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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Politics of Gendered Death: Exile and Belonging in the Shadow of Russia's
Existential Wars

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Global Studies

by

Gvantsa Gasviani

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Long Bui, Chair
Distinguished Professor Eve Darian-Smith
Professor Dorothy Fujita-Rony

Portions of Chapter 2 © 2024 Common Ground Research Networks (published as “Post-Soviet Gender Regimes: Militarized Masculinities in the Making of the Russian–Ukrainian War” in *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Global Studies*)

Figure 7 © 2026 Peace Leadership Collaborative (published in *The Men Who Refuse to Fight*)

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DEDICATION

To

the girls who climbed beyond every limit drawn around them.
Keep going.

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Figure 7 was previously published in *The Men Who Refuse to Fight* by the Peace Leadership Collaborative and is reproduced in this dissertation with permission.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Politics of Gendered Death: Exile and Belonging in the Shadow of Russia's Existential Wars

By

Gvantsa Gasviani

Doctor of Philosophy in Global Studies

University of California, Irvine, 2026

Professor Long Bui, Chair

What happens when refusing to fight a war is framed not as a moral stand but as a betrayal of masculinity itself? This dissertation examines how Russian men who left after the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine are constructed as both political and gendered failures. While exile is often understood as a legal or geographic condition, I argue that in the Russian context, it also operates as a tool of gender discipline. Through state media, propaganda, and popular discourse, Russian men in exile are portrayed not simply as conscientious objectors but as morally deviant, feminized, and queer-coded figures who have forfeited their claims to societal and state-recognized masculinity. Drawing on ethnographic interviews, participant observation, and media analysis, this project introduces the concept of the politics of gendered death: a media-driven process through which narratives, satire, and viral circulation recode refusal to participate in state-defined masculinity and war-making as a failure of manhood, stripping those who leave of recognition as men and citizens. It also theorizes a “post-performative” shift in the Russian state’s approach to loyalty. Before the war, publicly performing ideological and gender norms was often enough to avoid repression. Today, the state demands full emotional and embodied allegiance. In this new condition, refusal to fight is not just disobedience; it is treated as a fundamental failure of

citizenship, morality, and manhood. Under these conditions, many exiles develop quieter, more embodied strategies of disengagement. Focusing on Russian exiles in Georgia, a country shaped by its postcolonial relationship with Russia, this dissertation shows how masculinity becomes both a target of authoritarian violence and a fragile claim to legitimacy in exile. It offers new insight into how gender, dissent, and mobility are reshaped under the pressures of war and authoritarian rule.

Chapter 1 – Framing the Study: Research Design, Methods, and Theoretical Frameworks

I was only fourteen when war entered my life. The first shock came from the television, broadcasting images of Russian tanks storming across Georgia's borders. An even deeper fear set in when I huddled with my family in search of shelter from air strikes. For me, it was my first encounter with terror; for my family, it was the reopening of wounds that had never healed from the wars of the 1990s, wars waged by the same aggressor, Russia. Growing up in a war-torn country, I came to understand that these invasions were not isolated events but part of a broader pattern of Russian imperial aggression in the region, one that later culminated in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These memories did not fade with time; they shaped how I came to see empire, violence, and the politics of belonging. I carried those impressions with me when I left Georgia in 2020 to begin my PhD in the United States, not knowing that these early experiences would later guide the research I would come to pursue.

When I returned to Tbilisi in the summer of 2023, I found a transformed city whose changes echoed the geopolitical rupture unfolding across the region. Since February 24, 2022, the day the current phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war began, Tbilisi has undergone a significant shift. It has emerged as a prominent destination for both political and non-political Russian exiles (Krawatzek & Soroka, 2023), while also providing sanctuary for a considerable number of Ukrainian refugees (Trebucq, 2025). This change was not only demographic; Tbilisi also underwent a visual shift, with graffiti becoming a prominent feature across the cityscape (Cole, 2023). In my 25 years living in the city, I had rarely encountered graffiti with such intensity or explicit political force. By 2023, walls across Tbilisi, especially those lining major streets, were covered with bold, confrontational slogans. The most common phrases included "Fuck Russia,"

“Russians go home,” and “Russia is a terrorist state,” reflecting the charged climate that had taken hold of the city. Figures 1 and 2, drawn from my fieldwork photographs, capture a small portion of this atmosphere.

The city was adjusting to the arrival of more than 110,000 Russians who came to Georgia in 2022 (Kucera, 2022).¹ While individual motivations varied, the predominant reasons for Russian immigration included avoiding prosecution for anti-war expression, evading mobilization, and responding to the economic instability generated by sanctions imposed on Russia (Kamalov et al., 2022). Many of the émigrés quickly realized that they had entered a space where memories of Russian and Soviet domination still lingers, in conversations, in the layout of the streets, and in how people remember past wars (Gasviani, 2019).

The Russians of my childhood arrived as part of the machinery of conflict, leaving visible marks of violence. The ones I encountered decades later came by commercial flights, private cars, and even scooters through the Lars crossing,² movements that blended quietly into the daily life of Tbilisi (Krawatzek & Soroka, 2023). But their quiet arrival did not mean they were welcomed, for this was the same city that remembered being run over by Russian and Soviet tanks in 1921 and 1989, and nearly again in 2008 (Toria, 2014), when troops stopped just twenty-five miles away (Asmus, 2010).

The presence of Russian exiles in Georgia, set against anti-Russian graffiti and a deep postcolonial memory, frames the central question that anchors this dissertation: What happens to masculinity and political belonging when Russian men leave their country in response to

¹ This figure reflects border crossings rather than long-term settlement. A significant number of those who entered Georgia in 2022 later moved on to other countries or returned to Russia (Kucera, 2022).

² The sole land border crossing between Georgia and Russia is located at Zemo Larsi/Verkhny Lars along the Georgian Military Highway, linking Kazbegi in Georgia with Vladikavkaz in Russia’s Republic of North Ossetia (Caravanistan, 2025).

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine? Focusing on Russian exiles who arrived in Georgia after the invasion, the project examines how militarized gender norms structure expectations of citizenship, loyalty, and masculine belonging. By tracing how these expectations are disrupted, contested, and renegotiated in exile, the dissertation ultimately asks what such encounters reveal about the relationship between gender regimes and the subjects they produce.

Figure 1. Explicit Anti-Russian Graffiti in Tbilisi Public Space



Source: Author's personal archive.

Figure 2. Explicit Anti-Russian Graffiti on a Building Wall in Tbilisi



Source: Author's personal archive.

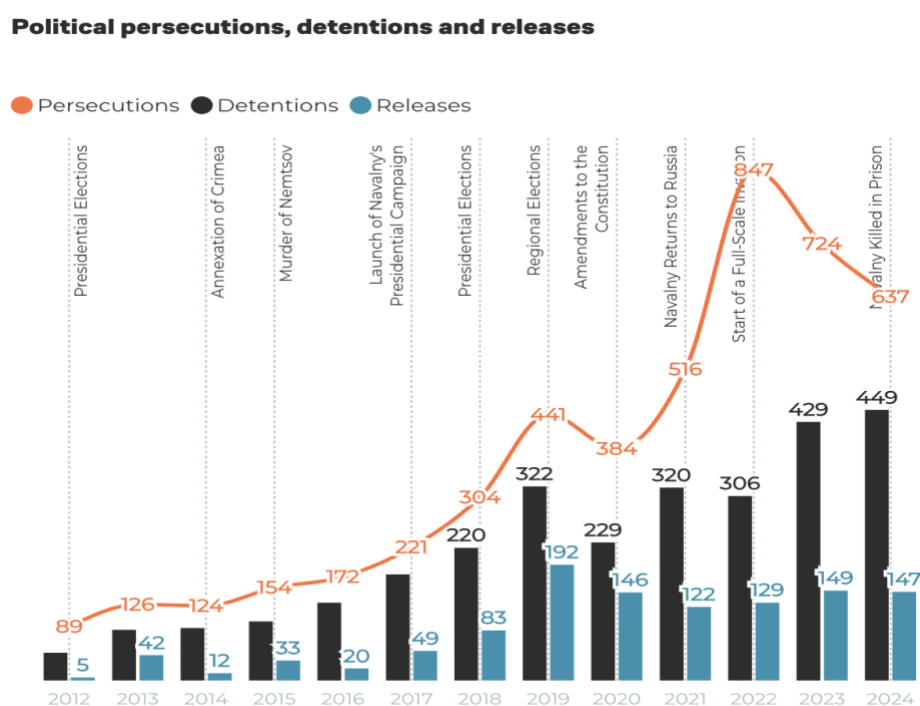
Taken together, these questions guide the analysis that follows. This dissertation examines how Russian men in exile in Georgia navigate the intertwined pressures of imperial identity, masculine expectation, and moral refusal in a postcolonial borderland reshaped by war. It theorizes the “Good Russian” as a figure whose moral distance from the Russian state is treated as conditional within the political climate shaped by Putin’s regime. Across many of the encounters I document, innocence is not presumed but negotiated, often requiring visible disavowals of empire. This burden of proof, I argue, is itself profoundly gendered.

Refusing Russia’s war produces a dual vulnerability: in Russia, it is read as a failure of masculinity and therefore of citizenship; in Georgia, the same refusal is interpreted as a lack of courage for not staying to resist the regime from within. Building on this framework, the dissertation examines how such gendered judgments are produced within broader regimes of political belonging that structure whose claims to citizenship are affirmed and whose lives become expendable.

In order to situate these questions within their geopolitical and historical moment, it is necessary to trace the conditions that produced this unprecedented movement of Russian men across borders. On February 24, 2022, Russia launched the largest military assault on a European nation since World War II (Person & McFaul, 2022). This moment also ushered in the most repressive period of Vladimir Putin's rule to date, marked by escalated authoritarian control and deepening domestic surveillance. Politically motivated criminal prosecutions hit a decade-long peak in 2022, underscoring the regime's heightened intolerance toward dissent (OVD-Info, 2024; see Figure 3). Amid these developments, an estimated 800,000 Russians have fled the country (Zavadskaya, 2023; Bouchet, 2024), with approximately 650,000 still living abroad as of 2024 (Mironenko, 2024). The two largest waves of emigration took place in late February 2022,

following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and in late September 2022, after Putin announced the partial mobilization of 300,000 men for the war. Most emigrants chose neighboring former Soviet states, such as Armenia (110,000), Kazakhstan (80,000), and Georgia (73,562), due to ease of travel, visa-free entry, and shared language. Other notable destinations included Israel (80,000), the United States (48,033), Germany (36,094), and Serbia (30,000) (Mironenko, 2024); see Figure 4).

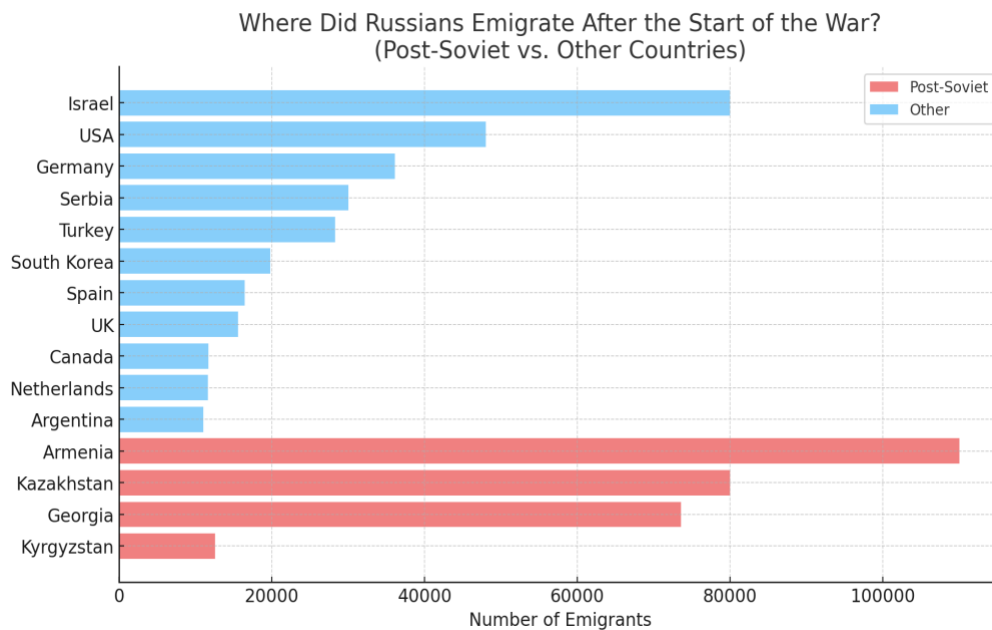
Figure 3. Political Persecutions, Detentions, and Releases in Russia (2012-2024)



Данные: OVD-Info · As of 9 December, 2024

Source: Data from OVD-Info (2024).

Figure 4. Top 15 Emigration Destinations for Russians After February 2022, by Regional Affiliation



Source: *The Bell* (2024). Graph recreated by the author.

The mass exodus of Russians quickly captured global attention, prompting a range of reactions. Perceptions of Russian exiles in host countries varied widely from viewing them as “a potentially history-changing vanguard” (Starobin, 2024, p. 19) to regarding them as a possible security threat (Zavadskaya, 2023). These diverging views were shaped in part by who these migrants were: young, typically in their mid-20s to early 40s, highly educated, and part of the urban middle class, primarily from major cities such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg (Prashizky, 2023). Their mobility, professional skills, and often vocal political stances, especially their opposition to the war, positioned them as both potential assets and sources of unease in their new environments (Zavadskaya, 2023).

While their reception abroad was uneven, in Russia their departure was framed in a sharply negative light. State media and political elites devoted sustained attention to those who

fled, framing their exit not as a principled refusal but as proof of weakness, disloyalty, and gendered inadequacy (The Economist, 2022). This narrative was orchestrated from the highest level. Putin set the tone when he declared, “I am convinced that such a natural and necessary self-purification of society will only strengthen our country” (NBC News 2022; 1:45). This was not merely rhetorical; it marked a new phase of rule characterized by intensified repression and a totalizing demand for loyalty, increasingly measured through military service.

Another example that illustrates the regime’s deployment of gendered language comes from State Duma Deputy Vitaly Milonov, who publicly suggested that men who left should be labeled with homophobic slurs and treated as “the lowest kind” of men, while women should be dismissed as prostitutes (Moscow 24, 2022, para. 3). Such statements do not reflect actual queerness or sexuality; they reveal how the state weaponizes homophobia and misogyny to discipline dissent and enforce normative masculinity. As Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai (2002) note, national belonging is often produced through regimes of sexual normativity. In the Russian wartime context, the man who leaves becomes a failed heterosexual, an unpatriotic body whose refusal to perform militarized masculinity marks him as deviant. Exile thus becomes a gendered rupture, a symbolic unmaking of the male subject who refuses to serve the state, even though the gendered conditioning he is said to betray was itself a social fiction fabricated by that same state.

The recent Russian exodus is distinct in its motivations. Many left not only because they were fleeing direct physical violence, but because they refused the state’s demand that they become agents of that violence. For many, migration reflects a refusal to participate in the war, a choice that carries the risk of being read as betrayal, social stigma, and gendered failure. Yet such refusals remain largely illegible within dominant wartime frameworks of suffering or resistance. These frameworks, structured by militarized gender scripts, privilege the figure of the

heroic male soldier and the passive female victim, leaving little conceptual room for those who reject both roles or who inhabit more ambiguous forms of political dissent or gender performativity (Butler 2015; Enloe, 2014). Humanitarian and political systems similarly recognize only certain kinds of suffering, those aligned with expectations of innocence, passivity, or victimhood, rendering figures like these exiles misrecognized, morally suspect, or excluded altogether (Ticktin, 2011).

By centering the voices of politically suspect, morally ambiguous, often feminized, and queered migrants, this dissertation challenges the social assumptions that shape how mobility and dissent are understood. It asks what kinds of subjectivities emerge when masculinity becomes both a tool of the state and a target of its violence, when being a man is no longer about power but about survival.

This dissertation examines what happens when the Russian state's performative demands of masculinity are refused or relinquished by the very men meant to embody them. It traces how exile becomes not only a movement across borders but also a transformation of gendered and political subjectivity, which I conceptualize as the politics of gendered death: a media-driven process through which refusing militarized masculinity is recoded as a failure of manhood, resulting in the social and gendered erasure of recognition within a gender order socially produced and politically sanctioned by the state. As the regime intensifies its call for bodily loyalty, those who refuse it find themselves unmade. I approach this unmaking not as disappearance, but as a generative site of analysis.

Drawing on ethnographic interviews, media analysis, and cultural texts, I explore how Russian exiles navigate symbolic death, moral suspicion, and gendered illegibility. Their lives unfold under discursive pressures that reverberate across borders, from Russian media casting

them as traitors to Georgian publics questioning their right to stay in a country of which 20 percent of the land is occupied by Russian forces (Asmus 2010; Toria 2014). In response, many attempt to perform what I call “Good Russian” syndrome, practicing forms of moral clarity, dissent, and civic alignment intended to distance themselves from Putin’s regime. Yet even these efforts offer no guarantee. Their masculinity occupies a liminal space, marked as dead by their home state and never fully reborn in the host society.

Georgia provides a particularly charged site for observing these dynamics. As a country still grappling with Russian occupation, it offers a space for questions of empire, masculinity, and dissent to unfold in real time. My position as a Georgian researcher shapes this project in critical ways. I write from a landscape marked by historical trauma and political ambivalence, where solidarity with Russian exiles is often shadowed by suspicion. This perspective informs my commitment to tracing how gendered performances of loyalty and resistance are constructed, negotiated, and sometimes refused by the state and those it casts out. With this foundation, the following section outlines the questions, methods, and procedures that guide this study.

Research Questions

In the following sections, I present the overarching research question guiding this project, followed by the specific questions, methodological framework, and research procedures that structure each chapter. At its core, this dissertation asks: What happens to masculinity and political belonging when Russian men leave their country in response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

While the project examines Russian exiles more broadly, the analysis centers men in exile because the Russian state’s militarized gender regime places the obligation to fight

primarily on male citizens. The empirical focus of the dissertation is Russian exiles who moved to Georgia after the invasion. This research project engages three major questions, each addressed in a substantive chapter, in addition to the overarching question that guides the dissertation as a whole.

The first question, explored in Chapter 2, asks: How are Russian exiles evaluated and positioned in a post-Soviet borderland shaped by imperial memory and ongoing geopolitical tension? In other words, what dynamics unfold when individuals from a former colonizer seek refuge in a former colony? Through life-history interviews and participant observation, this chapter examines how exiles navigate a landscape shaped by war memory, suspicion, and conditional hospitality. Georgia's experience of Russian aggression, especially since the 2008 war, positions it as a site where refuge and resistance coexist. I explore how exile, masculinity, and postcolonial ambivalence intersect in these encounters, particularly for male exiles who are viewed simultaneously through lenses of threat, complicity, and vulnerability (Modebadze, 2021). Their daily negotiations demonstrate how political belonging is reconfigured when exiles must prove themselves in a context shaped by imperial memory, ongoing occupation, and contested narratives of safety and responsibility.

The second question, examined in Chapter 3, asks: How do Russian viral media campaigns portray exiles, and what is the relationship between these portrayals and the state's gender regime? This chapter treats viral media as ideological instruments that manufacture consent and reinforce the kleptocratic power structure of Putin's regime, tracing how exiles are framed (Dawisha, 2015). It connects directly back to the overarching question by showing how masculinity is virtually fractured through media representations at the very moment these men become publicly visible. Drawing on Valerie Sperling's analysis (2014), which shows how the

Russian state uses gendered tropes, hypermasculinity, homophobia, and feminization to construct legitimacy, this chapter examines how gender norms are weaponized against men whose refusal to participate in war or patriotic spectacle marks them as political threats. By analyzing three viral videos, I show how humor and homophobia are deployed to delegitimize exiles as both men and citizens. These portrayals reveal how the unmaking of political belonging begins in the virtual realm, shaping the social and symbolic conditions exiles must navigate beyond Russia. At the same time, this mediated “death” does not foreclose subjectivity but opens a fragile space for rearticulation. Drawing on Jack Halberstam’s (2011) work on failure and alternative modes of being, I suggest that the very disqualification of these men as proper subjects of the state becomes a site of reconfiguration. In this sense, the gendered unmaking of the exile becomes simultaneously a condition of possibility for reimagining masculinity outside the state’s militarized script.

Chapter 4 explores the last question: How does Putin’s gender regime discipline not only exiles but also those who remain neutral or loyal within Russia? This chapter examines the widely debated “Almost Naked” party scandal and the popular Russian films, *Kholop (Son of a Rich)* (2019) and *Kholop 2 (Son of a Rich 2)* (2023), as sites of moral panic and cultural regulation. By showing how even seemingly apolitical or unserious behaviors become subject to state correction, this chapter connects to the overarching question by illustrating how imperial masculinity is tightly policed within Russia, producing a fragile and conditional form of gendered citizenship. Even men who do not oppose the regime must carefully perform state-sanctioned masculinity to navigate everyday life safely in Russia. This domestic disciplining reveals how political belonging in Russia is already unstable, setting the context for why men

who later cross into postcolonial borderlands encounter further challenges in crafting legible and secure identities.

Theoretical Engagement

This research draws on multiple interconnected fields relevant to the project, with a primary focus on gender studies, exile studies, and media studies. These fields are deeply intertwined, as each provides unique but complementary insights into the central themes of this project. This section is not intended to provide an exhaustive exploration of theoretical frameworks. Instead, it offers an overview of key thinkers and concepts that shape the central themes of this project. Each chapter engages more deeply with the specific theoretical perspectives necessary to address its research questions. While some of the literature and ideas introduced here will reappear in later chapters to align with specific topics, this section aims to establish the theoretical foundation relevant to my dissertation and demonstrate how these interconnected fields provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the complexities of exile and its gendered media representation.

Post-Performative Shift in Russian Gender Regimes

A central theme of this project is a critical engagement with post-Soviet gender regimes, particularly what I conceptualize as a post-performative shift in the Russian state's gender politics. Although gender has long been integral to Soviet and post-Soviet governance, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine marks a distinct turning point. Wars are deeply gendered, shaping whose bodies are mobilized, protected, or sacrificed. What differentiates the current moment is the state's explicit use of so-called traditional values as its central ideological tool (Laruelle, 2024). As Petr Kratochvíl and Míla O'Sullivan (2023) argue, Russian political discourse

surrounding the war constructs a civilizational binary in which Russia is presented as the defender of moral order, while Western Europe and the broader West are portrayed as a feminized and morally “decadent Other” (p. 347). The invasion of Ukraine is thus positioned as the frontline of this broader civilizational confrontation. In this narrative, gender and sexuality become central terrains through which the state organizes political belonging and moral legitimacy. The war therefore emerges not only as a geopolitical project but also as a gendered civilizational struggle, one in which the state actively regulates masculine belonging and casts refusal or dissent as both moral and gendered failure.

This intensification aligns with a broader global rise of anti-genderism, defined as the rejection of gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, or even the legitimacy of gender-diverse existence (Myhre & Berg Nordlie, 2024). Anti-genderism draws strength from the insecurity and frustration generated by neoliberal transformations and has become a powerful challenge to liberal democratic norms (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). In Russia, as in several European contexts, these currents accelerated during the 2010s (Gasviani, 2023). To understand why anti-genderism crystallized so forcefully in support of the war on Ukraine and as a mechanism of domestic repression, it is necessary to situate these developments within the political and ideological shifts that preceded the invasion rather than treating them as purely reactive phenomena.

Under Vladimir Putin, post-Soviet Russia entered an increasingly restrictive era of gender regulation. Putin became the embodiment of a post-Soviet strongman masculinity. His image developed alongside the dominant masculine ideal of the 2000s known as *muzhik*, meaning the Russian man or macho (Riabov & Riabova, 2014). The figure of the *muzhik* was positioned against both Soviet and Western models of masculinity. Unlike the Soviet man, the *muzhik* was imagined as self-reliant and entrepreneurial; unlike the Western man, he was unapologetically

coarse, sexist, homophobic, and indifferent to political correctness (Riabov & Riabova, 2014). Yet this opposition carried a clear irony. While in the early stages of his career, Putin's rhetoric often distances itself from Soviet ideology, his political persona draws heavily on late Soviet and Stalinist models of masculine authority, revealing continuity rather than rupture in the gendered foundations of state power (Randall, 2020).

To analyze the centrality of these gendered expectations to authoritarian governance and to trace their transformation, I draw on the work of Alexei Yurchak (2006) and Julie Cassiday (2023). Yurchak's (2006) account of late socialism identifies the rise of a performative shift in which the ritual repetition of authoritative discourse gained importance over its literal meaning. Citizens outwardly reproduced state-mandated speech and gestures while maintaining a relatively autonomous private sphere. Cassiday (2023) extends this argument to the post-Soviet period, showing that by the 2010s outward conformity was increasingly organized through gendered and sexualized styles. Performing what she terms cisgender drag publicly became a condition for maintaining privacy even as the state tightened control over economic and political life.

The generation born after the Soviet collapse came of age entirely within this performative system. For years, Putin's government relied on the illusion that the state allowed a protected private sphere so long as citizens complied with expected public performances of loyalty and normative gender roles (Yurchak 2006; Starobin 2024). This illusion fractured during the mass protests of 2011 to 2013, which revealed widespread refusal to participate in the ritualized performances that sustained the regime. The state responded with intensified repression, signaling an emerging interest in disciplining not only public dissent but also private autonomy (Greene, 2014). The 2013 gay propaganda law marked a fundamental turning point.

By criminalizing the dissemination of information about non-heterosexual relationships to minors, the law targeted intimate life directly, collapsing the distinction between public and private spheres (Healey, 2017; Kondakov, 2019). Although framed as a measure to “protect children,” the law functioned far beyond its literal scope: it became a tool for policing queerness itself, enabling widespread discrimination, censorship, and intimidation of LGBTQ+ individuals and organizations under the guise of safeguarding minors. Over time, its application only intensified, normalizing state-sanctioned homophobia and paving the way for even more restrictive legislation in the years that followed (Kondakov, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2022b).

This work argues that war in Ukraine marks the collapse of the performative compact as a mode of governance. Outward conformity no longer guarantees relative privacy or autonomy. The state now demands affective conviction, internalized loyalty, and a seamless alignment with state-sanctioned gender norms. This new configuration is what I identify as the post-performative shift in Putin’s regime. In this regime, the distinction between public performance and private life becomes almost untenable. The dual positionality that once allowed citizens to appear loyal while cultivating private forms of autonomy dissolves. Gender becomes a central mechanism through which the state reorders both political and intimate life. Bodily comportment, sexuality, affect, and everyday practice are increasingly treated as indicators of political loyalty. Refusal to conform to these gendered demands is understood not only as a moral deviation but as a violation of the state’s criteria for legitimate citizenship.

It is within this post-performative order that exile gains new meaning. Exile is not only a spatial departure from Russia. It becomes a form of political and gendered disobedience. For many men, leaving the country is a refusal to enact the masculinities demanded by a wartime authoritarian state. Under the earlier performative regime, such refusal could be absorbed into

the gap between public conformity and private autonomy. Under the post-performative regime, that gap no longer exists. Departure becomes legible to the state as a failure of embodied loyalty and a betrayal of the gendered obligations that anchor authoritarian legitimacy. Exile, therefore, becomes a site where the collapse of the performative compact is made visible. Those who leave do so precisely because private dissent has become inseparable from political exposure. Exile becomes not only a condition of physical displacement but the result of the state's demand for total identification at both the symbolic and embodied levels. The chapters that follow analyze how this post-performative order shapes the lived experiences of Russian men who refuse to embody the masculinities required of them and who are consequently cast outside the gendered and political boundaries through which the state defines legitimate citizenship.

Exile and the Borderlands

I conceptualize the condition of Russian migrants in Georgia as exile, following Ashwini Vasanthakumar's (2021) definition of exile as a political condition shaped by three elements: territorial absence from one's political community, the compulsion of that absence produced by pressures from both state and non-state actors, and the exile's continued political orientation toward their homeland. Russian exiles in Georgia exemplify each of these dimensions. They are removed from the state's jurisdiction and separated from their social worlds, including families, workplaces, and communities. Their departures emerge under conditions experienced as compulsory. Some fled after arrest, surveillance, or political intimidation, while others left preemptively after observing the state's treatment of politically like-minded individuals. Every interviewee maintained a clear orientation toward Russia, asserting continued membership in the political community and expressing a desire to return once conditions change. Whether imagined

as a distant hope or a concrete plan, the possibility of return was tied to the eventual end of Putin's regime.

When describing their position in the migration process, interviewees uniformly rejected the label refugee. They differentiated their experiences from those of Ukrainians fleeing direct violence and instead referenced the legacy of the White émigrés of the early twentieth century, invoking a historically grounded and elite model of political exile (Prashizky, 2025). Between 1918 and 1922, between 1.5 and 3 million members of the Russian nobility and intelligentsia fled the Bolshevik regime, including philosophers, scientists, and writers expelled on the so-called philosopher's ships (Gan, 2019). This community preserved cultural capital, sustained political opposition to communism, and cultivated a myth of dignified exile associated with intellectualism, class status, and loyalty to the idea of Russia's future. By aligning themselves with this lineage, contemporary Russian exiles frame their departure as principled rather than desperate.

This identity work resonates with Long Bui's (2018) analysis of the political economy of memory in the South Vietnamese diaspora. Displaced communities often resist marginalization by drawing on heroic or elite self-narratives that preserve their political subjectivity. Russian exiles engage in similar work by distancing themselves from humanitarian framings associated with the refugee figure. In many Western and post-Soviet contexts, refugees are associated with helplessness, dependency, and threat (Malkki, 1996; Ticktin, 2011). By contrast, terms such as expat or *relokant*, a Russian term that became widely used after 2022 to describe professionals who relocated abroad (Utkin, 2024), signal mobility, professionalism, and middle-class respectability. The term exile, therefore, offers a more appropriate analytical category, capturing the political conditions of displacement while avoiding both the humanitarian framing associated

with refugees and the depoliticized language of professional mobility implied by labels such as expat or *relokant*.

Vasanthakumar's framework aligns with Edward Said's (2000) reflections on exile, which emphasize the pain of displacement and the epistemological clarity it can produce. Said describes exile as generating a plurality of visions because it compels individuals to inhabit more than one cultural world and to perceive them contrapuntally. Russian exiles in Georgia inhabit a complex contrapuntal position. They stand between an authoritarian homeland that brands them traitors and a host society that often views them with suspicion. In Georgia, a post-Soviet borderland shaped by a strong pro-Western orientation and resistance to Russian power, this position unfolds within a landscape where belonging and legitimacy remain unsettled, even as political tensions persist (Bibilashvili, 2022; Kakachia et al., 2025).

Approaching Georgia as a borderland extends Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) foundational concept of spaces where multiple worlds collide. While the concept has been most prominently developed in relation to spaces such as the U.S.–Mexico border, its analytical value extends beyond a single geography. Borderlands are not defined solely by territorial boundaries but by historically layered power relations and ongoing negotiations of identity and belonging. Scholars working beyond the U.S.–Mexico context have extended this framework to other regions marked by imperial entanglements, including Madina Tlostanova's (2010) decolonial feminist analysis of gender epistemologies in Eurasian borderlands, with particular attention to the Caucasus and Central Asia, and Maria Todorova's (2009) framing of the Balkans as a liminal space shaped by overlapping histories of empire and marginality. At the same time, borderlands scholarship has increasingly emphasized how these spaces are not only geopolitical but also deeply gendered, structured by hierarchies of masculinity, sexuality, and power. Victoria Reyes (2019) develops

the concept of global borderlands to describe zones where external rules and logics govern socioeconomic life, producing semi-autonomous spaces of negotiated sovereignty and often intensely gendered forms of violence and intimacy.

Building on these foundations, this project extends Reyes's global borderlands framework to the post-2022 Georgian context by foregrounding its gendered dimensions under wartime authoritarianism. Georgia thus operates as a post-Soviet borderland shaped by imperial entanglements, where Russian exiles and Georgian society confront one another under conditions marked by memory, tension, and unresolved domination. The arrival of Russian men who refuse conscription and the militarized masculinity demanded by the post-performative shift activates a specific form of gendered borderland. Here the embodied politics of exile collide with local histories of Russian imperial domination, reconfiguring gendered expectations around masculinity, responsibility, and belonging. These encounters do not simply reproduce geopolitical hierarchies; they generate new arenas of political visibility, moral judgment, and contested masculine belonging.

In this sense, exile takes shape within a borderland condition that unsettles belonging and brings both home and host society into sharper view. Exiles, in turn, become reputational figures through which Georgia negotiates its place and its sense of sovereignty.

Approaching exile as a shifting and contested condition rather than a fixed identity reveals how Russian exiles actively reconstruct belonging and political subjectivity. Exile becomes a framework for understanding how displaced subjects generate critique, form solidarities, and reinterpret the meaning of political membership. It is not solely dispossession but also a form of critical detachment that allows exiles to view the structures of their homeland and host society through new ethical and political lenses. As Vasanthakumar (2021) notes:

Finally, exile politics alerts us to the ways in which politics reaches beyond the nation-state but without grasping for cosmopolitan alternatives. Exiles are often cultural and political misfits, minorities who reject prevalent cultural norms and seek to upend long-standing hierarchies. And their time abroad only enhances this critical distance, in terms of both the cultural and political norms they seek to advance and the political strategies they come to see as being most effective (p. 13).

In this way, exile sharpens rather than dilutes political agency. For Russian exiles in Georgia, this enhanced critical distance emerges not only from their estrangement from home but also from their uneasy position in a host society shaped by long-standing tensions with Russia and the unresolved consequences of past conflict. Exile therefore becomes simultaneously a site of rupture and a site of political possibility, enabling displaced actors to articulate new forms of critique and belonging from a vantage point that is structurally impossible within the authoritarian homeland.

The Mediated Politics of Gendered Death

In the contemporary moment, war is no longer confined to battlefields. It is staged and consumed across screens. Stephen Hutchings (2022) captures this transformation:

We live in a period in which war and conflict, like other aspects of our social world, have been mediatized, through and through. Rather than merely being central to the ways in which acts of war are communicated, sanitized, and

explained, the media are now pre-inscribed within those acts from the very moment they are contemplated (p. 31).

This blurring of media and reality extends beyond war itself to struggles over identity and belonging, where media narratives shape public perceptions of conflict, displacement, and exile.

Traditional migration frameworks, such as push-and-pull models or economic analyses (Hanson & Baltabayeva, 2024; Prashizky, 2023), explain mechanics of movement but overlook how migrants and exiles are subsequently constituted through media images and narratives. Media representations do not merely reflect social reality; they actively participate in producing political subjects and defining the boundaries of legitimacy and belonging (Couldry, 2012; Hall, 1997). It is therefore necessary to situate exile within broader regimes of power that determine whose lives are valued and whose are rendered disposable.

Drawing on Achille Mbembe's (2006) theorization of necropolitics as the power to determine who may live and who must die, I argue that the Russian wartime state performs a symbolic killing of men who refuse to fight. Necropolitical regimes traditionally operate through the management of populations exposed to death, most often in colonial contexts where imperial power determines which bodies are disposable. Ege Selin Islekel (2022) further complicates Mbembe's (2006) framework by foregrounding the role of gender in necropolitical regimes. Islekel demonstrates how necropolitics operates through intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, and sexuality that determine which bodies are rendered disposable or exposed to symbolic and material forms of death. Building on this insight, I argue that in the Russian wartime context the state extends these necropolitical logics to its own citizens who refuse participation in war. Because exiled men cannot be physically disciplined or deployed as bodies for the war effort once they leave the country, the state turns to media and public discourse as its primary punitive

apparatus, relying on what Amaya-Castro (2015) describes as the political economy of visibility to publicly mark exiled men as objects of ridicule, betrayal, and moral failure.

I conceptualize this process as the politics of gendered death. This refers not only to a condition of symbolic unmaking but to the everyday practices through which certain men are rendered illegible as both political and gendered subjects. Although the concept of gendered death has most often been used to analyze violence against women (Fluri and Piedalue, 2017; Martin and Carvajal, 2016), I extend it here to the Russian wartime context. I examine how gendered logics of worth and disposability operate on men who refuse militarized masculinity. In this setting, gendered death emerges through media spectacles, public discourse, and quotidian judgments that mark exiled men as failed citizens and failed men. These practices produce an ongoing process of social and gendered erasure rather than a singular event. This framing sets the stage for the specific mechanisms of queering and debasement that follow.

Jasbir Puar's (2018) extension of necropolitics showcases what happens to these men once they are marked as failed or unworthy within this mediated regime. Puar (2018) shows how bodies can be debased, queered, or rendered disposable when they no longer conform to national, racialized, or heteronormative expectations. In the Russian wartime context, exile severs the link between the male body and the sacrificial militarized masculinity demanded by the state, transforming the exiled man into both a failed patriot and a failed masculine subject. Media thus becomes a key arena through which this gendered punishment is enacted.

Building on Dan Healey (2017) and Alexander Kondakov (2022), who show how the Russian state frames gender nonconformity as a threat to national identity, I demonstrate that exile has been folded into this logic. Through viral spectacles that shame men fleeing conscription, television segments portraying them as moral failures, and online mockery that

feminizes those who leave, the state produces a coherent narrative of exile as gender collapse and queering. Exile thus becomes a mediated performance of cowardice and moral deviation, an arena in which masculinity is symbolically attacked, stripped away, and repeatedly fractured.

Within this mediated landscape, the “Good Russian” emerges as a precarious and highly visible figure produced at the intersection of multiple gazes. These overlapping visibility regimes create an identity that is less a personal stance than a mediated demand. The “Good Russian” must continually distance themselves from the regime, performing responsibility and legibility. This visibility regime operates as a form of social control. Critical media theorists such as John Thompson (2005) and Nick Couldry (2012) emphasize that mediated visibility is inseparable from judgment and discipline. Russian exiles find themselves navigating multiple overlapping gazes: the condemnatory gaze of Russian state media, where those who leave the country are frequently framed through narratives of disloyalty and moral failure within an increasingly controlled information environment (Dauce et al., 2025), the moralizing gaze of Western observers who often expect Russians abroad to clearly distance themselves from the Kremlin and the war (Sachkova, 2025), and the suspicious gaze of Georgian publics who interpret Russian bodies through the lens of colonial history and geopolitical tension (Darieva et al., 2024). These converging pressures produce the “Good Russian” as a mediated identity while constraining the imaginative possibilities of exile.

This figure is therefore inherently unstable. It absorbs and reflects expectations projected onto Russian bodies rather than enabling exiles to reinvent themselves on their own terms. Yet moments of refusal, displacement, and perceived failure can also open space for alternate ways of inhabiting manhood or citizenship (Halberstam, 2011). While the mediated pressure to appear “good” often narrows the range of acceptable performances, it does not fully eliminate the

generative uncertainty that failure can produce. The “Good Russian” attempts to codify a narrow repertoire of acceptable performances: apologetic, rational, anti-regime, and visibly committed to liberal respectability. At the same time, these expectations are never fully stable or complete, leaving room for slippages, contradictions, and unexpected forms of ethical and political positioning.

In this sense, the “Good Russian” is not an emancipatory identity, but a reputational burden shaped by media circulation, geopolitical anxieties, and the politics of visibility. Yet the instability of this figure also reveals the limits of such scripts. As the case studies in this chapter show, moments that appear as failure to perform the expected role can instead become sites of transformation, where Russian men in exile experiment with alternative forms of responsibility, belonging, and political engagement.

Methodology and Research Design

Drawing on the work of Eve Darian-Smith and Philip McCarty (2017), this research adopts a “global transdisciplinary framework” (p. 10) that enables the study of complex, large-scale phenomena through multidimensional lenses. Their approach facilitates the integration of diverse perspectives across spatial and temporal contexts while foregrounding marginalized epistemologies and ways of knowing. Rather than isolating exile, gender, or mediated national identity as separate entities, this framework shows how they are lived together in the post-Soviet borderlands, where the pressures of repression and the textures of daily life are inseparable from cultural expression. Building on this foundation, the methodological approach combines critical media studies, case studies, and ethnographic methods such as life-history interviews and participant observation. Life-history interviews and critical discourse analysis serve as cross-

cutting methods throughout the dissertation. Interviews provide interpretive insight into exilic experiences in two of the remaining three chapters, while critical discourse analysis is used in every chapter to examine the media and cultural texts that shape the conditions of exile. Rather than functioning as separate techniques, these modes of inquiry operate reflexively and in relation to one another. As Darian-Smith and McCarty note (2017), “A researcher capable of approaching a subject with more than one theoretical framework can provide a kind of theoretical triangulation that enables new perspectives and understandings. The result is often a more rounded analysis” (p. 111).

Chapter 2 centers a qualitative ethnographic methodology that combines life-history interviews, participant observation, and critical discourse analysis to examine how Russian exiles in Georgia negotiate gender, identity, and notions of belonging. Ethnography allows for tracing how broader ideological scripts are encountered and contested in everyday life. Life-history interviews are well suited to exile research because they foreground personal experience over institutional discourse, allowing participants to narrate their trajectories on their own terms (Atkinson, 1998; Goodson & Gill, 2011). As Robert Atkinson (1998) writes:

A person's story is essentially an expression of his or her self-understanding. There is no stronger, clearer statement of how the person sees and understands his or her own life than his or her own narrative of it. The researcher's job, as far as interpretation, may be to simply identify the meaning or understanding that is already implied in the story by the teller (p. 65).

This approach centers participants' understandings of exile and identity rather than imposing external frameworks. To preserve the emotional and cultural nuances embedded in

participants' expressions, interviews were conducted in Russian, the participants' native language. Conducting interviews in a shared native language facilitated deeper relational trust and encouraged richer storytelling. I carried out all translations myself, both due to limited research funding and my bilingual fluency in Russian and English. Research supports this approach, noting that when the researcher is also the translator, it can enhance contextual sensitivity and preserve participant meaning, provided it is handled reflexively (Van Nes et al., 2010). Still, translation is not a neutral practice. As Temple and Young (2004) argue, it is entangled with issues of representation, power hierarchies between languages, and epistemological positioning. They stress the importance of making translation visible in research, particularly in contexts involving marginalized languages, and call for reflexivity in the translator's role. Attending to these dynamics, this study treats language not as a transparent medium but as a textured site through which meaning is constantly negotiated. These methodological choices reflect a commitment to ethical storytelling and to honoring the complexity of exilic subjectivity.

Participant observation supplemented interviews by providing access to everyday interactions in informal gatherings, volunteer initiatives, and activist meetings. This approach allowed for what Clifford Geertz (1973) terms "thick description," which emphasizes not only the documentation of actions but also the interpretation of their cultural significance. It enabled me to capture not only what participants said but how they moved through space, navigated social dynamics, and embodied exile in practice. Observation also extended to spatial and material transformations in Tbilisi, where many Russian exiles settled. These included the proliferation of Russian-language signage, anti-Russian graffiti, and intensified public discourse around the presence of exiles. Such observations contextualized exilic experience within broader

urban and political shifts. Field notes were taken during and immediately after public events to document gestures, silences, spatial arrangements, and interactions that might not surface in interviews, thereby enriching the interpretive frame.

Chapter 3 combines critical discourse analysis of viral media with life-history interviews conducted with Russian exiles in Georgia. It examines how humor, ridicule, and gendered humiliation are deployed in viral videos after the invasion of Ukraine to delegitimize men who leave the country. Interview narratives provide an interpretive lens for understanding how these representations are encountered and interpreted by Russian exiles.

Drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak, 2015), I examine how language, imagery, and performative cues in viral videos and official media statements construct Russian male exiles as feminized, deviant, and unpatriotic. These portrayals rely on recurring discursive strategies such as homophobic insinuation, emasculating metaphors, and moral ridicule that work to delegitimize dissent and reaffirm loyalty. CDA provides the tools to expose the power relations and ideological operations that underpin such representations, revealing how these media narratives function as a form of gendered governance.

Chapter 4 employs a cultural case study methodology and film analysis alongside life-history interviews. It examines two extreme cultural cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006): the “Almost Naked” party scandal and popular films *Kholop* (*Son of a Rich*) and *Kholop 2* (*Son of a Rich*). These cases illustrate how public scandal and popular cinema become sites through which gendered discipline and moral regulation are enacted within Russia.

To examine how these dynamics unfold in concrete cultural moments, I employ a cultural case study methodology (George & Bennett, 2005; Flyvbjerg, 2006). Case studies enable the in-depth examination of strategically chosen cultural phenomena that illuminate broader ideological

processes (George & Bennett, 2005). I focus on two “extreme cases” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.229): two state-endorsed films and a widely publicized celebrity social event. As Bent Flyvbjerg (2006) notes: “Atypical or extreme cases often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied” (p.229). Though differing in form, one a fictional narrative and the other a real-world occurrence, both function as sites of disciplinary spectacle. The film dramatizes patriotic redemption through heteronormative and nationalistic conformity, while the event exemplifies public shaming of elites for performative excess. Together, these cases demonstrate how cultural production and popular reception reinforce state ideology by punishing deviation and celebrating conformity. Rather than generalizing, this method draws on the “force of example” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.228) to highlight how singular moments crystallize broader ideological patterns.

Film analysis plays a central role in this design, given cinema’s long history as an ideological tool of governance in Russia. Vladimir Lenin famously declared film “the most important of all the arts,” while Stalin noted that “film is an illusion, but it dictates its laws to life” (Bulgakova, 2005, p. 2). Post-Soviet cinema continues this legacy, remasculinizing society by restoring hierarchical gender orders through narrative and symbolism. A feminist film methodology (Attwood, 1995) allows for close analysis of visual and narrative strategies that discipline femininity, valorize masculinity, and link personal redemption to patriotic conformity.

Together, these methodological approaches allow me to trace how mediated representation and everyday experience shape the conditions of exile and the politics of gendered death.

Data Collection and Analysis

This dissertation employs a multi-method qualitative research design that aligns with the global, transdisciplinary ethos of Global Studies (Darian-Smith & McCarty, 2017). Rather than seeking a single methodological coherence, the project draws on diverse forms of data collection, each calibrated to the object of inquiry and grounded in a commitment to contextualized and ethically attuned research. The data collection process combines media and discourse analysis, life-history interviews, and participant observation, enabling a layered investigation of how gender, war, and exile are articulated across both textual and embodied registers.

The first set of data was generated through life-history interviews conducted in Tbilisi, Georgia, in the summer of 2023. This method was selected to trace how Russian exiles narrate their identities before and after displacement. As a qualitative method, life-history interviewing foregrounds personal narrative as a vehicle for exploring broader socio-political transformations (Atkinson, 1998; Goodson & Gill, 2011). It is especially suited for research on migration and exile, as it allows participants to articulate the temporality of rupture and transition in their own terms (Riessman, 2008).

I spent several months moving through the networks that had formed around Russian exiles in Tbilisi. Organizations such as the Free Russia Foundation and Emigration for Action served as important reference points within the exile community, offering legal assistance, humanitarian support, and spaces where newly arrived Russians could navigate the uncertainties of displacement (Free Russia Foundation, 2023; Emigration for Action, 2023). Through these networks, I was introduced to individuals willing to share their experiences of leaving Russia and rebuilding their lives abroad. I conducted 20 interviews, 19 in person and one over Zoom. Each interview ranged from one to two and a half hours, with follow-up sessions arranged as needed.

To protect participants' anonymity, all names used throughout the dissertation are pseudonyms. The use of life-history interviews is particularly justified in Global Studies, where scholars have emphasized methods that capture the complexity of lived experience across borders and institutional structures (Darian-Smith & McCarty, 2017). Rather than isolating variables, this approach treats stories as relational and situated, revealing how global processes are made meaningful through the entanglements of everyday life, cultural practices, and local interpretation (Tsing, 2004). Beyond serving as empirical data, these interviews are approached as forms of historically situated knowledge that preserve and transmit understandings of power, empire, and belonging. While Dorothy Fujita-Rony (2021) develops this framework in relation to minoritized subjects within imperial formations, it is useful here for understanding how Russian exiles, though originating from the imperial center, become differently marginalized in displacement.

In addition to interviews, I conducted participant observation by attending informal gatherings and activist events, and spending extended time in neighborhoods with high concentrations of Russian migrants. Drawing on traditions of critical ethnography (Madison, 2011) and thick description (Geertz, 1973), I documented not only what participants said in formal interviews but also how they navigated everyday encounters with Georgians in restaurants, taxis, and other public venues. I paid attention to linguistic negotiations, body language, and ambient symbols of geopolitical tension, including anti-Russian graffiti, stickers, and protest signage throughout the city.

The second set of materials consisted of a curated digital archive of primary media sources from 2022 to 2024, including viral propaganda videos, political speeches, social media content, celebrity scandals, and popular films. These materials, widely circulated in public

domains, were accessed through regular engagement with media across social and broadcast platforms during the research period. This approach reflects traditions within Critical Media Studies and Global Studies that emphasize the importance of analyzing cultural texts as sites of ideological negotiation (Couldry, 2012; Shohat & Stam, 2014). Drawing on Nick Couldry's (2012) concept of media as practice, the analysis treats media not simply as texts to be decoded but as socially embedded actions through which meaning and legitimacy are performed and contested. This framing is especially useful for understanding how media, particularly in moments of political crisis, help shape narratives of masculinity, dissent, and belonging. The selection of materials followed principles of purposive sampling, prioritizing content that circulated widely and explicitly engaged these themes (Patton, 2014). Sources included platforms such as Russia-1, Russia Today, Telegram, YouTube, and state-linked film studios, and materials were analyzed for their rhetorical, visual, and emotional dimensions.

Together, these methods reflect a commitment to grounded, context-sensitive knowledge production that resists universalizing narratives while engaging with global structures of power and meaning. By integrating textual, narrative, and embodied forms of data, this research speaks to core methodological goals of Global Studies: to understand complex transnational phenomena through a plurality of voices, scales, and epistemologies.

Looking Ahead

The chapters that follow examine how exile, gender, and mediated visibility unfold across distinct yet interconnected sites. Chapter 2 begins in Georgia, where exile emerges as a lived and negotiated condition. Drawing on interviews, participant observation, and the visual field of anti-Russian graffiti, the chapter traces how Russian exiles navigate suspicion,

borderland dynamics, and the pressure to embody “Good Russian” respectability. In these encounters, masculinity and belonging are reshaped in everyday interactions shaped by geopolitical histories.

Chapter 3 turns to mediated representations, analyzing viral videos that circulated widely after the invasion. It demonstrates how the Russian state deploys humor, humiliation, and gendered ridicule to pre-emptively strip potential exiles of masculine and political legitimacy. In these texts, exile is imagined before it is lived, producing a template through which those who leave are rendered suspect. Juxtaposing these representations with interview narratives, the chapter shows how lived experiences of refusal complicate and challenge these portrayals.

Chapter 4 examines cultural controversies within Russia, focusing on the “Almost Naked” party scandal and the films *Kholop (Son of a Rich)* and *Kholop 2 (Son of a Rich)*. These cases reveal how the state intensifies moral regulation, policing not only dissent but also ordinary forms of embodiment and self-expression. In doing so, the chapter shows how the post-performative regime narrows the range of acceptable masculinity, rendering even ostensibly apolitical subjects vulnerable to gendered discipline.

Taken together, the chapters trace a movement from lived experience to mediated representation and back to domestic discipline, showing how Russian exiles become legible, contested, or undone as political subjects in the shadow of war.

Chapter 2 - Good Russian Syndrome in the Post-Soviet Borderland

The arrival of Russian migrants in large numbers after 2022 quickly reshaped Tbilisi's atmosphere, a shift that was soon written across the city's walls in anger. Much of the graffiti that appeared was short, blunt, and openly hostile, "Fuck Russia," "Russians go home," marking rejection while requiring little explanation. One inscription, however, broke from this pattern. Longer, more deliberate, and strikingly directive, it addressed Russian-speaking audiences not simply to denounce them, but to tell them how to behave, where they belong, and what forms of political action are expected of them. The image below shows the inscription as I documented it during fieldwork.

Figure 5. Anti-Russian Graffiti Addressing Russian Speakers in Tbilisi



Source: Author's personal archive.

The message appears on a large wall near the funicular cable car in Mtatsminda, one of the most visible and tourist-heavy areas of Tbilisi. Its placement ensures that it is encountered not only by local residents but also by the many Russian visitors and exiles who have arrived in

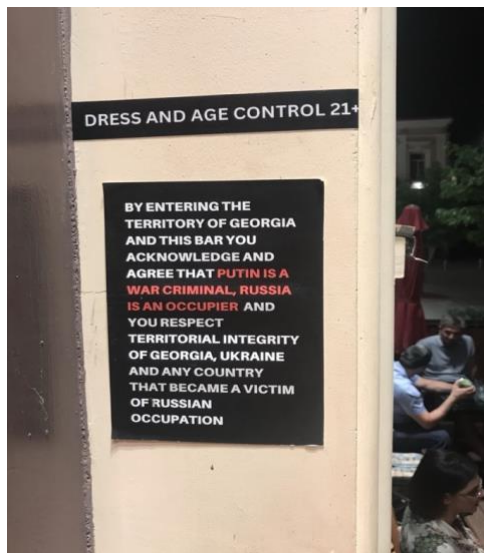
the city since 2022. The graffiti's design reinforces its political message. The yellow background and bold blue letters evoke the colors of the Ukrainian flag, while the phrases "Ruzzian-speakers" and "bloody Empire" appear in red, visually associating Russian identity with bloodshed and imperial violence. The stylistic choices further sharpen the message. The word "Dear" appears in quotation marks, signaling sarcasm rather than politeness, while the capitalization of "STOP," "TALK MORE QUIETLY," and "PROTEST" transforms the text into a sequence of commands. Even at a glance, the graffiti communicates a set of disciplinary imperatives directed at Russian-speaking audiences.

The spelling of "Russian" as "Ruzzian" is equally deliberate. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the letter "Z" has emerged as one of the most recognizable symbols of Russian militarism and public support for the invasion. The symbol is often associated with the phrase "For Victory" (*Za Pobedu*) and has become widely used in Russian propaganda and everyday expressions of support for the war (Marandici, 2023). Journalist and author Sergei Medvedev (2023) argues that contemporary Russia has been "gripped with the Z virus" (p. 93). In the graffiti above, however, the symbol is reappropriated as a marker of accusation rather than pride. By transforming "Russian" into "Ruzzian," the inscription collapses the distinction between the Russian state and Russian-speaking individuals abroad, marking them as entangled with the violence of empire. In this sense, the graffiti performs a form of semiotic resistance that redirects a symbol associated with imperial victory into a sign of shame and complicity (Marandici, 2023).

During my fieldwork, I also encountered similar messages posted at the entrances of cafés, bars, and other establishments. One such sign, displayed at the doorway of a bar in central Tbilisi (see Figure 6), reads: "By entering the territory of Georgia and this bar you acknowledge and agree that Putin is a war criminal, Russia is an occupier and you respect territorial integrity

of Georgia, Ukraine and any country that became a victim of Russian occupation.” Positioned at the threshold of the establishment, the message transforms an ordinary entrance into a symbolic checkpoint. Moments like this reveal how geopolitical conflict is reproduced in the mundane spaces of everyday life. The entrance to a café becomes a site where belonging is negotiated and where visitors are reminded of the political meanings attached to their presence in Georgia (Mühlfried, 2023). For Russian migrants in particular, crossing such thresholds often involves demonstrating moral distance from the Russian state and recognizing Georgia’s historical experience of Russian imperial domination (Cheishvili, 2026). These encounters illustrate how the legacies of empire surface not only in formal political discourse but also in the small interactions and spatial boundaries that structure everyday urban life (Darieva, et al., 2025; Kamushadze & Kobidze, 2025).

Figure 6. Bar Entrance Sign in Tbilisi Requiring Acknowledgment of Russian Occupation and War Crimes



Source: Author's personal archive.

While existing studies illuminate the politicization of everyday spaces and moral accountability for Russian migrants in Georgia (Cheishvili, 2026; Mühlfried, 2023), they largely overlook the gendered dimensions of these negotiations, particularly how masculinity intersects

with imperial legacies to shape differential pressures on men to perform anti-imperial humility amid public hostility. By requiring individuals to condemn the Russian state and acknowledge its imperial violence, such signs challenge forms of national pride historically intertwined with Russian imperial identity. Russian men, in particular, are implicitly called upon to demonstrate humility, responsibility, and moral distance from the state's militarized nationalism (Ouzilevski, 2022).

In this chapter, I conceptualize these tensions through Good Russian Syndrome, a fraught and internally contradictory condition. Russian men who fled mobilization after 2022 reject the militarized masculinity promoted by the state, yet this refusal does not translate into moral recognition in Georgia. Instead, they are caught in a double bind: condemned by the Russian state for not fighting, and in exile, judged for leaving rather than confronting the regime as “real men.” These liminal conditions, compounded by the Georgian government's navigation of relations with both the West and Russia (Kakachia, 2022; Korableva, 2023), place Russian exiles in a precarious position. The term “syndrome” here is used metaphorically, not clinically: it denotes a recurring, socially imposed cluster of symptoms (performative opposition to the Putin regime, public disavowal of imperial violence, and constant reputational labor) that Russian exiles, especially men, must manage in the Georgian context. Like other “syndromes” in social theory (e.g., “imposter phenomenon” (Clance & Imes, 1978) or “survivor syndrome” (Niederland, 1968), it highlights how external pressures and internal ambivalences often give rise to patterned, sometimes difficult, identity negotiations.

This chapter's original contribution lies in showing how the arrival of Russian exiles transforms masculinity into a central site through which imperial memory, migration, and moral accountability are negotiated in the Russo-Georgian borderlands. What is being born in these

liminal encounters is neither seamless integration nor outright rejection, but a borderland masculinity. The concept of borderland masculinity has been developed primarily in studies of Chicano manhood drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) borderlands theory (Lennes, 2019) and has rarely been applied beyond U.S.–Mexico contexts. Here I extend it to the post-Soviet South Caucasus, where Russian exile men and Georgian society together generate hybrid masculine subjectivities shaped by friction rather than fusion. This masculinity is neither the militarized “real man” of Putin's Russia nor the historically wounded, hyper-vigilant protector of Georgian sovereignty. Russian exiles who stay and engage must rework their sense of masculine worth away from imperial entitlement or sacrificial loyalty toward quieter, more reflexive forms of responsibility and presence. At the same time, segments of Georgian society are confronted with living, breathing counter-examples to the monolithic “Russian” they have long imagined, individuals whose very existence challenges easy narratives of victimhood or perpetual threat.

In this sense, the Georgian-Russian encounter in Tbilisi after 2022 may be incubating an embryonic post-imperial subjectivity: messy, contradictory, and still heavily marked by pain and suspicion, yet capable of generating novel ways of being masculine and being neighboring in a region long defined by empire's long shadow.

The chapter proceeds in three sections. The first section situates these encounters within broader theoretical debates on masculinity, empire, and borderlands. Drawing on scholarship on hegemonic masculinity, postcolonial theory, and Eurasian imperial relations, it develops a framework for understanding how Russian exile masculinity becomes entangled with Georgia's historical experience of Russian imperial domination. The second section draws on twenty life-history interviews I conducted with Russian exiles in Georgia during the summer of 2023. It examines how Russian migrants themselves navigate the expectations associated with the “Good

Russian” identity. The third section shifts the perspective to Georgian society, exploring how Georgian citizens interpret the presence of Russian migrants and the expectations they place upon them. It highlights how historical grievances, solidarity with Ukraine, and generational differences shape these evaluations. While younger Georgians often reject Russian cultural and political influence more strongly, some older generations retain forms of Soviet-era nostalgia.

Postcolonial Masculinities in the South Caucasus

The arrival of Russian exiles in Georgia following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine has created a series of encounters shaped not only by migration but also by the long history of imperial relations between the two societies. Russian men entering Georgia are rarely perceived as neutral migrants. Instead, their presence is interpreted through the historical framework of Russian imperial domination, positioning them as symbolic carriers of empire whose bodies and behaviors become subject to public scrutiny (Cheishvili, 2026).

In this chapter, I integrate three distinct bodies of scholarship that have hitherto remained largely disconnected: theories of hegemonic and postcolonial masculinity, research on post-Soviet coloniality and imperial memory in the South Caucasus, and borderlands approaches to hybrid gendered subjectivities and reputational economies. Each body of work illuminates important dimensions of the phenomenon, yet none is sufficient on its own. Theories of hegemonic and postcolonial masculinity explain how gender hierarchies operate within imperial power structures, but they rarely engage with the specificities of post-Soviet borderlands (Connell, 2005; Sinha, 1995). Scholarship on post-Soviet coloniality and imperial memory captures the persistence of asymmetrical relations between Russia and its former peripheries (Etkind, 2013; Tlostanova, 2015, 2017). Yet this body of work has paid limited attention to

everyday gendered performances and negotiations. A notable exception is the work of Madina Tlostanova, whose borderlands framework illuminates the complex in-betweenness and hybrid subjectivities produced by imperial legacies in the Caucasus (Tlostanova, 2010). My analysis builds directly on Tlostanova's decolonial approach while extending it to the new post-2022 realities. However, even Tlostanova's framework does not address the specific dynamics of Russian exile and the renegotiation of gendered belonging in the South Caucasus context. Borderlands frameworks more broadly offer powerful tools for analyzing cultural hybridity, in-betweenness, and reputational labor, but they have seldom been applied to Russian exile experiences in the region (Anzaldúa, 1987; Lennes, 2019). Synthesizing these literatures therefore allows for a more integrated analysis. This section develops such a framework in order to advance the central argument of the chapter: that the Russo-Georgian borderland is producing a distinctive borderland masculinity among Russian exiles — a hybrid, contradictory form of manhood forged through reputational economies of empire, where the performance of the “Good Russian” is demanded and evaluated differently across generations of Georgian society.

Gender scholars have long argued that masculinities are not fixed identities, but social hierarchies structured through relations of power (Kimmel et al., 2004; Thompson et al., 1992). Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity remains foundational. Connell conceptualizes hegemonic masculinity as the culturally exalted form of manhood that legitimizes men's domination over women and the subordination of alternative masculinities (Connell, 1995). Importantly, hegemonic masculinity is never isolated; it is embedded in broader political and historical structures, including colonial and imperial hierarchies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In imperial contexts, the masculinity of the colonizing center is routinely constructed as rational, civilized, and authoritative, while the masculinities of colonized populations are

depicted as inferior, backward, or feminized (McClintock, 1995; Morrell & Swart, 2005; Sinha, 1995). Connell (2005) further extends this logic to a world gender order, noting that “the conditions thus exist for the production of a hegemonic masculinity on a world scale — that is to say, a dominant form of masculinity that embodies, organizes, and legitimates men’s domination in the world gender order as a whole” (p. 82).

These global dynamics are particularly salient in the post-Soviet space, which must be understood not merely as Postsocialist but as shaped by enduring imperial legacies. Scholars of post-Soviet coloniality argue that Eurasia functions as a complex imperial borderland structured by the relationship between the Russian center and its surrounding peripheries (Tlostanova, 2015, 2017). Although this domination differed from classical overseas colonialism, postcolonial frameworks remain analytically productive (Moore, 2001; Spivak et al., 2006). Within this order, Russian masculinity became intertwined with claims to European modernity and civilizational authority, while masculinities in the imperial peripheries were positioned as subordinate (Yusupova, 2023).

The South Caucasus occupies a particularly ambiguous position within this imperial geography. Incorporated into the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century and later into the Soviet Union, Georgia was governed through political, military, and cultural structures that reinforced Russian dominance (Malerius & Binder, 2025). Colonial encounters reshaped local gender hierarchies by introducing competing models of masculinity associated with imperial power (Collins-Breyfogle, 2011). In the Russian imperial imagination, the Caucasus was constructed through orientalist tropes as both romanticized and uncivilized, with Russian masculinity positioned as the civilizational standard and local masculinities as primitive or subordinate (Layton, 1994). As a result, relations between Russia and Georgia have long been

structured by asymmetrical power relations that extend beyond formal political structures into everyday cultural and symbolic practices (Malerius & Binder, 2025).

In the contemporary period, these historical legacies continue to shape Georgian national identity in generationally differentiated ways. Since the Rose Revolution of 2003, younger, urban, and pro-European Georgians have actively promoted narratives that frame Georgia as a European nation historically oppressed by Russian imperial rule, emphasizing resistance, sovereignty, and cultural self-determination (Bolkvadze et al., 2014; Gasviani, 2019). For this generation, the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and the ongoing occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia reinforce Russia as an existential imperial threat rather than a historical adversary (Friedman, 2008; Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2018). Older generations, however, often retain more ambivalent or nostalgic interpretations of the Soviet period, associating it with stability, social mobility, and shared modernity rather than pure colonial domination (Gasviani, 2019). These generational divergences create a complex evaluative landscape in which the performance of the “Good Russian,” the demand that Russian exiles publicly demonstrate moral distance from the imperial state, is judged differently: younger Georgians tend to demand stronger, more visible anti-imperial humility, while older Georgians may be more tolerant of ambiguity.

Gender norms within Georgian society further complicate these encounters. Georgian social structures remain shaped by heteropatriarchal family models that assign public authority to men while positioning women as moral guardians of the nation (Chkeidze & Gudushauri, 2024; UN Women & CRRC-Georgia, 2025; Waterston & Barkaia, 2017). Masculinity in Georgia has historically emphasized strength, honor, and national defense, ideals that were partially reshaped during the Soviet period and later linked to post-Soviet nationalism and military readiness (Gabunia et al., 2024). Russian men who fled mobilization after 2022 face a particularly sharp

double bind. By evading mobilization after 2022, many Russian men have distanced themselves from the militarized masculinity actively promoted by the Putin regime (Gasviani, 2023). Yet this refusal does not automatically earn moral recognition in Georgia, where masculinity is frequently tied to courage, resistance, and defense of the nation (Gabunia et al., 2024). Russian men thus find themselves condemned in Russia for refusing to fight and questioned in Georgia for fleeing rather than fighting Putin's regime from within.

Borderlands scholarship offers a powerful lens for understanding why these encounters are so intensely charged. Drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) foundational work, borderlands are not mere geographic lines but dynamic social spaces of cultural collision, hybridity, and negotiation where historical hierarchies and identities are constantly reshaped. Georgia functions as a quintessential post-Soviet borderland, indelibly marked by centuries of Russian imperial domination and ongoing efforts to shed those legacies while asserting European belonging. As Richard Pine (2021) suggests, borderlands are also social and epistemic spaces defined by ambiguity, instability, and overlapping meanings. The borderland is "the in-between space ... home to imprecise meanings which lurk between definitions and within attempts at translation" (p. 2), where identities do not settle into fixed categories but instead multiply across competing frameworks. In such spaces, the absence of stable interpretive "bridges" produces insecurity, mistrust, and a sense of the uncanny, making uncertainty itself a defining condition of social life. In this liminal zone, the arrival of Russian exiles reactivates imperial temporalities and produces a sense of "misfitting," a temporal dissonance in which the past intrudes upon the present (Cheishvili, 2026).

Victoria Reyes's (2019) theorization of global borderlands extends this framework by showing how such spaces operate through reputational economies. In zones of overlapping

sovereignty and legal ambiguity, reputation itself becomes a form of capital that individuals must constantly perform, manage, and repair to secure legitimacy and belonging. Russian exiles arrive in Georgia already carrying an imperial reputational economy: they are positioned in Georgian discourse as embodiments of Russian empire, regardless of their personal politics. Everyday interactions, from graffiti to café signs, therefore become sites of reputational labor in which exiles must visibly perform moral distance from the imperial state and rejection of militarized Russian norms.

Building on Anzaldúa's (1987) cultural hybridity and Reyes's reputational economies, the concept of borderland masculinity (Lennes, 2019) provides the final theoretical bridge. Originally developed in studies of Chicano manhood, borderland masculinity describes hybrid masculine subjectivities forged in spaces of cultural collision, where men must constantly negotiate contradictory expectations rather than inhabit a single coherent gender ideal. In the Russo-Georgian borderland, Russian exile masculinity becomes precisely such a borderland masculinity: a contradictory form that requires the ongoing performance of the "Good Russian," humility, reflexivity, and moral accountability, evaluated differently by younger (more demanding) and older (more ambivalent) generations of Georgians. This framework reveals how imperial memory, reputational economies, and generational differences converge to transform Russian men's bodies and behaviors into sites where the legacies of empire are simultaneously reproduced, contested, and potentially transformed.

Good Russian Syndrome in the Borderland

This section examines how the expectations associated with the "Good Russian" are lived, negotiated, and contested in everyday encounters in Tbilisi. Drawing on life-history

interviews and ethnographic observations, I analyze these narratives not as individual experiences but as sites where borderland masculinity, reputational labor, and the contradictions of Good Russian Syndrome are actively produced. These encounters reveal how moral judgment, historical memory, and gendered expectations converge to structure Russian exiles' everyday lives in Georgia.

Debates about how to distinguish Russians who oppose the war from those associated with the state intensified after 2022, revealing the difficulty of separating individual responsibility from imperial belonging. Among the most visible interventions was Garry Kasparov's proposal for a special document that would identify Russians who had publicly rejected the regime and its invasion of Ukraine. His suggestion aimed to simplify their migration processes at a time when both the EU and the US had rejected a complete visa ban for Russian citizens, stressing the importance of distinguishing between the actions of the Russian government and the Russian people, including dissidents and those at risk of human rights abuses, yet had made obtaining visas significantly more difficult and expensive. EU countries retained the authority to impose their own bilateral restrictions, which several countries bordering Russia chose to implement, while US migration processes were already complex and costly (Hankinson et al., 2022). The concept was initially called the "Good Russian" passport, but this label was quickly recognized as divisive, implying that those who remained in Russia were "bad Russians," without considering that many may not have had the opportunity to leave (Rudina, 2022).

To address this, the label was changed to a "Free Russian" document. Garry Kasparov and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, another prominent Russian politician and businessman, released a joint statement outlining the purpose of the proposed document. To obtain it, Russians would

need to demonstrate a clear opposition to Putin's regime, typically by publicly denouncing the invasion of Ukraine, supporting democratic values, or actively participating in anti-war activities. This document would grant them recognition as politically persecuted individuals, help distinguish them from those supporting the Russian government, and potentially ease their migration processes by facilitating access to visas and other international protections amid the ongoing sanctions against Russia (Khodorkovsky & Kasparov, 2023). However, freedom is a fluid social state that involves more than self-declaration and is produced through social interaction. However, this proposal did not come to fruition. More importantly, its failure reveals the limits of attempting to formalize moral distinction through bureaucratic mechanisms. The idea that political opposition could be verified and recognized through a document overlooks the fundamentally relational and context-dependent nature of moral legitimacy. As this chapter demonstrates, recognition as a "Good Russian" is not granted through official certification but must be continuously negotiated in face-to-face encounters, where it remains unstable, contested, and deeply shaped by local histories, gendered expectations, and reputational economies.

This evolving narrative highlights a key tension: the desire to separate those opposing the Kremlin from the broader Russian diaspora. Even in the EU and the United States, publicly denouncing Putin's regime is rarely sufficient; practical barriers to visas and protection remain high despite official distinctions between dissidents and the state. In Western settings, the demand tends to operate in a more bureaucratic and performative manner at a distance, mediated through institutional and legal frameworks that seek to distinguish dissidents from the state (Hankinson et al., 2022; Rudina, 2022). Yet the meaning and stakes of this status shift dramatically across contexts. In Georgia, by contrast, such declarations are rarely enough. Russian exiles encounter far more immediate and relational expectations, shaped by lived

historical memory and ongoing geopolitical tensions (Cheishvili, 2026). Here, moral legitimacy is not secured through a single act of disavowal but must be continuously performed and reassessed in everyday interactions. This relational character of moral legitimacy echoes findings from other migrant contexts, where self-declaration or formal documents prove insufficient and legitimacy must instead be performed and reassessed through ongoing social interactions (Richter-Devroe, 2022). Recognition remains contingent, mediated through local interpretations, and deeply entangled with gendered judgments and reputational labor in the Russo-Georgian borderland (Mühlfried, 2023).

My fieldwork was conducted in Tbilisi, Georgia, during the summer of 2023. The primary aim of this research was to gather personal narratives about their experiences as Russian exiles in Georgia, their reasons for leaving Russia after the onset of the invasion, and how the war has influenced their self-perception as Russians and/or exiles, as well as the gender norms they navigate around those terms. It is important to note that the majority of my interviewees were not publicly engaged in political activities before February 2022. For many of my interviewees, political awareness emerged gradually and often retrospectively, as they began to connect events that had previously seemed disconnected.

I met Marina through connections with Emigration for Action, where she volunteered in her free time sorting medications for Ukrainian refugees. We conducted the interview in the yard outside their rental office; as she lit a cigarette at the beginning, she remarked that revisiting that period of her life, especially when she had not paid attention to politics, was difficult. Marina described this process as a gradual awakening:

I was too young to care about the Russo-Georgian war. The annexation of Crimea seemed like a bigger deal, but a positive one.

I even had my wedding ceremony there. Only when I saw rockets hitting Kyiv did something change in me. I could no longer continue believing whatever I heard on TV. Only then did I begin to see the connection between these events: Georgia, Crimea, the full-scale invasion. And once my eyes were opened, I could not stay apolitical anymore. And being political meant getting arrested if I stayed in Russia. That moment was the biggest shift; it changed my life trajectory forever.

Marina's reflection was echoed by many interviewees, particularly those who described their political awakening as delayed, fragmented, and shaped by retrospective recognition rather than sustained opposition. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War barely registered within their information bubbles. Most were either adolescents at the time or were led to believe that Russia played a peacekeeping role rather than being an active participant in the conflict. However, in Georgia, this delayed recognition becomes socially and morally reinterpreted, not simply as ignorance but as a failure to have acted earlier. Marina continued:

But in Georgia, I feel the pressure of not knowing, something I did not feel before. I should have known, and I should have acted earlier. Pressure here is real, men feel it even more since many assume that they are only escaping mobilization and are not really anti-war. Georgians do make fun of them not being real fighters, real men.

In this interactional site, a volunteer yard where aid work for Ukrainian refugees itself performs a form of atonement, Marina's narrative reveals how Georgian space transforms

temporal delay into a gendered moral deficit. What appears as retrospective political awakening is reinterpreted as a failure of masculine responsibility. This produces temporal misfitting, where Russian exiles are judged through moral timelines they cannot retroactively meet. In this sense, Good Russian Syndrome emerges as a relational condition rather than an individual failing (Cheishvili, 2026; Griffiths, 2026). Such patterns of suspicion toward male migrants as insufficiently vulnerable or principled align with broader dynamics in which refugee and exile men face heightened scrutiny and demands to perform recognizable courage or responsibility (Turner, 2021). This highlights reputational labor as an exhausting and ongoing performance shaped through borderland encounters.

A similar collapse of performative quiet emerges in Vova's account. I met Vova at Fabrika, a former Soviet factory in Tbilisi that has been repurposed into a vibrant social and cultural space. He suggested the location himself, noting that he found it meaningful as a place that had transformed from a Soviet remnant into something more open and dynamic, a shift he loosely associated with his own trajectory from political indifference to a more self-aware and engaged position. Prior to 2022, he described his life as comfortable and largely insulated from politics, with dissent expressed only within a small, private circle. Explaining why he attended an anti-war protest in Saint Petersburg during the first few days of the war, he reflected:

This is not a hero complex, like, "oh, I want to be cool." No, I do not want to be cool. All of this started because we were quiet for so long. We did not have strength, because we were scared.

Recounting his detention, he emphasized both the fear of repression and the ambivalence of silence:

We were taken to another city. We stayed there a few hours waiting. We were sitting in rooms, four or five people per room, and we stayed there the whole night. Very small rooms. It was scary, but not as scary as the quiet that we have maintained so far. Not going to lie, it was a comfortable quietness. But this was the point after which being quiet became impossible. I know it sounds bad that it did not happen when Russia attacked Georgia, but back then, at least for me, it could not have happened, I was too young. The generation that gets its info from the internet did not care about politics just yet. Now in Georgia I know more about it and cannot do anything about the past, but I do regret not knowing more before coming.

Across interviews and observations in sites like Fabrika, where Soviet material remnants meet new hybrid sociality, such reflections illustrate how silence under late Putinism, though patterned by fear and repression, becomes subject to retrospective moral scrutiny in the borderland. In Tbilisi, this past quiet is reinterpreted through a different moral framework, requiring exiles to perform reputational labor that accounts for both present opposition and historical inaction. Vova's account thus shows how Good Russian Syndrome extends beyond present-day declarations to encompass retrospective evaluation, producing an unstable borderland masculinity that demands visible courage while remaining constrained by local historical memories.

Even for those who had long opposed the regime, recognition in Georgia remains unstable. I met Dimitry at the office of the Free Russia Foundation in Tbilisi, where he

responded to my questions while simultaneously monitoring Russian news across two computer screens, noting that keeping track of developments had become part of his daily routine. A young man involved in oppositional organizing, he described:

I have been fighting this regime since I was 17 and had some understanding of what's going on, but in Tbilisi I'm still looked at with suspicion. I was even told that if my story was true then I should have manned up enough and continued fighting. Nobody understands what fighting in Russia means. In Georgia there is a glimpse of democracy, at least you can protest freely, that's not the case in Russia. It's easy to be a man and fighting when you know that you won't be arrested and sent to prison just for saying no to war.

The pressure in Tbilisi is real. I only get a break from old taxi drivers who are relieved that they do not have to speak English and switch to Russian. They always start remembering Soviet times and how a flight to Moscow was only 37 rubles or something.

Dimitry's account, voiced in the activist office where opposition work continues transnationally, highlights how even sustained resistance is re-gendered and re-temporalized in everyday Georgian interactions. His long-term opposition does not automatically grant legitimacy; instead, it collides with expectations of "manning up" under different conditions of risk. The contrast with older taxi drivers reveals generational divides in reputational economies: Soviet nostalgia offers momentary reprieve for some, while younger encounters demand consistent anti-imperial visibility. These patterns resonate with large-scale survey data showing

mixed but often wary Georgian perceptions of recent Russian arrivals, including generational differences in attitudes and heightened demands placed on male exiles (Fabos, 2024). The implications of this generational divide will be explored in greater detail in the following section. These sites actively produce borderland masculinity as a field of relational tension, where courage is measured not in absolute terms but through local interpretive frames.

A more hopeful articulation of this borderland condition emerged in my encounter with another interlocutor, Boris. We agreed to meet at a Ukrainian café in central Tbilisi. He arrived wearing a black T-shirt with the statement: “20% of Russia is occupied by Georgia.” The shirt immediately framed our interaction, signaling a deliberate inversion of dominant narratives of occupation and a public performance of alignment with Georgian perspectives.

Boris had previously been involved in oppositional activism connected to Alexei Navalny’s network. After relocating to Georgia, he became engaged in local initiatives, including organizing volunteer efforts to deliver food and supplies to communities near the occupied regions. He described these actions as a way to take responsibility for the violence carried out by his country: “I’m man enough to listen, especially to Georgian people, even when they question my intentions. I’m here and I will continue to be here and make things right.”

Boris’s articulation, performed visibly in a Ukrainian café through both attire and volunteer labor, suggests a reworking of masculinity within the borderland. Rather than embracing militarized strength, he reframes it as accountability, listening, and persistence under scrutiny, echoing hybrid or borderland subjectivities that emerge in spaces of cultural overlap and power asymmetry (Lennes, 2019). Yet this possibility remains structurally constrained. When I later checked his social media, I found that he had left the country, not by choice, but because he had been denied re-entry by Georgian border authorities. Studies of Russian migrant

activism in Georgia similarly document how visibility, through protests, humanitarian work, or public anti-war positioning, can heighten exposure to state control and re-entry barriers even as it responds to host-society demands for moral clarity (Darieva et.al, 2023). This reveals a broader contradiction: while Georgian society may demand moral clarity through reputational labor, the Georgian state does not necessarily protect those who attempt to embody it. Russian exiles who participate in protests alongside Georgian citizens face heightened risks (Civil.ge, 2025a; Nikuradze, 2025; Transparency International Georgia, 2026). This dynamic exposes a key paradox of the borderland: the same visibility required to establish legitimacy within reputational economies simultaneously increases exposure to state control and vulnerability.

Taken together, these encounters, from volunteer yards and repurposed factories to activist offices, taxis, and Ukrainian cafés, demonstrate that the Russo-Georgian borderland produces more than a hybrid masculinity. It produces a deeply unstable and continuously negotiated one. Russian exile men are expected to reject imperial violence, demonstrate moral accountability for collective history, and embody recognizable forms of courage, all while navigating contradictory local expectations. Borderland masculinity thus emerges here not as a stable alternative but as an ongoing condition of tension and misfitting. In these everyday sites, Good Russian Syndrome is actively constituted through the interplay of historical memory, gendered judgment, and the ongoing labor of proving legitimacy in face-to-face interactions.

Georgian Perspective

This section examines how Georgian society interprets and responds to the presence of Russian exiles in everyday life. Drawing on ethnographic observations, informal encounters, and “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of public and private interactions in Tbilisi, I approach these

moments not as isolated incidents but as dynamic sites where historical memory, moral judgment, and gendered expectations are actively negotiated. While the previous section focused on how Russian exiles experience and perform the demands of the “Good Russian,” here I shift the analytical lens to Georgian perspectives. I ask how these performances are received, evaluated, and sometimes contested, with particular attention to the ways in which local understandings of masculinity shape the uneven pressures placed on Russian men.

To make sense of these layered and often contradictory responses, I draw on Long Bui’s (2019) concept of the heteroglossia of history. In his analysis of contemporary Vietnamese film, Bui shows how multiple, often conflicting narratives of the past coexist and compete within a single cultural field, producing a polyphonic space in which divergent interpretations continue to shape identities, judgments, and social boundaries. A parallel heteroglossia of history characterizes contemporary Georgia, where competing accounts of the Soviet past, Russian imperial domination, the 2008 war, and the post-Rose Revolution drive toward European belonging circulate simultaneously (Chikovani & Kakitelashvili, 2015). This creates an unstable evaluative landscape sharply inflected by generational experience and political outlook.

Georgian understandings of masculinity are closely tied to militarist nationalism and reproductive heterosexuality, positioning men as defenders of Georgian culture, territory, and traditional social order, especially amid ongoing territorial conflicts and perceived external threats (Ziemer & Roberts, 2024). These ideals now intersect with strong expectations that Russian men demonstrate moral accountability and anti-imperial humility. Russian men who arrived after the 2022 invasion, whether they fled mobilization or left because they opposed the war, are often perceived as failing a different and more locally defined test of manhood. Younger Georgians in particular tend to regard staying inside Russia and actively resisting the regime

from within as the true measure of masculine courage, viewing departure as a choice of personal safety over direct confrontation, while older generations apply similar scrutiny though often tempered by greater pragmatism and Soviet-era nostalgia. As a result, these men are frequently judged as embodying neither the assertive, state-backed masculinity promoted in Russia nor the vigilant, resistance-oriented masculinity valorized in Georgia. These intersecting pressures, filtered through Georgia's heteroglossia of history, generate the unstable and contradictory borderland masculinity examined throughout this chapter.

A brief encounter in central Tbilisi illustrates this unevenness vividly. I arrived slightly late to one of my interviews and found my interlocutor already seated in the café. As I joined him, I instinctively began speaking in Russian, the language that had structured most of my conversations with Russian exiles. Before the waiter approached, I overheard him telling a colleague in Georgian, "I do not want to serve these Russians. Can you take them?" His colleague replied jokingly, "It is your unlucky day. Make them suffer. Do not respond to Russian." When the waiter reached our table, my interviewee ordered in English. When it was my turn, I switched to Georgian. The waiter's demeanor changed instantly, from reluctance to visible embarrassment and then irritation. "Oh, I did not know you were Georgian," he said, before pressing me on why I had been speaking Russian at all. In that moment, I felt an unexpected pressure to justify both my presence and my linguistic choices. My interlocutor, sensing the tension, suggested we continue in English. I declined, but the atmosphere had shifted. We minimized further interaction with the staff and left without ordering more.

This experience stood in sharp contrast to my taxi ride just minutes earlier. The older driver had spoken warmly about depending on a Russian ride-hailing app, explaining that it was simply easier and more familiar to communicate in Russian with passengers. He expressed a

sense of comfort with Russian clients that he did not feel with those “from the West or Arab countries,” as he put it. Moving between these two interactions within a single commute revealed the contradictory ways in which Russian language, identity, and male presence are read in Tbilisi today. Together, they demonstrate how evaluations of Russian exiles are neither fixed nor uniform. Instead, they shift across social settings and generational lines, shaped by competing historical narratives, situational logics, and the relational dynamics of everyday life.

Similar forms of informal policing emerged in other everyday interactions throughout my fieldwork. In cafés, shops, and service encounters, Russian language often triggered subtle shifts in tone, ranging from visible discomfort to deliberate distancing. In some cases, staff would respond in English rather than Russian, even when it was clear that Russian would have been mutually intelligible. In others, interactions became noticeably colder or more transactional. These moments rarely escalated into open confrontation, yet they carried a quiet but persistent message: Russian presence in public space required careful management (Darieva et al., 2025; Fabos, 2024).

These subtle forms of informal policing reflect deeper intersections between linguistic colonialism and gendered power. As Timothy Blauvelt (2013) argues, Russian persists in contemporary Georgia as the “Soviet imperial tongue,” its continued public use often read as a lingering assertion of dominance rather than neutral communication. In postcolonial frameworks, imperial languages have historically been coded as markers of rational, authoritative masculinity, while resistance to them (through code-switching, avoidance, or deliberate discomfort) becomes a performance of local sovereignty and honor (Yusupova, 2023; Tlostanova, 2017). In the Georgian case, younger generations socialized after the Rose Revolution interpret default Russian speech by male exiles, especially when unaccompanied by humility or code-switching,

as a refusal to relinquish imperial entitlement. This clashes with local ideals of masculine resistance and non-threatening presence (Gasviani, 2019).

This tension is further complicated by the heteroglossia of history surrounding Soviet “brotherhood.” Official Soviet discourse celebrated a harmonious “brotherhood of nations,” with Russia cast as the benevolent elder brother guiding its culturally vibrant but politically junior siblings, including Georgia (Chikovani & Kakitelashvili, 2015; Gasviani, 2019). In practice, this fraternal rhetoric masked a deeply gendered and ethnicized hierarchy in which Georgians were positioned as passionate yet immature “younger brothers” in need of Russian guidance and civilization.

Nino Chikovani and Ketevan Kakitelashvili (2015) capture the fluctuating nature of these images in post-Soviet Georgian collective memory:

After the August War 2008, the perception of Russia as an aggressor seemed to be strongly fixed. However, the contours of this image are becoming blurred as a result of current changes of the political elite. The part of the society which is oriented towards the past experiences a kind of nostalgia towards the image of the “Big Brother”... Although, the post-Soviet generation holds in its collective memory the overlapping images of “aggressive” and “conqueror” Russian Empire and that of the Soviet Russia; supposedly, they could be hardly demolished (p.138).

Today, this heteroglossia of history (Bui, 2019) produces competing readings. Younger Georgians hear in Russian speech the echo of the condescending elder brother who never truly listened, while older generations may interpret the same language through a more nostalgic

register. When Russian male exiles speak Russian by default in public space, they inadvertently reactivate these layered meanings, intensifying the demand for a different kind of language and performance.

These symbolic tensions do not remain at the level of language and memory alone but extend into material and spatial inequalities that structure everyday life in Tbilisi. The post-2022 influx triggered a dramatic surge in Tbilisi's rental market: rents rose by 48 percent across the city in 2022, with some central neighborhoods experiencing increases of 66 to 77 percent. Many property owners doubled rents, putting local students, families, and lower-income renters at a distinct disadvantage (Darieva et al., 2025; TBC Capital, 2023). Landlords, frequently older Georgians who own property, often preferred Russian tenants who could pay significantly higher rates in cash and sometimes evicted locals to accommodate them (Seturidze, 2023). In this context, Russian exiles, even unintentionally, continue to enact a subtle form of former-colonial economic dominance: their greater purchasing power allows them to reshape housing access, urban space, and everyday life in ways that reinforce perceptions of imperial entitlement and masculine assertion. Younger Georgians, who rarely own property and are more likely to rent, can resist this dynamic more openly through "patriotism from below," informal sanctions such as rejecting Russian tenants, enforcing linguistic boundaries, or creating discomfort in host-tenant relations without direct financial penalty (Darieva et al., 2025).

This generational tension sharpens when younger Georgians judge Russian male exiles as not men enough to have fought Putin from inside Russia. Marina, one of my Russian interlocutors, noted that Georgians sometimes make fun of them for not being real fighters, real men. Such judgments gain force from Georgians' own recent history of sustained, high-risk protest against their government. Since late 2024, massive, largely young generation driven pro-

EU demonstrations have continued almost daily in Tbilisi and beyond, responding to Georgian Dream's suspension of EU accession talks until 2028, allegations of electoral fraud in the October 2024 parliamentary elections, and the adoption of repressive legislation modeled on Russian laws (Civil.ge, 2025b; Demytrie 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025b). Protesters have faced water cannons, tear gas, mass detentions, and reports of police violence. These scenes of everyday courage and willingness to confront authoritarian power at great personal risk create a stark contrast that further undermines the legitimacy of Russian exile men in the eyes of many younger Georgians, reinforcing the perception that fleeing Russia represents a failure of masculine responsibility rather than a valid form of resistance.

This contradiction finds clear expression in the ruling party itself. Georgian Dream, whose very name ironically promises a future of prosperity and European integration, has increasingly come to resemble what critics describe as a Russian Dream: a vision of stability achieved through accommodation with Moscow, centralized control, and the gradual erosion of democratic institutions (Kakachia et al., 2024; Kitachaev, 2025). By suspending EU accession talks until 2028, adopting legislation modeled on Russian foreign agents' laws, and restricting the return of vocal Russian opposition figures, the party has signaled a preference for managed authoritarianism over the uncertainties of genuine democratic reform.

Yet unlike Putin's regime, Georgian Dream has not fully embraced overt mass repression. It still permits large-scale street protests and maintains a formal framework of electoral competition. Nevertheless, the trajectory is unmistakable: the ruling party is steadily moving toward a softer, transactional form of authoritarian control. In the borderland, this creates a painful irony. Russian exiles who fled one authoritarian system now find themselves in a country where the ruling Dream is slowly beginning to mirror the very power structures they

escaped, albeit in a more restrained and pragmatic manner. For both Georgians and Russians living in Tbilisi, this raises a deeper question: what kind of dream is possible in a borderland scarred by empire? A future that does not depend on any authoritarian government, neither the overt militarism of Putin's Russia nor the incrementally tightening grip of Georgian Dream.

Despite these frictions and the undeniable pain of historical memory, the Russo-Georgian borderland also holds genuine generative potential. In moments of shared resistance, Russian exiles and Georgians have stood together in concrete ways. During the 2024 protests against the foreign agent's law, Russian men joined Georgian demonstrators in the streets, providing medical assistance to those affected by tear gas and actively participating in collective acts of defiance (Ouzilevski, 2024). Similarly, in mixed Russian-Georgian volunteer groups such as Volunteers Tbilisi and Just Help, Russian men work alongside Georgians to deliver medicine, food, and humanitarian aid to Ukrainian refugees (Bronnikova, Gavrilova, & Margvelashvili, 2025). In these contexts, a hybrid borderland masculinity begins to emerge. Russian men shift away from traditional imperial or militarized forms of manhood and instead perform masculinity through quieter, more reflexive practices of care, practical support, and solidarity. Rather than asserting dominance or seeking recognition as heroic fighters, they engage in the everyday labor of listening, assisting others under risk, and contributing to collective well-being. At the same time, Georgian participants encounter living counter-examples to the monolithic image of the Russian man rooted in collective memory.

These encounters open space for re-imagining not only masculinity but also the very idea of a dream in the borderland. The Soviet brotherhood and the current Georgian Dream (increasingly perceived as a Russian Dream) both offered visions of stability tied to hierarchical or authoritarian power. In contrast, the borderland offers the possibility of a different dream, one

that does not depend on any authoritarian government. Grounded in mutual recognition of pain, shared opposition to repression, and the willingness to listen across historical wounds, this emergent vision points toward non-authoritarian futures. Drawing on Anzaldúa's (1987) vision of borderlands as spaces of hybridity forged in friction, Lennes's (2019) concept of borderland masculinity, and Tlostanova's (2017) decolonial attention to in-betweenness, Russians and Georgians together begin to enact a masculinity, and a shared future, capable of transcending the cycle of domination. What is being born here is messy, contradictory, and still marked by trauma, yet it carries the potential for novel ways of being masculine and being neighboring in a region long defined by empire's long shadow. In these liminal spaces, the borderland becomes not only a site of suspicion and reputational labor but also a generative space where masculinity is redefined through the shared labor of opposing authoritarianism, acknowledging historical pain, and learning to neighbor across difference. This co-production of borderland masculinity fulfills the chapter's central argument: that imperial memory, migration, and moral accountability converge to forge a distinctive, hybrid form of manhood capable of sustaining coexistence in the post-Soviet South Caucasus. At the same time, this potential does not resolve into a stable alternative but remains marked by tension and uneven recognition, even as it gestures toward forms of rearticulation developed more fully in the following chapter.

Conclusion: Borderland Tensions

In the end, the presence of Russian exiles in Tbilisi after 2022 has done more than simply transplant bodies from one country to another. It has reopened old imperial wounds while simultaneously forcing both Russian men and Georgian society to confront the limits of their accustomed ways of being. What emerges from these daily frictions is not a clean resolution or

harmonious integration, but a slow, uneasy reshaping of masculine identity in the shadow of empire.

What emerges from these encounters is not resolution, but a condition of ongoing tension. The same act of leaving Russia after 2022 is read through conflicting frameworks that shift across contexts. In Russia, it is often framed as a failure of loyalty. In Georgia, it may appear insufficient as a moral stance. These layered interpretations do not stabilize into a shared understanding but instead produce a field in which recognition remains provisional and contingent. Even long-standing opposition to the regime does not secure legitimacy. It must be repeatedly articulated and interpreted within a local context shaped by its own histories of violence and dispossession.

This instability is precisely what gives rise to borderland masculinity. It does not emerge as a coherent or unified alternative, but as a condition shaped through contradiction, misalignment, and constant reinterpretation. Masculinity here is not simply redefined but unsettled. It becomes something that is read, questioned, and recalibrated across interactions, rather than something that can be fully claimed or secured. The borderland thus does not produce a stable model of manhood but exposes the limits of any singular framework for understanding it.

At the same time, Georgian society itself is not fixed in its evaluations. As the chapter has shown, responses to Russian exiles are shaped by generational differences, political orientations, and lived experiences of the Soviet and post-Soviet past. Younger Georgians often approach Russian presence through a lens of heightened suspicion and demand for visible disavowal, while older generations may interpret similar encounters through more ambivalent or pragmatic

registers. These differences ensure that the meaning of Russian presence remains unsettled, shifting across spaces and interactions rather than solidifying into a single narrative.

Yet within this instability, certain moments complicate established expectations. Encounters in shared spaces such as volunteer initiatives, protest sites, and everyday conversations introduce forms of interaction that do not fully align with inherited images of the Russian as a singular figure of domination. These moments do not dissolve mistrust or erase asymmetry, but they create points of friction where existing narratives are tested and, at times, quietly reworked. In this sense, the borderland does not simply reproduce imperial hierarchies but renders them visible and open to contestation.

The broader implication of this analysis is that moral clarity in post-imperial contexts cannot be secured through fixed categories or singular acts of disavowal. It is produced relationally, through interactions that remain contingent, uneven, and open-ended. The figure of the “Good Russian” does not resolve these tensions but makes them legible, revealing the persistent gap between self-understanding and recognition, between intention and interpretation. This gap is not incidental. It is constitutive of the borderland itself.

What takes shape in Tbilisi after 2022 is therefore neither reconciliation nor simple hostility. It is a fragile and often uncomfortable process in which both Russian exiles and Georgian society are compelled to confront the limits of their own frameworks. The borderland does not offer closure. It sustains a condition in which meanings remain unsettled, where belonging cannot be fully secured, and where the afterlives of empire continue to structure even the most ordinary interactions.

In this light, the Russo-Georgian borderland is not only a site where imperial legacies persist, but one where they are actively negotiated in lived experience. The forms of masculinity

that emerge within it remain incomplete, shaped by pressures that cannot be fully resolved and by expectations that cannot be entirely met. This incompleteness is not a weakness of the framework but its central insight. It reflects the enduring nature of empire's imprint and the ongoing effort to live within, against, and beyond it.

Chapter 3 - Defying Putin's Mold: Russian Masculinity in a Time of Exile

“Are you gay? Is that why you ran?”

“It does not matter. By leaving, you already
showed what you are. Gay or not, you are
dead to me.”

—Roman’s mother, quoted in interview with Roman,
Tbilisi, 2023

The above exchange comes from a phone call Roman received from his mother shortly after he left Russia in the months following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The accusation arrived before he had the chance to explain his decision. In her view, Roman’s departure had already settled the question of who he was. The proper response for a man, she implied, was to go and fight in Ukraine; at the very least, he should have remained in Russia during wartime. By leaving, Roman revealed himself, in her eyes, as something less than a man. The insinuation of homosexuality did not simply function as an insult but as a form of moral classification that placed him outside the boundaries of respectable masculinity and, by extension, outside the community of those who remain loyal to the nation in wartime (Sperling, 2014). Leaving the country became legible not as political dissent but as a failure of manhood. This judgment did not remain at the level of state rhetoric, but circulated through intimate relationships, where it was repeated, enforced, and lived in everyday interactions.

This moment illustrates how judgments about war, loyalty, and masculinity circulate through intimate relationships. Roman’s mother’s words echo a broader moral language that has become increasingly visible within Russian media and political discourse, where participation in war is framed as a measure of masculine citizenship (Gasviani, 2023). Men who refuse the call to

fight are recast as weak, deviant, or morally suspect. Their departure is interpreted not as political refusal but as evidence that they have failed to embody the form of masculinity the state demands (Magdelénat, 2024).

Building on the previous chapter's analysis of how exile is lived and negotiated in the borderland, this chapter shifts attention to how exile is pre-structured through gendered narratives of masculinity and loyalty. In this chapter, I conceptualize this dynamic as the politics of gendered death, enacted through media as a process in which narratives, satire, and viral circulation symbolically unmake men who refuse participation in state-defined masculinity and war-making. Instead of interpreting departure as political dissent, dominant narratives recode exile as a failure of manhood, withdrawing recognition and belonging and rendering exiled men socially illegible. What I call politics of gendered death draws on insights from scholarship on social death (Patterson, 1982), necropolitics (Mbembe, 2006), gendered citizenship (Walby, 1994; Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2005), and militarized masculinity (Sperling, 2014), but applies them to a setting that has received less attention: the intersection of authoritarian politics and transnational exile. Earlier scholarship has also explored how death itself is culturally gendered, showing how societies attach different meanings to male and female death (Schmoll, 1998) and how representations of death in art and literature are shaped by gendered cultural imaginaries (Williams, 2001). More recently, Ege Selin Islekel (2022) extends Achille Mbembe's (2006) work on necropolitics by demonstrating how regimes of death are structured through intersecting hierarchies of race, sexuality, and gender. Building on these insights, I shift the focus from the governance of physical death to the symbolic elimination of political subjects, showing how this politics of gendered death is enacted through media narratives and public discourse. In the Russian wartime context, the state not only demands that men be willing to die

as soldiers; it also produces narratives that mark those who refuse participation as socially and morally dead. Masculinity becomes the medium through which loyalty is evaluated, and refusal becomes grounds for disqualification from the community of legitimate citizens.

I begin with a brief review of scholarship on masculinity, citizenship, and Putin's gender regime to situate how these narratives became possible. To examine how these meanings circulate and acquire authority, this chapter juxtaposes two forms of evidence: viral media circulating within the Russian information environment and life history interviews conducted with Russian exiles in Tbilisi. Viral videos reveal how narratives of masculinity, loyalty, and betrayal are produced and amplified within the contemporary Russian media ecosystem. Interviews illuminate how these narratives travel into intimate spaces of family life and personal relationships, shaping how men who leave Russia are judged, remembered, and understood. Placing these materials side by side allows me to trace how mediated scripts of masculinity move across scales, from the level of propaganda and viral circulation to the level of everyday conversation and moral evaluation. The chapter, therefore, moves between media analysis and ethnographic narrative. The story that follows offers an entry point into these dynamics as they unfolded in the everyday lives of Russian exiles navigating displacement.

I spent the summer of 2023 in my hometown of Tbilisi, moving through streets that felt familiar and strange at once. Russian voices threaded through cafés and courtyards, anti-war graffiti appeared and disappeared overnight, and new routines formed around departure, waiting, and uncertainty. For many Russian exiles, Tbilisi was imagined as a provisional refuge upon arrival in 2022, shaped by expectations that the war would be short or that onward movement to Europe would soon follow, even as such mobility was beginning to be constrained by tightening visa regimes (Dumbrava, 2022). By 2023, this imagined temporariness had unraveled, as many

found themselves unexpectedly anchored in the very place they had not intended to stay (MacFarquhar, 2025). Russian exiles moved through the city marked by abrupt departures and unfinished lives, their displacement produced by war, mobilization, and political refusal (Yablokov & Gatov, 2025). It was within this altered urban landscape that I began my fieldwork, listening to how Russian exile was narrated, explained, and lived in the shadow of war. One of the first was Roman, whom I met at Prospero's Books, a common gathering spot for exiles.

Roman arrived early and chose a table near the edge of the courtyard. When I introduced myself, he greeted me with an easy smile, and the conversation began without hesitation. Roman told me about leaving Saint Petersburg, the city where he had lived his entire adult life. Much of his family remained in Russia, and the weight of that distance lingered in the pauses between his sentences. He described the first days of the invasion and the shock that rippled through his social circle. Staying in Russia, he said, felt like standing in front of a falling meteor and telling yourself that holding your ground counted as bravery. In Georgia, he hoped he could still be useful. He could help friends who remained behind. He could donate to Ukrainian refugees. He could breathe.

When Roman began speaking about his family, his voice tightened and tears gathered in his eyes. When they fell softly into his coffee cup, I felt a flicker of unease. My upbringing in a patriarchal society had shaped my instincts so deeply that seeing a man cry in public felt almost transgressive. Roman noticed my hesitation and offered a small reassuring smile.

That moment of discomfort reflected not only Russian gender norms but also Georgian expectations of masculinity, where emotional restraint and silent endurance are often valued over visible vulnerability (Gasviani, 2022). Crying, he explained, had become part of his life since leaving Russia, a response to the collective trauma many people experienced after crossing the

border. In a setting where men's public tears are often stigmatized, Roman's willingness to cry without apology suggested that exile had altered not only his circumstances but also the emotional expectations he carried with him. In this sense, his tears quietly disrupted the militarized masculinity promoted by the Russian state, revealing a form of agency that refuses the demand for stoic endurance.

Later in our conversation, Roman told me about the phone call from his mother that would become the epigraph of this chapter. Her words echoed a familiar script of masculinity under Putin's regime. As Valerie Sperling (2014), citing Riabov, Riabova, and Shaburova, notes, attaining the status of a "real man" (*muzhik*) requires demonstrating that one is "not a woman, not a child, and not a homosexual" (p. 36). In the current political moment in Russia, the demonstration of manhood is increasingly equated with participation in the invasion of Ukraine.

Roman's refusal to participate and his decision to leave therefore rendered him legible, in his mother's view, through the remaining categories of failure, culminating in the insinuation of homosexuality. Her accusation operated not simply as a private moral judgment but as an intimate reproduction of a broader political logic. In contemporary Russia, masculinity functions as a tool of political legitimation, woven into macho political language, male-dominated power networks, and leadership practices that enforce loyalty through symbolic humiliation and exclusion (Wood, 2024).

As my fieldwork continued, I heard variations of Roman's story again and again. Men described being called cowards for leaving and accused of betraying their country and their duties as men. These accusations often followed a familiar hierarchy of masculine disqualification: some were labeled gay, others reduced to the status of children, figures

understood as lacking the moral and political capacity required of men (Ryabova & Ryabov, 2011).

In contemporary Russia such accusations carry additional political weight. The state has increasingly framed queer identities as threats to the moral and political order, culminating in the designation of the so-called “international LGBT movement”³ as extremist (Human Rights Watch, 2023). As Jasbir Puar (2018) argues, states often construct sexual deviance as a sign of political threat, linking queerness to national betrayal or internal subversion. Within this framework, accusations of homosexuality do more than feminize men who refuse war; they position them alongside enemies of the state.

Nearly all of my interlocutors emphasized that their families remained immersed in Russian state television and online media, repeating phrases absorbed from news programs, viral clips, or talk shows. Several described phone calls in which they recognized not only the words, but the cadence and effect of state broadcasts reproduced almost verbatim in intimate conversation. The boundary between media discourse and family judgment, they suggested, was thin, if it existed at all.

These recurring phrases pointed to the sites where scripts of masculine disqualification were being produced and circulated. For many of my interlocutors, these scripts appeared most clearly in short, widely shared videos that condensed complex political positions into simple and recognizable figures. Often framed as satire or everyday commentary, these clips presented a limited set of recurring characters: the cowardly exile, the feminized man, the spoiled urbanite, the traitor who chose comfort over duty.

³ The term “LGBT” is used here to mirror Russian state terminology rather than the author’s preferred inclusive language.

The analysis that follows examines how these narratives emerge and circulate across multiple domains. I begin by situating these accusations within the broader gender regime consolidated under Putin's rule, where masculinity functions as a key measure of political belonging. I then turn to viral media frequently referenced by my interlocutors, analyzing how ridicule and satire transform political departure into visible masculine failure. Finally, I return to the experiences of Russian men living in exile, tracing how these narratives continue to shape their relationships, self-understandings, and encounters with others beyond Russia's borders.

Masculinity, Citizenship, and the Making of Putin's Gender Regime

Soviet constructions of masculinity provide a crucial historical foundation for understanding contemporary Russian gender norms. Throughout much of the twentieth century, Soviet manhood was organized around a state-centered ideal that linked masculine worth to public service, political loyalty, and endurance, while systematically devaluing the private sphere of family life and emotional intimacy (Chernova, 2012; Randall, 2012). Men were expected to serve as soldiers, workers, and breadwinners in the name of the collective, while fatherhood was framed less as a site of care or authority than as a moral obligation compatible with state priorities rather than personal fulfillment (Chernova, 2012). War, political repression, and prolonged militarization further distanced men from domestic life, drawing them into institutional and ideological projects that left little room for alternative masculine identities.

By the late Soviet period, this model had begun to fracture. Economic stagnation, political disillusionment, and the widening gap between ideological expectations and lived realities produced what scholars came to describe as a "crisis of masculinity," a diagnosis that framed men's social dislocation as individual inadequacy rather than as the result of structural

constraints (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2013). Rather than challenging the conditions that undermined men's ability to fulfill prescribed roles, this discourse obscured social discontent by recasting it as a moral or psychological failure of men themselves (Riabov & Riabova, 2014). At the level of everyday practice, heavy drinking emerged as a recognizable idiom through which men enacted toughness and camaraderie, even as it deepened vulnerability and marginalization (Hinote & Webber, 2012).

These late Soviet configurations did not disappear with the collapse of the USSR. Instead, they formed a cultural reservoir of unresolved anxieties, failed promises, and gendered expectations that would later be selectively reactivated and reworked (Gasviani, 2023). As Maya Eichler (2011) argues, post-Soviet projects of militarized citizenship draw on this inherited terrain, redefining "real men" through renewed emphasis on service, sacrifice, and readiness for war. The endurance of these gendered logics helps explain why contemporary appeals to militarized masculinity resonate so powerfully: they do not emerge anew but build upon long-standing efforts to stabilize political authority through the regulation of male identity.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a dramatic rupture in political and economic life, bringing with it the collapse of socialist futures and the promise of market-based transformation. In Russia, the transition to capitalism was widely imagined as an opportunity to unleash men's creativity and entrepreneurial potential, previously constrained by state socialism (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2013). Much of the blame for men's perceived "emasculatation" was retroactively assigned to Soviet gender policies, which were said to have stifled initiative and innovation (Kay, 2006). Throughout the 1990s, Russian print media and popular culture flooded the public sphere with images of desirable post-Soviet masculinity and femininity. Men were encouraged to embody the figure of the successful businessman, while women were increasingly

directed toward domesticity and beauty as primary domains of fulfillment (Morell & Tiurikova, 2017).

Yet these ideals were largely unattainable for most men. Market volatility, mass unemployment, and the collapse of industrial production made it impossible for many to assume the role of sole breadwinner or to achieve the entrepreneurial success celebrated in media discourse (Yurchak, 2002). As Boris Kagarlitsky (2002) documents, Russian agricultural and industrial output fell dramatically during Boris Yeltsin's presidency, while population decline and falling life expectancy further underscored the depth of social crisis. Political leadership during this period became closely associated with gendered failure. Russia's first president, Yeltsin, whose public persona was marked by visible intoxication and bodily instability, came to symbolize a defeated and weakened Russian masculinity (Mettke, 2007). His inability to restore national dignity, coupled with the disastrous First Chechen War (1994–1996), reinforced perceptions of demasculinization at both domestic and international levels (Eichler, 2011).

Vladimir Putin's rise to power at the turn of the millennium offered a symbolic resolution to these anxieties. From the outset, Putin was presented as the antithesis of Yeltsin: disciplined, controlled, physically capable, and morally upright. Drawing on militarized imagery and carefully curated performances of strength, Putin embodied what scholars have described as the return of the Russian muzhik—a figure defined by toughness, self-reliance, and indifference to liberal norms of political correctness (Riabov & Riabova, 2014). Unlike the Soviet man, the contemporary muzhik was imagined as independent from the state yet unwaveringly loyal to it. Unlike Western masculine ideals, he was rough rather than refined, taciturn rather than expressive, and unapologetically sexist and homophobic (Goscilo, 2013).

Putin's consolidation of power coincided with renewed militarization, most notably through the Second Chechen War (1999–2000), which he framed as a project of restoring national pride and rehabilitating Russian masculinity. Military success, patriotism, and readiness to use force became key markers of proper citizenship. Over time, this model hardened into a gender regime in which masculinity, loyalty, and political obedience were tightly fused (Eichler, 2011). Putin's own biography as a former KGB officer, combined with his public performances of hypermasculinity, riding horses shirtless, practicing judo, and staging encounters with nature, reinforced this model and made it central to the political imagination of the 2000s (Goscilo, 2013).

Putin's rule is organized through a gender regime that structures political authority, moral legitimacy, and social belonging. Citizenship under this regime cannot be understood solely as a legal status conferred by the state. Building on feminist critiques of citizenship theory, scholars have emphasized that citizenship is a performative and embodied practice shaped by gender, sexuality, and race (Supik et al. 2022; Walby 1994). In the Russian context, citizenship increasingly functions as a moral category, evaluated through adherence to state-sanctioned gender norms (Kondakov, 2014). After a brief period of post-Soviet liberalization in the early 1990s, including the decriminalization of sodomy in 1993, Putin's regime reasserted heteronormativity as a central ideological foundation, culminating in the 2013 "gay propaganda" law, which cast queerness as a threat to the moral and political order (Alexander, 2018; Kondakov, 2014).

As Julie Cassiday (2023) argues, this gender regime is hypergendered, rigidly ordering masculinity and femininity in hierarchical terms. Masculinity is aligned with strength, sacrifice, and loyalty, while femininity is confined to subordinate and reproductive roles, and queerness is

mobilized as a sign of weakness and foreign influence. These norms are reproduced through elite political formations dominated by men who mirror Putin's image, while women appear primarily as moral guardians aligned with church and state rather than as autonomous political actors (Wood, 2024). Political authority thus rests less on institutional accountability than on personalized loyalty, naturalized through familial metaphors that cast Putin as a paternal figure (Hanson & Kopstein, 2024).

Under Putin, the media function as a governing infrastructure through which gendered norms of loyalty, masculinity, and belonging are continuously produced and stabilized rather than simply represented (Hutchings & Rulyova, 2009; Hutchings & Tolz, 2015). State-aligned media rely less on explicit ideological instruction as was typical during the Soviet days than on affective strategies such as humor, ridicule, spectacle, and moral contrast that render political obedience emotionally intelligible and culturally desirable (Astapova, 2021). These distinctions circulate across news, entertainment, and digital platforms, blurring the boundary between propaganda and popular culture and allowing moral judgments about citizenship to appear familiar, humorous, and self-evident (Hutchings & Tolz, 2015; Yablokov, 2018).

Taken together, these historical and political developments produced a gender regime in which masculinity functions as a primary register of political loyalty and moral worth, while deviation is rendered legible as failure rather than dissent. Under Putin, this regime is sustained not only through law and elite performance but through media forms that translate gendered norms into everyday affective judgments. Because exile places individuals beyond the reach of direct state discipline, the work of enforcement increasingly shifts toward symbolic and mediated forms of exclusion.

The following section turns to a set of viral videos repeatedly referenced by my interlocutors to show how this politics of gendered death is enacted through media tools: a process through which political refusal is staged as ridicule, moral diminishment, and social unmaking. These videos rely on familiarity, humor, and moral contrast to render exile emotionally intelligible as a form of masculine failure, allowing punishment to be enacted even in the absence of territorial control. As Roxanne Varzi (2006) demonstrates in her analysis of media and martyrdom in Iran, visual and narrative representations of war do not remain confined to the realm of propaganda or entertainment; they become embedded in everyday storytelling and moral reasoning. Following this insight, I treat viral videos not simply as media artifacts but as elements within a broader narrative environment that informs how Russian men and their families interpret exile, loyalty, and masculinity.

This chapter, therefore, adopts a multi-modal approach that places media analysis alongside life history interviews. By examining both the viral videos circulating within the Russian information environment and the personal narratives of men living in exile, I trace how public representations of masculinity become recognizable scripts through which private relationships and moral judgments are articulated.

Media Production of Gendered Death

Several of the men I interviewed described Russian wartime media as unsettling not simply because it threatened or mocked those who left, but because it made departure appear as the point at which one ceased to count as a man and, therefore, as a citizen, in a context where citizenship had become inseparable from performing a state-mandated masculinity (Kondakov, 2014; Cassiday, 2023). My interlocutors explained that what made propaganda videos so

effective was not their aggression, but their familiarity. They did not need to persuade or threaten. What these account makes visible is how such media work through an already consolidated gender regime under Putin: departure is not presented as a political choice open to debate, but as a failure of masculinity that renders exit self-evident and unquestionable. In this framing, men who leave are not simply excluded; they are quietly stripped of social legibility, portrayed as having already forfeited the terms of masculine belonging.

The majority of my interviews echoed this perception, emphasizing that wartime media increasingly framed political belonging through gendered performance rather than legal status. Aleksei, who left Russia after mobilization and now works with mutual aid networks among Russian and Ukrainian migrants in Tbilisi, described these narratives as especially powerful because they staged the loss of recognition that departure would entail in advance. “They don’t wait for anything to happen to you,” he explained. “They show what kind of person you become the moment you leave.” For Aleksei, propaganda did not simply condemn dissent; it preemptively marked exit itself as a form of personal inadequacy.

Through repetition across popular media, leaving the nation is made to appear as the moment at which masculine recognition collapses. The media texts analyzed below do not argue that men must stay, fight, or sacrifice themselves. Instead, they stage the consequences of departure, teaching audiences in advance which lives remain socially viable and which no longer count. To leave was not simply to relocate or dissent, but to fall outside the moral economy that sustained masculinity as a civic status. Fear, ridicule, and moral clarity operated together, producing a shared lesson about which lives remained socially viable and which no longer counted.

The media texts analyzed below were repeatedly identified by my interlocutors as especially representative of this process. Across interviews, the same videos, songs, and televised segments surfaced when men described how wartime media made departure feel socially and morally untenable. Importantly, these examples were not offered as controversial or obscure cases requiring explanation. They appeared as self-evident reference points, texts that “everyone had seen” and whose meanings were already widely understood. Their recurrence suggests that these media objects function not merely as individual propaganda artifacts, but as stabilizing nodes within the broader mediascape, one that stretches outward from Russia to Georgia. They condense complex gendered expectations into recognizable forms, allowing masculine failure and civic exclusion to appear natural, familiar, and already resolved.

Comedy proved to be a particularly effective site for staging gendered death, precisely because it renders exclusion palatable rather than coercive. One of the most frequently referenced examples was a short comedic skit that circulated widely online in the early months of the war (The Asia Post, 2022).⁴ Set aboard a commercial airplane, the video follows a Russian family, a man, a woman, and their young child, who are leaving Russia for the United States. From the outset, the family is portrayed as openly excited about their departure. Their expressions and dialogue convey anticipation and relief, framing the journey as a long-awaited opportunity rather than a reluctant escape. The airplane functions as a transitional space, marking the moment of exit before arrival elsewhere. As the analysis below shows, this liminal setting becomes a stage on which emigration is recast as gendered betrayal, transforming the departing family into an object of ridicule and symbolic exclusion.

⁴ Versions of this skit circulated across multiple platforms, including Telegram, VK, and TikTok, in early 2022. The version cited here refers to the recording that remains publicly accessible on YouTube as of 2025 and is used for purposes of reference and verification rather than to suggest a single or original site of circulation.

This excitement is gradually unsettled through a sequence of encounters with other passengers. Early in the flight, the family meets a woman with whom they initially share a warm and joyful conversation, exchanging excitement about leaving Russia and beginning a new life abroad. The interaction shifts abruptly when she introduces her spouse, revealing that she is married to another woman. The camera lingers on the family's visible discomfort, marking the first rupture between their expectations and the social environment they are entering.

Michael Warner's (1999) analysis of normalcy helps clarify why this encounter functions as such a destabilizing moment. Writing in the context of the United States, Warner argues that political power operates overwhelmingly on the side of the "normal," noting that "political groups that mediate between queers and normals find that power lies almost exclusively on the normal side," and that "the more you are willing to articulate political issues in a way that plays to a normal audience, the more success you are likely to have" (Warner, 1999, p. 44). While Warner's critique targets liberal strategies of normalization, his insight remains relevant here precisely because the Russian case represents its inverse. Rather than being selectively accommodated, queerness in Russia is actively mobilized as a marker of deviation from a heteronormative moral order (Kondakov, 2019). The family's first encounter with difference is thus organized around gender and sexuality, signaling how central these norms are to structuring expectations of belonging and legitimacy in the Russian context.

This same logic is subsequently extended beyond sexuality and family into the domain of everyday practice. When the father proudly brings meat from Russia onto the plane, the item is confiscated after flight attendants explain that other passengers are vegan and find it inappropriate. Staged for humor, the scene nonetheless marks a further erosion of authority: what the family treats as ordinary and culturally meaningful is reclassified as unacceptable,

reinforcing the sense that familiar norms no longer carry moral or social weight. Alongside this, the family is later asked to change seats because nearby passengers openly oppose sitting next to a child, signaling a preference for child-free space rather than shared social comfort. That preference resonates with broader state-enabled norms in contemporary Russia, where lawmakers have moved to ban the “propaganda” of voluntary childlessness, legally reinforcing parenthood and traditional family roles as core moral standards of belonging and citizenship (Stroehlein, 2024).

Subsequent scenes intensify this disorientation. While waiting in line for the restroom, the father is ordered to give up his place to a Black passenger. Other passengers reinforce the demand, instructing him not only to step aside but to kneel and apologize. One passenger justifies this demand through a moralized historical claim, declaring, “His people endured oppression of the white people for many years! We owe all African Americans a debt!” (The Asia Post, 2022, 1:15 – 1:30). The scene is exaggerated to the point of absurdity, yet it renders submission compulsory rather than negotiated, staging the father’s kneeling as a public performance of abasement rather than a meaningful form of engagement.

Importantly, this racialization operates through displacement. Race appears almost exclusively through Blackness and U.S.-centered histories of racial injustice, reinforcing the idea that racism is a Western problem rather than a Russian one. Yet, as scholars of contemporary Russia have argued, this apparent absence of race reflects not its irrelevance but its disavowal. Marina Yusupova (2021) captures this logic pointedly when she asks: “Why do we even need race to research diversity and inequalities in contemporary Russia? According to the ‘proud’ history of internationalism and anti-racism in the Soviet Union, race is an embarrassment. It is immoral, something that humanity has to leave behind once and for all” (p. 227).

Madina Tlostanova's work helps situate this disavowal historically and conceptually. As she argues with Walter Mignolo (2009): "A number of scholars think that there was no idea of race in the USSR. But others demonstrate that in Soviet modernity race was replaced with 'nation', and accompanied by a developed racial politics, as the Bolsheviks inherited Eurocentrism, Orientalism and racism, from the Western socialism, albeit in distorted forms" (p.137). Read alongside Yusupova, this formulation clarifies how race in the Russian context is not eliminated but rerouted, rendered unspeakable in explicit terms while continuing to structure social difference through alternative categories.

This displacement is precisely what allows race to reappear in the skit in a narrow and externalized form. Rather than acknowledging racial hierarchies within Russia, the scene locates race almost exclusively in the figure of a Black American and in a caricatured Western moralistic regime. As Tlostanova has shown in her analysis of imperial difference, "The Russian empire constructed its rationale for discriminating against the Caucasus *others* in various ways... to their total othering as symbolically black today" (Tlostanova, 2011, p. 76). The skit draws on this long-standing semiotic economy, where Blackness functions as the primary visible marker of race, enabling racial difference to be projected outward while Russian racial formations remain unmarked. In this sense, the scene does not simply exaggerate Western racial politics; it reproduces a familiar epistemic move through which race is displaced, externalized, and rendered legible only elsewhere. Whiteness thus retains its symbolic power.

Most strikingly, the scene in which the father is forced to kneel before a Black passenger introduces an explicitly racialized dimension to this process. The demand is not merely that he step aside, but that he submit both bodily and publicly, as other passengers instruct him to apologize while he kneels in the aisle. The scene collapses multiple hierarchies at once:

racialized power, masculine dominance, and geopolitical order. By positioning a Russian man as subordinate to a Black man within a Western setting, the skit activates long-standing Russian anxieties about racial hierarchy, imperial decline, and loss of global status, translating geopolitical displacement into an embodied scene of humiliation (Ziegler, 2016). Masculine authority is not simply undermined; it is shown to have been reversed, re-coded through race as well as gender. By portraying those who leave as feminized, unserious, and morally diminished, the skit echoes the Kremlin's remasculinizing project, which seeks to reclaim epistemic and political parity with the West through explicitly gendered hierarchies of worth and belonging (Narozhna, 2024).

The skit ends abruptly. Overwhelmed by the accumulation of humiliations, the family puts on parachutes and jumps from the airplane mid-flight, shouting apologies to "Mother Russia" as they disappear from view. The ending is staged as comic excess, yet it reverses the emotional arc of the video: departure, initially framed as hopeful and liberating, is rendered intolerable. The ending converts departure into a scene of symbolic death, marking exile as the point at which masculine authority and social legibility collapse. This logic reappears across the skits examined below, where leaving the nation is repeatedly framed as a form of gendered erasure.

During interviews, multiple participants independently mentioned the song *Relocation* as a familiar cultural reference point, noting its explicit references to Georgia, a destination that mirrored their own trajectories of departure. Performed by the Russian pop singer Olga Buzova on the comedy program *Once Upon a Time in Russia*, the song is structured as a light, ironic

narrative of romantic disappointment (OVRshow_tnt, 2023)⁵. Buzova performs the role of a woman abandoned by a male partner who leaves Russia, with his departure framed as a personal betrayal in which he exchanges her for life abroad, and specifically for Georgia.

In the song, the man who leaves Russia first appears as a familiar romantic figure. He is remembered as strong and confident, sexually attractive, and independent, precisely the traits that make him desirable and worthy of love. These qualities anchor Buzova's initial attachment to him. Yet once he departs, the meaning of those traits shifts. His leaving does not simply diminish his masculinity; it recasts it. What once appeared as strength is revealed, in retrospect, as bravado. Independence becomes avoidance. Confidence curdles into irresponsibility.

The song's humor is built around this reversal. Staying is reimagined as endurance, loyalty, and real strength, while leaving is reframed as weakness, fear, and softness. The man is not portrayed as moving toward sacrifice or political conviction, but as drifting toward Western comfort, toward McDonald's, IKEA, and PayPal. These references matter. They situate exile within a classed and gendered imaginary, where departure is framed less as an act of resistance than as a consumerist escape, chosen by a man seduced by ease rather than compelled by repression or moral refusal of war.

The chorus seals this judgment. Built around a rhyme between Buzova's surname and the Russian name for Georgia (*Gruziya*), it turns relocation itself into a punchline. The man does not simply leave; he "trades" her for Georgia. In this telling, Georgia functions less as a real place than as a symbolic shorthand for abandonment and emasculation. The humor is light, even

⁵ Versions of this skit circulated across multiple platforms, including Telegram, VK, and TikTok, in early 2022. The version cited here refers to the recording that remains publicly accessible on YouTube as of 2025 and is used for purposes of reference and verification rather than to suggest a single or original site of circulation.

catchy, but its effect is not. By making loss laughable, the song withdraws recognition from the man who leaves, rendering his departure legible as failure rather than as a defensible choice.

This moral verdict is briefly softened, but not undone, by the appearance of Buzova's male counterpart, comedian Azamat Musagaliev, who steps in to play the man who supposedly left her. In a confessional register, he repeatedly urges "quiet, quiet, quiet," before admitting that he "got a little scared" and went to visit his grandfather in Georgia, promising that he will return. The framing is telling. Departure is excused only when it is narrated as momentary panic rather than decision, and only when it is accompanied by shame and a pledge of return. Yet the song leaves unspoken what such a return would actually entail. The promise functions as a moral repair without confronting the risks, constraints, and conditions under which return is possible.

As I will later show in Chapter 4, return is neither neutral nor guaranteed, but often contingent on compliance, silence, and the ability to negotiate one's way back into the state's good graces. Here, however, that complexity is smoothed over. The fantasy of return allows masculinity to be symbolically restored without reckoning with the dangers that await those who fail to follow the rules. This retroactive logic is central to how politics gendered death operate. Exile functions as a temporal device, reaching backward to reassign meaning to the past. Masculine competence is reinterpreted as moral deficiency, and mobility becomes evidence of avoidance rather than autonomy. Throughout the song, relocation is framed not as a response to violence or repression, but as a move toward comfort and ease. References to Western consumer brands function as affective shorthand for softness, convenience, and moral thinness. Political choice is displaced by character judgment. What matters is not what the man opposes, but what he refuses to suffer. In this way, *Relocation* operates less as persuasion than as affective governance, shaping which masculine lives can be imagined as worth living.

The politics of gendered death, as I theorize it here, names a media-driven mode of symbolic elimination in which masculinity is withdrawn as a condition of livability. It is not death by force, but death by foreclosure: the collapse of future-oriented recognition. The exiled man does not simply lose his country. He loses access to narratives in which he could still be understood as responsible, mature, or morally intact. Importantly, this foreclosure operates through pleasure rather than fear. Laughter, melody, and repetition make the withdrawal of recognition feel natural and even enjoyable.

A similar dynamic appears in another widely circulated video often summarized by its closing line: “The boys left, the men stayed” (Doan, 2023).⁶ Unlike *Relocation*, this clip adopts a sober, realist tone. Set in an ordinary residential courtyard, it contrasts a professionally successful man preparing to leave with younger men who remain. The video unfolds in a residential courtyard, a setting that signals ordinariness and social intimacy. Two young men observe another man loading his car with luggage. Their conversation establishes the departing man as professionally successful and economically secure; he works at a bank, a detail that immediately codes him as mobile, educated, and middle class. When two middle-aged women approach and ask why he is leaving, he responds that he is relocating to Georgia. The mention of Georgia is brief and unelaborated, yet it carries significant symbolic weight. In these narratives, Georgia functions as the externalized site of gendered death, symbolically positioned outside the domain of the Russian muzhik and associated instead with the feminized or queered space to which failed masculinity is relegated.

⁶ Versions of this skit circulated across multiple platforms, including Telegram, VK, and TikTok, in early 2022. The version cited here refers to the recording that remains publicly accessible on YouTube as of 2025 and is used for purposes of reference and verification rather than to suggest a single or original site of circulation.

As the conversation continues, an elderly woman stumbles nearby and drops a bag of oranges. The camera shifts focus. The departing man watches passively, while the two young men rush forward to help her gather the spilled fruit. This brief gesture becomes the moral hinge of the video. Care, attentiveness, and embodied presence are contrasted with detachment and movement. The scene closes with one of the women remarking softly, almost wistfully, “The boys left. The men stayed.”

Here, the politics of gendered death is enacted through quiet subtraction rather than ridicule. The man who leaves is not shamed or attacked. He is rendered irrelevant. His professional success and mobility are emptied of moral value, while endurance and presence are elevated as the sole markers of mature masculinity. The effect is not spectacular but normalizing. Viewers are invited to accept, without coercion, that some lives naturally fall out of the community of value.

Taken together, these pop-cultural texts demonstrate how the politics of gendered death operates as a dispersed and affective process rather than a singular act. Across humor, irony, and realism, departure is framed as the point at which masculine recognition collapses. Men who leave are not positioned as enemies to be destroyed, but as figures whose lives no longer warrant ethical or civic investment. They remain alive, but their futures are foreclosed.

By tracing the politics of gendered death through popular media, this section extends necropolitical analysis into the terrain of everyday affect and entertainment. Rather than asking who may be killed, it asks whose lives can no longer be lived as meaningful men. In the following section, I turn to what it means to live after gendered death, examining how exiles inhabit, refuse, or rework failure once recognition has already been withdrawn.

Life After Gendered Death: Living with Failure

If wartime media attempts to enact the politics of gendered death by recoding departure as moral and masculine failure, the ethnographic question that follows is how men inhabit life in the wake of this symbolic disqualification. The propaganda analyzed in the previous section does not merely condemn departure; it preemptively scripts what exile means, defining it as cowardice, emasculation, and moral insufficiency. In doing so, it withdraws recognition from those who leave, marking them as failed men and failed citizens before they can narrate themselves otherwise. Yet symbolic death does not eliminate life. It reorganizes it. What emerges is not silence or disappearance, but a condition in which subjects must continue living after legitimacy has already been denied.

A growing body of scholarship suggests that exit from authoritarian regimes can function as a form of political voice, particularly under conditions in which dissent becomes dangerous or impossible (Hanson & Baltabayeva, 2024; Henry & Plantan, 2022; Roshchin, 2025). Related studies show how emigration may enable new forms of activism, advocacy, and transnational engagement, especially among those already embedded in oppositional networks (Zavadskaya et al., 2022; Henry & Plantan, 2022). These approaches are useful for understanding why some Russians left and how political contestation can continue from abroad, even as they leave open questions about the experiences of exile that do not easily register as voice.

At the same time, my ethnographic material suggests that this logic does not encompass the full range of lives produced by exile, particularly among men whose departure was shaped less by explicit dissent than by fear of mobilization, arrest, or bodily harm. For many interlocutors, leaving was neither a fully articulated political statement nor a heroic refusal of the regime, but a pragmatic response to escalating risk. These men often expressed political

ambivalence: critical of the state yet not always engaged in opposition; opposed to the war, yet hesitant to claim the moral authority of resistance. Treating exit exclusively as voice risks overstating coherence and intentionality, while reproducing a normative expectation that migration must be politically meaningful in order to be analytically legible.

This is where Jack Halberstam's (2011) *The Queer Art of Failure* provides a crucial analytic shift. Rather than evaluating exile against standards of resistance, coherence, or political success, Halberstam's framework directs attention to what becomes possible once those standards lose their force. Failure here is not a temporary condition to be overcome. It is a reorganization of life after recognition has already been withdrawn. Subjects do not step outside systems of power; they remain entangled with them, often speaking their language even as they no longer meet their demands. Yet once failure has been assigned, the obligation to perform according to dominant norms begins to loosen. The demand to prove oneself, to be legible as a "proper" subject, no longer holds in the same way. This shift is particularly consequential in the context of masculinity, where normative expectations are both rigid and heavily policed.

Across my interviews in Tbilisi, men repeatedly described their departure as a moment of rupture that did not resolve their relationship to the Russian state or its gender regime. Leaving did not produce clarity or moral certainty; it produced exhaustion, uncertainty, and a lingering sense of insufficiency. Several interlocutors emphasized that they did not see themselves as refugees, a distinction articulated sharply by staff at organizations such as the Free Russia Foundation, who insisted that "refugee" status belonged to Ukrainians. This refusal was not only political but moral, signaling discomfort with occupying a position of victimhood (Ticktin, 2011). At the same time, a few men embraced a heroic narrative of resistance. Instead, they

described themselves as people who had “relocated,” highlighting the provisional and unresolved nature of their departure.

For men who left after the announcement of partial mobilization, the shift was immediate and embodied. Mobilization transformed masculinity from an abstract ideal into a direct threat: the male body became a resource to be seized, disciplined, and potentially destroyed by the state. In this context, leaving was not experienced as desertion but as a necessary condition for survival. At the same time, this decision did not free them from the language of condemnation. Many were acutely aware of how Russian media framed emigrants as cowards and traitors, and some repeated these terms even as they rejected their conclusions. This internalization underscores the reach of the politics of gendered death. The media does not simply assign judgment; it shapes how subjects come to understand themselves. Yet even here, the force of that judgment is not absolute. Once condemnation has already been issued, its capacity to discipline begins to shift.

These dynamics became visible in everyday conversations during fieldwork in Tbilisi. One afternoon, I met Sasha, an IT worker from Moscow in his late thirties, at a small café near the city center. The café carried a Georgian name, but when I ordered my coffee in Georgian, the staff responded in Russian. Sasha noticed my hesitation and laughed. Since the migration wave that followed the invasion of Ukraine and the announcement of partial mobilization, he explained, many cafés in central Tbilisi had quietly become Russian-owned or Russian-run.

What emerged was not simply a change in circumstance, but a shift in how normative expectations organized everyday life. Leaving did not eliminate judgment, but it reduced its grip. Once disqualification had already been assigned, the need to continuously prove oneself began to recede. I saw this most clearly in my conversation with Sasha, a young IT worker from Moscow,

who arrived in an open floral shirt and bright red pants, his noticeably colorful outfit standing in quiet contrast to the kind of masculinity he later described growing up with.

When our conversation turned to Russian wartime media, Sasha reflected on how repeated portrayals of emigrants as cowards and traitors gradually reshaped his relationship to the expectations he had grown up with. As he explained:

At some point, I realized there was nothing left to prove. They had already decided who I was. On television, they say we are cowards, traitors, parasites. My parents believe it completely. So eventually I stopped trying to convince them. Even before the war, they could not understand my lifestyle. They always hated the way I dressed. My dad used to say, ‘With those ripped jeans, you don’t look like a man. Go find clothes that make you look like a man.’ I never fit the image of a man they wanted. Now the war moved me here, and I don’t have to anymore. In a strange way, it feels liberating.

Sasha’s reflection makes visible a decisive shift. Once failure has already been assigned, the demand to approximate a normative ideal begins to lose its hold. Rather than marking a simple defeat, failure operates here as a release from the obligation to prove oneself. If he is already recognized as inadequate, there is little left to demonstrate. What appears as disqualification becomes a condition that permits reorientation. Everyday practices no longer need to be calibrated against expectations that have already been withdrawn. This does not produce total freedom. The release is situational and uneven, shaped by where it becomes

possible and where it remains constrained. Yet it marks a clear transformation: the expectations that once organized life no longer operate with the same force.

These shifts also surfaced in the social spaces where Russian migrants gathered in Tbilisi. One evening I met Mikhail, another IT worker from Saint Petersburg, at a Russian-owned bar in the city center, where he occasionally played guitar with friends. When I arrived, he was setting up his instrument near the small stage while greeting acquaintances who had come for the evening's live music. The bar was crowded and loud, filled mostly with Russian-speaking migrants who had gathered for drinks and conversation after work.

Soon enough, the conversation took a familiar turn. Like many of the men I interviewed in Tbilisi, Mikhail began reflecting on how Russian media portrays those who left the country after mobilization. He responded with visible indifference, remarking that he knew state media labeled emigrants *pidarasy* and adding that the opinion of those *pidarasy* did not bother him at all. The Russian term *pidaras*, derived from *pederast*, historically functioned as a derogatory term for homosexual men and is often used in Russian as a slur roughly equivalent to “faggot,” though in everyday speech it may also operate more broadly as a general insult similar to “jerk,” “degenerate,” or “asshole,” while still retaining a distinctly homophobic undertone (Healey, 2017; Scheller-Boltz, 2017). In Russian political discourse, accusations of failed masculinity frequently rely on this linguistic slippage, where cowardice, moral deviance, and homosexuality become conflated categories of insult.

For Mikhail, however, the accusation had already lost much of its power. In Saint Petersburg, he explained, the demands of work and the constant pressure to build a stable life had left little time for music. Playing guitar had long been something he imagined returning to someday, once life finally settled. After leaving Russia, that imagined future collapsed. As he put

it, the most improbable “what if” of his life had already happened. In Georgia, he found himself spending less time worrying about how his choices might appear to others and more time playing guitar in small bars like this one. The stage offered a modest but meaningful space of experimentation, where he could perform without worrying whether his red pants, his music, or his departure from Russia met anyone else’s expectations. In small ways like this, the experience of failure opened space for practices that had previously felt deferred or impossible, echoing what Halberstam (2011) describes as the unexpected possibilities that can emerge once dominant expectations collapse.

These dynamics were also visible in conversations with queer migrants whose experiences revealed another dimension of gendered disqualification. One evening, I met Liza, a queer woman from Moscow, at a quiet restaurant in central Tbilisi. She arrived wrapped in a long cape that gave her appearance an almost theatrical quality, a detail that stood in subtle contrast to the seriousness with which she described the hostility directed toward those who left Russia. As we discussed Russian media narratives about emigrants, she reflected on how homophobic language had become a routine shorthand through which the state and its supporters discredited both political dissent and non-normative gender identities.

On TV, they always make fun of us, people who left Russia, and of course, homophobic slurs are their favorite shortcut. Like, nothing can be more insulting, right?! But I think it’s because they are scared. They are scared that our way of thinking might be gaining power. That, if there are more people who defy what they think a man or a woman should be, their days will be counted. I am still

very scared when I hear these slurs, but at least now I know that
they are scared too.

Liza's reflection highlights how gendered insults operate not only as tools of humiliation but also as mechanisms of epistemic control. By framing emigrants and queer subjects as morally deviant, Russian media narratives attempt to foreclose alternative understandings of gender, sexuality, and political belonging. In this sense, the politics of gendered death, as produced through media narratives, does not merely symbolically eliminate particular individuals; it also works to delegitimize the forms of knowledge and critique associated with feminist and queer perspectives. Scholars of feminist epistemology have long noted that attacks on marginalized subjects often function simultaneously as attacks on the knowledge they produce and the political possibilities those knowledges enable (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991). The ridicule and slurs directed at those who leave therefore operate not only as moral condemnation but also as attempts to neutralize feminist and queer epistemologies, ways of interpreting power, gender, and citizenship that challenge the state's heteronormative vision of social order.

Taken together, these moments underscore the analytic stakes of the politics of gendered death. Televised narratives worked to fix the meaning of exile as emasculation and moral collapse, illustrating how media tools enact the politics of gendered death by defining departure as a condition of permanent social disqualification. Yet for some migrants this foreclosure paradoxically loosened the grip of compulsory masculinity and heteronormativity. Freed from the need to perform endurance, dominance, or reproductive futurity for an audience that had already condemned them, some men described finding fragile space to live otherwise. Survey data similarly indicate that Russian migrants in the South Caucasus often diverge from dominant

Russian gender norms in their everyday practices and family arrangements, even when such shifts are not articulated as explicit political commitments (Krawatzek et al., 2023).

At the same time, this freedom was neither complete nor uncontested. Exile did not dissolve gendered expectations; it relocated them within a different social context. Georgian society, while distinct from Russia's militarized gender regime, maintains its own strong norms surrounding masculinity, family roles, and public respectability, shaped by Orthodox Christianity, nationalist narratives, and post-Soviet transformations of gender politics (Gasviani, 2022). Several interlocutors spoke of carefully modulating their behavior in public, distinguishing between spaces where experimentation felt possible and those where it did not. The unmaking of Russian hypermasculinity thus unfolded not in an open terrain of freedom but within another normative landscape.

Defying Putin's mold, then, did not mean exiting gendered power altogether. It meant living on after symbolic disqualification, carrying its contradictions into everyday life. The men I interviewed were not exemplary figures of liberation or resistance. They remained shaped by the very norms they no longer fully inhabited. Yet it was precisely in this ambivalence, in their partial detachment, uneven experimentation, and unresolved attachments, that masculinity began to loosen from its militarized script. As Alexander Generalov (2022) suggests, the mass departure of educated urban Russians signals not only a political or demographic loss but a deeper erosion of the regime's moral and gendered promise. Exile marked the point at which the regime's gendered claims lost their capacity to organize everyday life, even as their force continued to be felt.

Conclusion: Defying Putin's Mold

This chapter has argued that exile in wartime Russia is not merely a spatial or political rupture, but a gendered one. Under Putin's rule, masculinity operates as a moral infrastructure through which loyalty, citizenship, and worth are evaluated. To leave the country at a moment of war is therefore not only to exit the state, but to fall outside the gendered terms through which political belonging is recognized. Russian wartime media crystallizes this logic by framing departure as cowardice, emasculation, and betrayal, producing what I have theorized here as the politics of gendered death: a condition in which men remain physically alive but are rendered socially unintelligible as men and citizens.

By bringing together ethnographic fieldwork, media analysis, and feminist and queer theory, this chapter shifts attention away from exile as either heroic dissent or humanitarian suffering. Instead, it shows how the politics of gendered death functions as a mode of governance that precedes and exceeds legal and national exclusion. Drawing on Butler's (2005) work on recognizability, Mbembe's (2006) necropolitics, and Patterson's (1982) social death, I have argued that gendered death names a specifically contemporary form of symbolic elimination—one that operates through affect, humor, and familiarity rather than overt violence. In this framework, men who leave Russia are not simply condemned; they are made to appear already failed, already irrelevant, already outside the moral community.

At the same time, the chapter has insisted that symbolic death does not end life. What follows gendered death is not absence, but a reorganization of how masculinity is lived. Engaging Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, I have shown that exile produces forms of life that do not seek redemption within the regime's terms. Rather than transforming exit into voice or resistance, many exiled men inhabit failure as a condition of survival, marked by ambivalence, compromise, and provisionality. These lives are not easily celebrated, but they are analytically

powerful. They reveal how masculinity can be reworked not through opposition alone, but through everyday practices that quietly diverge from the sacrificial, militarized ideals on which the regime depends.

This is what it means, in this chapter, to defy Putin's mold. Defiance here is not limited to protest or dissent. It unfolds through the refusal, or inability, to continue performing masculinity as endurance, dominance, and reproductive futurity. It takes shape in prioritizing safety over sacrifice, care over conquest, and survival over martyrdom. These practices do not announce themselves as political, yet they unsettle the gender regime that underwrites Putin's authority. By failing to reproduce the ideal soldier-citizen, exiled men participate in forms of life that the regime cannot fully discipline, even as it seeks to name and shame them through media spectacle.

Crucially, this chapter has also resisted moral purification. Exiled men are not uniformly oppositional, nor are they innocent victims. Some remain ambivalent, selectively supportive of the regime, or skeptical of liberal narratives. Rather than treating this as a limitation, I have argued that such ambivalence is central to understanding how power works. The politics of gendered death does not produce clean political subjects; it produces compromised ones. Halberstam's insistence that failure is entangled with complicity allows us to analyze these lives without forcing them into redemptive or condemnatory frames. In doing so, the chapter contributes a more ethically and analytically honest account of exile under authoritarianism.

Finally, this chapter prepares the ground for the analysis that follows. If those who leave are rendered dead through gendered narratives of failure, those who stay are increasingly disciplined through spectacles of sacrifice and disposability. Exile does not simply remove people from the national body; it reshapes the moral and gendered terrain within which those

who remain must live. The next chapter turns to this other side of the same regime: to figures who stayed, supported, or were tolerated by the state, only to be publicly sacrificed when their usefulness expired. By examining how the regime turns on its own supporters, what I conceptualize as disposable elites, the following chapter extends the argument developed here. Together, these chapters show that Putin's mold is sustained not only by producing loyal men, but by managing failure, abandonment, and expendability across those who leave and those who stay.

To defy Putin's mold is therefore not always to escape it. More often, it means living in its aftermath, carrying forward the contradictions and injuries of state masculinity into forms of life that no longer reproduce its political future. Exile becomes not a clean break from the gender regime, but a space in which its demands linger, reshaped through vulnerability, loss, and the effort to live otherwise.

Chapter 4 - Eat the Rich: Celebrity, Punishment, and the Politics of Visibility in Putin's Russia

Does the party stop after the war starts? Certainly not in Moscow, Russia, at least not until December 22, 2023. After Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the country entered a period of profound disruption. Large numbers of people left Russia in the months that followed, including political opponents, activists, professionals, and those seeking to avoid mobilization (Kamalov et al., 2022). Yet daily life inside the country did not come to a halt. Moscow's nightlife, entertainment industry, and celebrity culture largely continued, creating the impression that certain forms of visibility, pleasure, and excess remained insulated from the war (Tenisheva, 2023).

For much of the conflict, this continuity appeared deliberate. While dissent was criminalized and public criticism of the war carried severe consequences, spaces of leisure and celebrity performance persisted. Cultural elites who avoided overt political statements continued to work, tour, and appear on television, benefiting from the departure of openly anti-war figures (Shevchenko, 2023). Public conformity and political silence seemed sufficient to ensure safety (Coalson, 2023). That assumption collapsed abruptly in December 2023, when Russian blogger

and television presenter Nastya Ivleeva hosted a lavish dress-up ball at the high-profile Moscow nightclub Mutabor (Kirby, 2023; Kurmanaev, 2023).

The party lasted two days. The first event, held on December 20, was invitation-only and limited to celebrities. Attendees paid one million rubles (approximately USD 10,770) and followed an “almost naked” dress code (Meduza, 2023b). Admission to the second event was open to the public, with tickets priced at 2,500 rubles (approximately USD 27) (Meduza, 2023b). The first night featured some of Russia’s most recognizable cultural figures, including Russia’s “King of Pop,” Philipp Kirkorov; pop icon and Eurovision winner Dima Bilan; and journalist and television personality Ksenia Sobchak, often described in the media as Vladimir Putin’s rumored goddaughter (Sauer, 2023). Leaked images from the first night circulated rapidly across tabloids and social media, including photographs highlighting Ivleeva’s emerald necklace, valued at 23 million rubles (approximately USD 251,000), worn provocatively low across her lower back, as well as images of the rapper VACIO (Nikolai Vasiliev) attending with only a sock covering his genitals. These visuals quickly became focal points of public outrage (Meduza, 2023b; Al Jazeera, 2023).⁷

Initial criticism came from supporters of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Pro-war bloggers and conservative commentators condemned celebrities for attending such festivities during wartime (Meduza, 2023b; Kurmanaev, 2023). Vladimir Solovyov, one of Russia’s most prominent state propagandists, denounced the attendees on social media, writing, “The country is at war, and these scum, beasts, are putting on this... Cattle who don’t give a damn about what’s happening” (Kurmanaev, 2023, para. 6). Ekaterina Mizulina, head of the Safe Internet League,⁸

⁷ For ethical reasons, I describe the images that circulated rather than reproducing them, focusing on their political legibility and effects rather than their sensational content.

⁸ An organization initially created to remove harmful content online but increasingly functioning as a tool of state censorship (Antoniuk, 2024).

called for a state-level boycott of the participants, arguing that “our soldiers at the front definitely aren’t fighting for this” and describing the event as “firing a bullet into the foot of the entire policy implemented by the state” (Meduza, 2023b, para. 5). Within days, the scandal became globally visible across major international outlets, not because of the party’s extravagance alone, but because of the severity and speed of the state’s response, a dynamic later echoed when President Vladimir Putin indirectly condemned such displays of excess during the “special military operation” (Stognei, 2024).

This level of political attention was followed by increasingly harsh punitive measures. Arrests, military summons, charges related to promoting “non-traditional sexual orientation,” tax evasion investigations, canceled concerts and film screenings, and mandatory performances in war zones were among the tactics used by the regime to discipline the organizers and participants of the “almost naked” party, including figures who had previously maintained political neutrality or expressed support for the war (Meduza, 2023c; Kirby, 2023). Taken together, these measures suggest a sharp departure from the state’s prior tolerance of celebrity excess and signal that the boundaries of acceptable visibility have fundamentally shifted. Political silence or even formal loyalty no longer suffices to secure safety in the public sphere.

This chapter extends the dissertation’s analysis of gendered legibility and political belonging from viral media to celebrity culture. Whereas the previous chapter traced how Russian men who left are represented in media as deviating from dominant gendered and political expectations, and how they negotiate, resist, and defy these portrayals in everyday life, this chapter turns to a different, yet structurally analogous, site of governance: the public disciplining of cultural elites. Read together, these cases illuminate a vertically integrated economy of visibility in which political belonging is produced across social strata through the

same moral grammar. Drawing on Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2018) concept of economies of visibility, which "increasingly structure not just our mediascapes but also our cultural and economic practices and daily lives" (p. 23), this framework positions visibility as a governing resource that is unevenly distributed and central to contemporary regimes of power and recognition. I extend this framework to a Russian authoritarian context, where visibility is hierarchically organized and directly managed by the state. Men who leave the country are rendered illegible as failed national subjects, while celebrities who remain visible are rendered legible only through punishment, humiliation, and forced moral realignment. Across the dissertation, exile and celebrity discipline operate as complementary techniques of rule: one expels nonconforming bodies from the national body, while the other reprocesses visible bodies into state-legible forms of loyalty.

Alongside the Mutabor scandal, this chapter examines how the cultural normalization of elite punishment is produced through popular cinema, where narratives of humiliation and moral correction render elite discipline socially acceptable. The intelligibility of elite disposability does not arise spontaneously; it is prepared and normalized through popular narratives that frame the loss of privilege as morally necessary and socially productive. To trace how this logic circulates, the second part of the chapter turns to *Kholop (Son of a Rich)* 2019 and its sequel *Kholop 2 (Son of a Rich 2)* 2023. I analyze these films because, as massively popular box-office hits (France 24; Box Office Mojo, 2024a, 2024b), they circulate a widely shared cultural script that frames elite humiliation and re-education as morally necessary and socially redemptive.

Why did the "almost naked" party garner such extensive attention and lead to severe repercussions for its participants? Since its inception in 2019, Mutabor had cultivated a reputation for hosting lavish parties, some of which revolved around queer themes. In this sense,

establishments like Mutabor functioned as “progressive” havens within Moscow nightlife, spaces widely perceived as somewhat insulated from the Kremlin’s conservative ethos (Stognei, 2024). Russian conservatives, along with pro-war bloggers and propagandists, justified the crackdown by arguing that such festivities were intolerable “during wartime” (Kurmanaev, 2023). Yet the regime’s own official framing makes this justification unstable. The Kremlin insists Russia is engaged in a “special military operation,” rather than an official war (Al Jazeera, 2022), and simultaneously claims that the conflict began in 2014 in Russian-occupied Donbas (Wesolowski, 2022). If these narratives are taken seriously, then leisure and spectacle should have been condemnable not only in late 2023 but throughout the past decade. The selective timing of the crackdown, therefore, points to something beyond moral outrage: it signals a shift in the regime of legibility through which the state constructs visibility, loyalty, and gendered citizenship. Gendered citizenship, as used here, denotes the expectation that political belonging must be performed through normative masculinity, sacrifice, and moral discipline (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2005). The Mutabor scandal thus does not merely mark a rupture in celebrity culture, but a broader reorganization of how political belonging is produced and enforced through visibility.

I conceptualize the current moment as a reconfiguration of governance that builds on what I describe in the dissertation as a post-performative shift, in which the Russian state is moving beyond a performative mode of rule, understood as a system in which symbolic displays of loyalty and conformity were sufficient to secure legibility (Yurchak, 2006; Cassiday, 2023), toward a hierarchical ordering of visibility in which loyalty, masculinity, and political belonging must be actively demonstrated and enforced. This transformation becomes particularly visible in the domain of celebrity culture, where visibility itself becomes a site of discipline.

Putin's regime strategically exploits celebrity culture to stage populist punishment, converting highly visible elites into exemplary subjects whose public humiliation reinforces hierarchy while consolidating state power. I conceptualize this as the contradictory politics of the popular and the populist. Celebrity operates as a domain of glamour, pleasure, consumption, and mass affective appeal, generating broad cultural legitimacy and symbolic capital (Marshall 2014; Turner 2014). Yet the state mobilizes populist moral narratives demanding wartime sacrifice, discipline, and the punishment of excess to recode that glamour as moral betrayal when it threatens regime cohesion. Celebrity power, rooted in visibility rather than institutional authority, is thus politically useful for soft power and affective attachment yet structurally precarious. In moments of instability such as the wartime moral economy post-2022, the regime exploits this precarity. Recognizable figures are swiftly reframed as morally suspect and subjected to public correction, enabling authoritarian signaling through emotionally charged boundary-making (Turner 2014; Gel'man 2015). This disciplining process aligns the popular (glamour's mass appeal) with the populist (sacrificial morality), staging a form of elite accountability that absorbs popular resentment without disrupting underlying power structures. Far from resolving contradiction, the regime sustains it productively. Glamour entertains and legitimates, while selective punishment performs justice, preserving hierarchy under the guise of moral leveling.

I use the term *disposable celebrities* to capture how figures who were previously tolerated or even quietly loyal become suddenly expendable once the terms of political legibility shift. The Mutabor scandal demonstrates that celebrity visibility no longer functions as insulation from politics but as a primary site of discipline. As the analysis of *Kholop* and *Kholop 2* shows, this logic is not only enacted politically but also normalized culturally through narratives in which elites are stripped of privilege, placed into positions of servitude, and remade through

enforced moral correction. In this sense, the management of celebrity visibility reflects a broader political imaginary in which hierarchy, obedience, and punishment are staged and rendered necessary.

This chapter situates post-Soviet glamour and celebrity culture within scholarship on Russian media, gender regimes, and authoritarian governance. It uses the Mutabor “almost naked” party scandal as a primary case study to demonstrate how the regime recalibrates the gendered performance of political belonging, specifically, the terms under which normative masculinity, moral conformity, and public visibility become legible and enforceable. Drawing on media reporting to reconstruct the scandal’s events and dynamics, and through close readings of celebrities’ public apology performances, the chapter shows how visibility is recoded from a resource that previously insulated cultural elites into a primary site of moralized exposure, exemplary punishment, and forced realignment. Through close readings of *Kholop* and *Kholop 2*, the chapter demonstrates how this punitive logic is culturally normalized through narratives of elite humiliation and “moral correction” as redemptive and socially productive.

Disposable Celebrities

Scholarship on Russian popular culture and media has long emphasized the entanglement of celebrity, state power, and ideological regulation. From the Soviet period onward, cultural visibility was produced through state-controlled cultural institutions and remained contingent on political loyalty, moral conformity, and ideological alignment (McCannon, 1997; MacFadyen, 2001). Even in periods of relative cultural liberalization, celebrity did not emerge as an autonomous domain of social or political power but remained embedded within hierarchical structures of governance that shaped who could appear, circulate, and endure within the public

sphere (Goscilo & Strukov, 2010). Post-Soviet transformations reshaped the aesthetics and economies of celebrity, introducing new repertoires of glamour, consumption, and self-fashioning (Litovskaia & Shaburova, 2010), yet did not dissolve the dependence of visibility on political authority. This persistence of state-structured visibility can be compellingly explained through the framework of a hybrid stratification system where social hierarchy is determined primarily by proximity to the state rather than market position alone (Shkaratan & Yastrebov, 2010). In this order, access to resources, protection, and privilege is organized through embeddedness in state institutions and patronage networks. The result is a blending of market logics with quasi-estate-like distinctions, in which rights and opportunities are distributed unevenly based on political positioning rather than formal citizenship. Under such conditions, celebrity status functions less as an independent source of power and more as a conditional, revocable form of visibility that is continually shaped, and potentially withdrawn by shifting political hierarchies.

Situating the Russian case within broader celebrity studies highlights its distinctiveness. While celebrity power derives from symbolic capital rooted in visibility and affect rather than formal authority (Marshall, 2014; Turner, 2014), this same visibility generates heightened vulnerability. In Western capitalist contexts, celebrity is typically theorized as a site of negotiated meaning and audience identification, mediated through media, markets, and public engagement rather than direct state coercion (Turner, 2014). Public figures may face reputational or commercial fallout, but systematic state punishment remains exceptional. Recent scholarship critiques these market-centered models for failing to capture celebrity dynamics in state-dominant systems (Xu, Donnar, & Kishore, 2021). Authoritarian contexts follow a different logic. For example, in contemporary China, authorities routinely mobilize erasure, public

shaming, and rectification campaigns against entertainers, turning celebrity punishment into a deliberate governance technique rather than a market byproduct (Jeffreys, 2016; Lin & Zhao, 2020). It is within this broader authoritarian logic of governing through visibility that the Russian configuration of disposable celebrities must be situated.

Soviet celebrity culture laid the groundwork for today's Russian dynamics of visibility and disposability. Back then, fame came almost entirely through state-run institutions, where success hinged on ideological loyalty, moral uprightness, and often sexual conformity. Socialist realism did not just reward talent; it celebrated heroic masculinity, patriotism, and purity (McCannon, 1997). Even the biggest stars were not safe. The beloved tenor Vadim Kozin was imprisoned in the 1940s for homosexuality, showing how quickly cultural value could vanish when personal life crossed the line (Alexander, 2023). By the Brezhnev years, things loosened a little. Pop stars like Alla Pugacheva and Sofia Rotaru became household names, amassing wealth and mass adoration (Prokhorov & Prokhorov, 2023). Pugacheva's cultural presence was so overwhelming that people joked Brezhnev would be remembered as a footnote in the age of Pugacheva (MacFadyen, 2001). Yet even such long-standing fame offers no real shield: after Pugacheva left Russia and spoke out against the war, prosecutors moved to brand her a 'foreign agent' (Faulconbridge, 2024), a stark reminder that even national icons can become disposable the moment their visibility no longer aligns with state expectations.

In post-Soviet Russia, celebrity culture has functioned as a politically useful resource rather than an autonomous sphere of cultural production. As Birgit Menzel (2013) demonstrates, the rise of glamour marked Russia's transition into globalized capitalism, producing a highly visible aesthetic of luxury, consumption, and self-fashioning that projected the country as modern, prosperous, and globally integrated. At the same time, celebrity culture contributed to

the consolidation of the regime by generating affective attachment and symbolic legitimacy. The cultivation of glamour operated as a form of political pedagogy, encouraging citizens to identify with consumerist aspirations and participate in a shared cultural imaginary that affirmed the new political and economic elite (Goscilo & Strukov, 2010).

Crucially, this system operates through a logic of controlled visibility rather than total control. Certain figures are tacitly permitted to express limited critique or occupy ambiguous political positions, enabling the state to project an image of pluralism while retaining authority over the broader narrative. Celebrities thus mediated between ideology and sentiment while retaining perceived autonomy (Menzel, 2013; Ratilainen et al., 2025). At the same time, this sphere is not fully reducible to state interests: celebrity culture can also enable forms of gender contestation and, in some cases, provide a platform for dissent, as seen in figures such as Ksenia Sobchak, whose trajectory from glamour celebrity to political actor illustrates the ambivalent political potential of mediated visibility (Ratilainen et al., 2025).

Within this system, gender emerged as a central axis through which the politics of glamour were organized and stabilized. Under Putin, celebrity became a key arena for the regulation of gender norms, with masculinity positioned as a stabilizing and normative ideal (Randall, 2012). Putin himself occupies a distinct position within this landscape: his carefully mediated image fuses sovereign authority with celebrity charisma. This image is cultivated through highly choreographed media performances that foreground physical discipline, virility, and control, and are repeatedly circulated across domestic and global media platforms (Foxall, 2013; Wood, 2016). As scholars have shown, Putin's public appearances, including staged outdoor exploits such as shirtless horseback riding, hunting, and encounters with wild animals, operate as carefully choreographed spectacles that transform political authority into a form of

mediated, affective visibility, through which hypermasculinity, physical discipline, and sovereign control are publicly performed and naturalized (Edenborg, 2020; Aron, 2023). As Swapnil Rai and Brandy Monk-Payton (2024) argue:

...while there have been populist authoritarian leaders in the past, what is distinctive about twenty-first-century authoritarian populism is its celebritization. We are now in a new era in the celebritization of politics wherein strongmen leaders assume populist power through the cultivation of a celebrity-like aura within broad mediascapes. These leaders deploy the tools and tactics of celebrity that allow them to extend their public reach and connect with their followers (p. 146).

In this sense, Putin's authority is inseparable from this celebritized form of visibility, as he mobilizes spectacle, affect, and mediated performance to sustain political legitimacy. His visibility thus becomes uniquely insulated from the vulnerabilities that characterize other public figures (Cassiday & Johnson, 2013; Goscilo, 2012; Sharafutdinova, 2020).

Precisely because visibility was tightly managed, Russian celebrity culture in the 2000s could accommodate metrosexual aesthetics, flamboyant fashion, and stylized excess, producing the appearance of a depoliticized glamour sphere (Cassiday, 2023). This flexibility did not signal liberalization but reflected a performative arrangement in which exaggerated gender expression could coexist with authoritarian governance so long as it did not challenge the regime's moral authority (Yurchak, 2006; Cassiday, 2023). In the current moment crystallizing around the "almost naked" party, this logic collapses: visibility itself becomes a site of political risk, glamour is recoded as moral failure unless subordinated to narratives of discipline and sacrifice,

and gender ambiguity is reframed as political deviance. Celebrity punishment thus functions as a technology for reasserting hegemonic wartime masculinity against non-sacrificial and queer-coded embodiments. This reconfiguration of visibility at the level of celebrity spectacle is not exceptional but diagnostic: it signals a broader reorganization of political legibility, one that became visible to many exiles earlier than it did to those who remained inside Russia.

The “almost naked” party at Mutabor crystallizes this shift from tolerated glamour to punishable visibility. What rendered the event intolerable was not merely its excess, but the specific configuration of gender, sexuality, and visibility it staged. The party’s aesthetics, semi-nudity, queer-coded performance, eroticized display, and conspicuous consumption, mobilized a repertoire of post-Soviet glamour once normalized as politically neutral spectacle. Under intensified wartime conditions, however, these were re-signified as moral and political violations: semi-nudity and gender ambiguity were reframed as affronts to wartime masculinity; conspicuous pleasure as a betrayal of sacrificial citizenship; and visibility itself as a surface of political accusation.

Crucially, discipline did not operate only through exclusion or repression, but through a conditional economy of repentance. In the aftermath of the Mutabor scandal, public apology performances and ritualized displays of moral purification became key techniques through which celebrities could seek conditional reintegration into the public sphere. This logic became particularly visible in the public apology performances that followed the scandal. Rapper VACIO, after his detention, issued a statement emphasizing respect for “traditional values,” while Nastya Ivleeva released a series of video apologies in which she appeared visibly distressed, framing the event as a mistake and seeking forgiveness from both the public and the state (Meduza, 2023c, 2023d; Kurmanaev, 2023; Kirby, 2023). These performances did not

simply express personal remorse; they functioned as highly visible acts of political realignment, through which excess was recoded as moral failure and loyalty had to be publicly reaffirmed.

The Mutabor scandal marks a critical shift: glamour, once tolerated, now carries heightened moral and political risk unless subordinated to state-sanctioned norms of loyalty, masculinity, and sacrifice. Visibility increasingly demands overt alignment, enacted through public apology rituals and repentance practices. The next section examines how this dynamic unfolds through apology performances and ritualized practices of repentance, tracing how visibility becomes a site of both discipline and conditional reintegration.

Repent and You Can Stay

The punitive response to the Mutabor scandal also functioned as a form of political theater aimed at a wider audience (Foucault, 1995). Beyond disciplining individual celebrities, the spectacle of elite humiliation staged a populist fantasy of moral leveling in wartime Russia: that those who had long appeared insulated by wealth, visibility, and privilege would finally be made to “pay” for their excess (Laruelle, 2024). This dramaturgy resonates with what might be called an “eat the rich” logic, in which the punishment of visible cultural elites performs a symbolic redistribution of suffering, reassuring ordinary citizens that no one is above sacrifice during war (Girard, 1986). Yet this moral theater remains carefully managed: the regime targets disposable cultural figures rather than politically entrenched elites, converting celebrity visibility into a site of exemplary discipline without threatening the structures of power themselves, as punishment operates on visibility rather than on access to power (Cassiday, 2023; Greene & Robertson, 2019).

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine intensified the political salience of celebrity visibility, transforming public figures into a primary site through which the regime stages loyalty, moral order, and gendered normativity. While celebrity influence is often theorized in liberal contexts as a form of agenda-setting or public persuasion (Street, 2004), the Russian case demonstrates a different political economy of visibility. The figures subjected to this dramaturgy are not political elites but culturally wealthy actors without institutional power, whose economic capital does not translate into political autonomy and whose visibility makes them legible targets for populist resentment while leaving core structures of power intact (Greene & Robertson, 2019).

Celebrities who publicly opposed the war were rapidly removed from Russia's cultural industries. Performances were canceled, appearances were edited out of broadcasts, and dissenting figures disappeared from television and entertainment platforms. Under the threat of prosecution for "fake news" or for discrediting the armed forces, many opted for exile. This produced a striking wave of celebrity emigration, particularly within the live music industry, where approximately 30 percent of performers left the country (Lerner & Stephenson, 2024). As Julia Lerner and Svetlana Stephenson (2024) show, public responses to these departures reactivated Soviet traditions of denunciation through contemporary social media infrastructures. Celebrities once framed as members of the national family were recoded as traitors and moral contaminants, stripped of symbolic belonging and rendered disposable.

At the same time, the regime could not afford to lose the symbolic labor of all celebrities. For those who remained in Russia after initial expressions of dissent, a conditional pathway to restored visibility emerged through what journalists have described as the Kremlin's "penance system" (Reiter, Safonova, & Zholobova, 2023). While celebrity visibility has at times enabled limited maneuverability and even moments of political repositioning within the system

(Ratilainen et al., 2025), the gendered and moral architecture of this disciplinary regime became especially visible in the aftermath of the “almost naked” party. The rapper VACIO’s punishment illustrates how post-performative governance recodes previously tolerated aesthetics as political deviance. Prior to December 2023, his semi-nude imagery, explicit lyrics, and gender-ambiguous performance style circulated without sanction, even well into the war period (Meduza, 2024d). Following the scandal, however, he was arrested, fined, sentenced to short-term imprisonment, and subsequently drafted into the military. His apology videos, in which he emphasized patriotic loyalty and disavowed any association with LGBTQ politics, demonstrate how redemption is framed through a compulsory performance of heteronormative masculinity and political conformity (Meduza, 2024d). Flamboyance and metrosexual aesthetics, once tolerated within post-Soviet glamour culture, were reclassified as moral threats as the regime recalibrated acceptable visibility.

The disciplining of other high-profile participants, including Kirkorov, Bilan, and Sobchak, followed a similar logic. Their public apologies emphasized loyalty to “Mother Russia” and affective attachment to the nation (Sauer, 2023), yet apology alone proved insufficient. Rehabilitation increasingly required visible re-masculinization and aesthetic restraint, with flamboyant styles reframed as incompatible with wartime masculinity. The closure of the Mutabor nightclub by Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing (Rospotrebnadzor) under the pretext of food safety violations, widely understood as punitive, illustrates how spaces associated with glamour and transgressive visibility are subjected to moral cleansing (Meduza, 2024b). The nightclub owners’ subsequent donation of religious relics to a Moscow church and public alignment with Orthodox moral

discourse demonstrates how redemption requires not only political loyalty but symbolic purification through state-sanctioned moral regimes (Meduza, 2024c).

This logic extends beyond individual cases, revealing how celebrity bodies become sites for the inscription of wartime moral order. The Mutabor scandal became a focal point for moralization precisely because it offered a visible elite target through which excess could be recoded as betrayal. As Helena Goscilo and Vlad Strukov (2010) show, Russian celebrity culture has long functioned as a site where moral boundaries are publicly staged, with visibility operating as both privilege and liability. Scandal and punishment redraw the limits of acceptable public presence (Yablokov, 2018), converting celebrity bodies into surfaces on which wartime moral order is inscribed. In this configuration, spectacle stabilizes rather than challenges political hierarchy by translating structural inequalities into individualized moral drama, allowing accountability to be performed without redistributing power (Hutchings & Tolz, 2015).

Nastya Ivleeva's post-Mutabor trajectory provides a particularly clear illustration of how this logic operates in practice. Prior to the scandal, Ivleeva embodied post-Soviet glamour as a media entrepreneur whose visibility was built on consumption, sexualized aesthetics, and political neutrality (Meduza, 2023b). After Mutabor, her visibility was reclassified as moral deviance. A Moscow court fined her for organizing an event framed as offensive to public morality, with official discourse emphasizing indecency and the promotion of "non-traditional sexual relations" (Meduza, 2023b). Beyond formal sanctions, she experienced rapid de-platforming: sponsorships evaporated, her social media presence was erased, and she temporarily disappeared from mainstream circulation. Yet these sanctions did not eliminate her economic position so much as suspend her visibility, underscoring that discipline operates through access to public presence rather than through the redistribution of material resources.

When Ivleeva reentered the public sphere in 2024, the staging of transformation was central to her rehabilitation. She adopted subdued aesthetics, framed the scandal as a moral lesson, and highlighted visits to war-affected areas of Ukraine under Russian control as moments of personal awakening, recalibrating her public persona to align with the regime's wartime moral economy. This re-entry, documented on Luka Ebkov's YouTube channel (Ebkov, 2024), functioned not simply as apology but as a process of rendering her body legible again as morally acceptable within a political order increasingly structured through moralized performances of loyalty. Her return was rescripted into a posture of service and alignment, illustrating how reputational survival under authoritarian conditions depends less on principled consistency than on visible recalibration of the self.

Crucially, as Ivleeva's trajectory makes clear, this capacity to recode visibility as moral deviance does not emerge spontaneously at moments of scandal but is enabled by a longer process through which the state has redefined the terms under which visibility itself becomes governable. The legal architecture developed under Putin gradually hollowed out this autonomy by transforming forms of visibility once tolerated as glamour into sites of potential sanction. The 2013 "gay propaganda" law established the foundational logic of this shift by reframing non-heteronormative visibility not as identity or cultural expression but as harmful information (Wilkinson, 2014; Kondakov, 2014). In 2022, Russia broadened the ban to cover all ages, explicitly targeting any representations and enabling expansive censorship (Human Rights Watch, 2022a; Kondakov, 2023). Within this legal framework, visibility itself becomes a regulatory object, allowing the state to retroactively reinterpret previously permissible forms of aesthetic expression as moral and political violations.

The punitive turn after Mutabor thus represents not a transformation in the moral economy of Putinism, but an intensification of its disciplinary force along the visibility hierarchy. Exile functions here as anticipatory knowledge: those who left recognized that infrastructures of repression embedded in the governance of gender, dissent, and visibility could be mobilized against anyone once political conditions demanded it, even as the underlying distribution of power remained intact.

The spectacle of punishment surrounding the Mutabor scandal does not end with celebrity discipline; it is culturally reproduced and normalized through narratives that normalize the moral necessity of elite punishment. The following section turns to *Kholop* and *Kholop 2* to show how contemporary Russian cinema mirrors and legitimizes this punitive imaginary.

Russian Cinema Mirrors Russian Politics

My reading of *Kholop* (*Son of a Rich*, 2019) and *Kholop 2* (*Son of a Rich*, 2023), both directed by Klim Shipenko, is informed by the broader reconfiguration of visibility, discipline, and belonging in wartime Russia. Read through this post-performative shift, the *Kholop* franchise emerges not simply as entertainment but as a cultural text that reframes coercion as care and domination as moral rehabilitation. At its core, the narrative stages a gendered pedagogy of citizenship: the undisciplined, excessive male subject must be broken down and remade into a morally legible figure through submission, labor, and affective realignment. Belonging is no longer secured through passive conformity, but through the embodied performance of humility, restraint, and loyalty to hierarchical order. In this sense, the films dramatize a broader shift in the conditions of recognition, where masculinity itself becomes a site of governance and correction. Discipline is rendered therapeutic, while submission becomes the

pathway through which the subject can reclaim moral worth and social belonging. In Sara Ahmed's terms, such narratives operate by aligning "good feelings" with normative attachment, positioning obedience not as coercion but as a desirable form of repair (Ahmed, 2014).

The choice to analyze *Kholop* and *Kholop 2* is motivated not only by their extraordinary commercial reach (France 24), but by their positioning within a wartime moral economy of visibility. *Kholop* (2019) normalized a fantasy of elite correction and moral reeducation in a prewar context, presenting humiliation and enforced hardship as comedic yet necessary pathways to ethical transformation. By contrast, *Kholop 2*, released at the beginning of 2024, circulated within a media environment already saturated with narratives of excess, punishment, and moral correction, immediately following the "almost naked" party at the Mutabor nightclub. Read in proximity to this scandal, the franchise does not simply reflect an existing cultural logic; it participates in its consolidation, rendering punitive discipline not only intelligible but desirable.

In 2019, Central Partnership, a Russian film distribution and production company embedded in Gazprom's media ecosystem (Castañeda, 2017), released what became one of the most commercially successful films in contemporary Russian cinema. *Kholop* grossed billions of rubles and was widely described as a record-setting domestic hit (France24.com, 2020). Its sequel, *Kholop 2* (2023), not only replicated but extended this success within Russia, grossing approximately 3.8 billion rubles at the domestic box office and quickly surpassing the two-billion mark within its first week of release. These figures, however, are largely confined to the Russian market; on the global stage, the original *Kholop* performed somewhat more strongly in terms of international distribution and total box office reach (Box Office Mojo, 2024a, 2024b). As Birgit Beumers (2024) notes, such successes reflect the increasing convergence of

commercial viability and ideological messaging in Russian cinema, producing cultural forms that appear apolitical while quietly reinforcing dominant moral and political narratives.

The film follows Grisha (Miloš Biković), a privileged young man whose wealth and social immunity allow him to move through post-Soviet life without consequence. After repeated displays of reckless behavior, he awakens in what appears to be a nineteenth-century village and is forced into the role of a serf. His labor is humiliating, his status is subordinated, and his everyday existence is governed by rigid hierarchy. What initially appears as time travel is later revealed to be a carefully staged experiment orchestrated by his father: an immersive environment designed to break down entitlement and reconstruct moral character through controlled suffering (Shipenko, 2019; Anisimova, 2020). This narrative device is not merely a comedic twist but the film's central organizing logic, transforming punishment into a pedagogical project through which subjectivity itself is reengineered.

Even the title *Kholop* (Serf), translated as *Son of a Rich*, is analytically revealing. It juxtaposes privilege and subordination, producing the illusion that even those at the top of the social hierarchy can be subjected to discipline. Yet this apparent equalization is tightly contained. The narrative does not dismantle hierarchy but temporarily suspends it, allowing elites to experience subordination without losing their structural position. In this sense, the film encodes a central feature of Putinist moral order: the promise that no one is above punishment, even as punishment leaves the underlying distribution of power intact. Elites' wealth remains secure only at the discretion of the authoritarian leader; when assets are confiscated, they are rarely redistributed to the general population but instead reinforce the regime's patronage networks by circulating among loyal insiders (Lanskoy & Myles-Primakoff, 2018).

A closer reading of the film’s “re-education” experiment reveals how this logic operates through the construction of a total environment. The village is not simply a setting, but a controlled social world structured through surveillance, hierarchy, and affective manipulation. Every interaction is staged, every response monitored, and every deviation corrected. The presence of a psychologist underscores that this is not punishment in a purely punitive sense but a managed process of behavioral recalibration. Coercion is reframed as care, and discipline is internalized as self-improvement. What emerges is a subject who experiences submission not as domination but as moral awakening. This disciplinary logic is explicitly structured through a paternal framework. Grisha’s punishment is administered by his father, who assumes the role of moral authority responsible for correcting excess and guiding transformation. This dynamic resonates with a substantial body of scholarship that conceptualizes Putinist governance through paternalism, in which the state is figured as a protective yet corrective father who disciplines wayward subjects while claiming to act in their best interest. Authority appears as care, and discipline as necessary guidance (Hanson & Kopstein, 2024; Mikhailova, 2012; Randall, 2020; Sharafutdinova, 2016).

Kholop 2 extends this paternal logic beyond its initial frame and, in doing so, aligns even more closely with the punitive dynamics observed in contemporary celebrity culture. Released in early 2024, in the immediate aftermath of the Mutabor scandal, the sequel enters a political environment in which elite visibility has already been recoded as a site of moral risk. As Meduza (2024a) reports, popular cultural production has been explicitly mobilized to shape public sentiment ahead of the presidential election, reinforcing affective orientations aligned with state priorities. Within this conjuncture, *Kholop 2* does not simply repeat the first film’s narrative but renders its disciplinary model socially reproducible.

The sequel centers on Katya (Aglaya Tarasova), a wealthy and socially dominant figure whose entitlement is expressed through cruelty, public humiliation of others, and a sense of total immunity from consequence. Her characterization closely mirrors the forms of excessive visibility associated with post-Soviet glamour culture and publicly condemned in the aftermath of Mutabor. Like the celebrities targeted in that scandal, Katya embodies a form of privilege that is both hyper-visible and morally suspect, making her an ideal subject for disciplinary intervention.

Her punishment is not administered by a father figure but by Grisha himself. Having undergone his own “re-education,” he now assumes the role of disciplinarian and orchestrates a similar immersive experiment to correct her behavior. Katya is placed within a constructed past where her privilege no longer guarantees protection, and she is forced to navigate a world structured by hierarchy, labor, and vulnerability. Her humiliation is staged and prolonged, framed as necessary for moral transformation.

This shift lies at the heart of the film's logic: authority no longer descends unilaterally from father to son but circulates through reeducated subjects who become active agents of discipline. The system generates individuals who internalize its norms and, in turn, reproduce them, actively participating in the regulation of others. In this way, *Kholop 2* dramatizes a form of distributed governance, where discipline is not merely imposed from above but enacted horizontally through everyday social relations. The film thus reflects a broader transformation in which power functions through the subject's self-regulation and their role in disciplining those around them. This transformation did not appear overnight. It grew increasingly evident during Putin's third presidential term and intensified amid the war in Ukraine, where moral conformity and loyalty became inseparable from claims to national belonging. Yet scholars had already

discerned its contours earlier: Andrey Makarychev and Sergei Medvedev (2015) described Russian governance as undergoing a biopolitical shift—an expansion of state power into the regulation of everyday life, moral norms, and intimate spheres, coupled with a redefinition of the political community through appeals to “traditional values.” *Kholop 2* can be read as a cultural expression of this shift, staging a world in which discipline is internalized and disseminated as a shared moral imperative rather than an external command.

Katya’s transformation culminates in a staged moment of crisis, represented through a simulated Napoleonic invasion, in which the carefully constructed world around her appears to collapse into real danger. As the scenario unfolds, Grisha’s princely persona is seemingly killed, and Katya is captured and brought before “Napoleon”. In this moment, she is confronted with a choice: align with the invading force in order to secure her own safety or remain loyal to the moral order she has been trained to inhabit. Her attempt to shoot Napoleon marks the decisive moment of transformation, demonstrating that she has internalized the script of courage, loyalty, and sacrifice.

Read through the lens of the film's moral and ideological framework, Napoleon functions as more than a narrative antagonist. He operates as a symbolic stand-in for external corruption and destabilization. Katya’s refusal to submit to him can thus be read as an allegory of loyalty, in which the feminine subject must resist temptation from an outside force and instead reaffirm attachment to a morally “pure” and hierarchical domestic order (Riabov & Riabova, 2014). At the same time, her willingness to risk death situates her within a longer lineage of Soviet and post-Soviet narrative traditions that valorize the self-sacrificial subject as the highest expression of moral worth (Gasviani, 2022). In these traditions, legitimacy is secured not through autonomy or critique, but through the readiness to endure suffering, subordinate the self, and, if necessary,

sacrifice one's life for a larger collective or moral order (Minkova, 2018). *Kholop 2* reactivates this figure, recoding sacrifice as both a personal transformation and a condition of belonging within a contemporary authoritarian moral regime.

The films' reliance on temporal displacement further reinforces this logic. Both Grisha and Katya are transported into a stylized past in which hierarchy appears natural, authority unquestioned, and moral clarity self-evident. This return to a premodern social order resonates with contemporary Russian state discourse that elevates "traditional values" as a corrective to modern liberal excess, particularly within the ideological framing of the war in Ukraine (Sharafutdinova, 2020; Laruelle, 2024; Stepanova, 2022). The past functions here not as historical reconstruction but as a moral technology through which discipline is legitimized and hierarchy rendered desirable.

What the *Kholop* franchise ultimately makes visible is not only the structure of discipline but its authorship. The films foreground a director figure who constructs an artificial environment in which subjects are placed, observed, and transformed. Read alongside contemporary Russian politics, this logic invites a broader interpretation of governance itself as a form of staged experimentation. Much like Grisha's father engineers the village and Grisha later reproduces this model for Katya, the Putinist state can be understood as orchestrating a managed social environment in which norms of acceptable behavior are continuously recalibrated through spectacle, discipline, and selective reintegration. This is not governance through stable rules alone, but through the production of scenarios in which subjects are tested and corrected in real time.

In this sense, the "experiment" extends beyond the cinematic narrative. It resonates with a political order in which the boundaries of visibility, morality, and belonging are constantly

adjusted, often retroactively, as seen in the sudden reclassification of previously tolerated forms of glamour as deviant in the aftermath of the Mutabor scandal. Figures such as Ivleeva, like Katya, are not simply punished but repositioned within a shifting moral script that demands visible transformation. The system does not eliminate them; it observes, disciplines, and reintroduces them once alignment is achieved. What is produced is a form of governance in which society itself becomes a space of ongoing calibration, where subjects learn not only to comply but to anticipate and internalize the expectations of an authority that remains partially obscured yet structurally omnipresent.

Taken together, *Kholop* and *Kholop 2* articulate a cultural logic in which visibility is recoded as vulnerability. Where earlier formations of celebrity in post-Soviet Russia allowed for a degree of excess, distance, and even political ambiguity, the current moment renders visibility itself a liability. Public figures are no longer simply tolerated as apolitical entertainers but are repositioned as morally legible subjects whose value depends on their capacity for correction. In this shift, celebrities become disposable not because they lose their prominence, but because their prominence makes them ideal sites for the public staging of discipline.

The films give this transformation a narrative form. They present punishment not as rupture but as recalibration, a process through which elite subjects are symbolically broken down and reintegrated without altering the underlying structure of privilege. What is at stake is not the redistribution of power but its moral re-legitimation. The degradation of the elite becomes a spectacle of accountability that leaves hierarchy intact while rendering it newly justifiable. In this sense, the figure of the “disposable celebrity” emerges as a governing technology of the post-performative moment: a mechanism through which authority is exercised not despite visibility, but through it, converting exposure into a site of discipline and loyalty into a condition of

survival.

Conclusion: Eat the Rich

This chapter has argued that the punitive turn against celebrity culture in wartime Russia is not a moral anomaly or episodic overreach, but a reconfiguration of how political authority is exercised through visibility. The “almost naked” party and its aftermath reveal a post-performative shift in the governance of public life: where earlier modes of rule tolerated stylized excess and political silence as sufficient compliance, the current moment demands embodied, affective, and gendered demonstrations of loyalty. In this reconfigured order, visibility itself becomes a site of political risk. Celebrities are no longer merely expected to avoid dissent; they are compelled to perform moral alignment with the regime’s wartime narrative through public repentance, aesthetic restraint, and proximity to sanctioned forms of sacrifice.

The chapter’s central contribution has been to conceptualize celebrity visibility as a site where disposability is produced and managed as a governing technology in contemporary Putinism. Far from challenging elite power, the ritualized humiliation and rehabilitation of cultural figures functions as an “eat the rich” politics that redirects popular anger away from state responsibility and toward morally legible targets whose privilege can be publicly consumed. This symbolic consumption stabilizes the regime by offering catharsis without accountability. Celebrity punishment thus operates as an affective release valve: it absorbs social rage that might otherwise be directed upward, while simultaneously reaffirming the state’s monopoly over visibility.

As the analysis of *Kholop* and *Kholop 2* demonstrates, this logic is not confined to political events but is reproduced and normalized through popular culture. The films render

discipline as moral rehabilitation and hierarchy as pedagogical necessity, staging controlled environments in which visible elites are subjected to humiliation, correction, and eventual reintegration. In doing so, they mirror a broader political logic in which authority operates through the orchestration of scenarios that test, recalibrate, and realign subjects without fundamentally altering their structural position. Punishment, in both cinematic and political form, does not dismantle privilege but regulates its expression, ensuring that visibility remains conditional upon demonstrable loyalty.

These dynamics further show why wealth and fame do not translate into political autonomy. Cultural elites are highly visible yet politically constrained, celebrated yet structurally expendable. Their vulnerability lies precisely in their visibility: it makes them legible targets for discipline while leaving the foundations of power untouched. Legal and moral frameworks targeting sexuality, propriety, and public conduct provide flexible instruments through which acceptable visibility can be redefined and enforced.

Ultimately, the spectacle of punishment, whether enacted through public scandals or reproduced in cinematic form, functions less as a mechanism of justice than as a technique of governance. It reaffirms hierarchy by staging the correction of those who appear excessive, while leaving the underlying distribution of power intact. What is produced is not equality, but the appearance of moral accountability. In this system, visibility becomes both privilege and liability: it elevates subjects into public recognition only to render them available for exemplary discipline. The “eat the rich” logic thus culminates not in redistribution, but in a managed cycle of exposure, humiliation, and reintegration through which power is both displayed and preserved. Power is not challenged at the top but secured through the controlled circulation of those who can be seen, punished, and returned.

Conclusion

I returned to Tbilisi in October 2025 carrying the same questions that had guided my fieldwork two years earlier. The city I had known since childhood had not simply absorbed another wave of arrivals; it had been reshaped by them. Russian voices still threaded through the cafés and courtyards, yet the bold anti-Russian graffiti that once covered walls and benches had been painted over, faded, or worn away by time and weather. Only one inscription remained stubbornly visible near the funicular in Mtatsminda, its yellow-and-blue letters still commanding passersby to “STOP,” “TALK MORE QUIETLY,” and “PROTEST.” In the quiet moments between interviews and observations, I found myself standing before that wall again, thinking about the men whose lives I had come to know. Not the soldiers who once rolled across Georgian borders in tanks, nor the dissidents who stayed behind to fight the regime from within, but a different figure altogether: the Russian man who left, who refused to fight, and who now occupies an uneasy place in the very borderland scarred by the empire he left behind.

Figure 7. Anti-Russian Graffiti in Tbilisi Addressing Russian Speakers (Author in Frame)



Source: Author's personal archive. Originally published in *The Men Who Refuse to Fight* (Peace Leadership Collaborative). Reproduced with permission.

This dissertation has been an extended reckoning with that new Russian male figure—the exile whose departure is read in Russia as a failure of masculinity and therefore of citizenship, and in Georgia as a failure of courage for not staying to resist from inside. He is neither the heroic resistor celebrated in some Western narratives, nor the unrepentant occupier feared in Georgian memory. He exists in the tension between those poles: a man whose refusal of militarized manhood has been recoded as moral and civic insufficiency, yet whose presence in a postcolonial borderland forces both himself and his hosts to negotiate new terms of belonging. Across the chapters that precede this one, I have traced how this figure is produced, disciplined, and repositioned—how his symbolic unmaking in Russian media and family conversations travels with him across borders, how the regime's demand for total embodied loyalty makes staying untenable, and how, once in Georgia, he must perform a continuous labor of moral distancing that never fully secures recognition. What emerges is not a stable new identity but an unsettled, hybrid form of masculinity forged in the friction of empire's afterlives.

The chapters together show that this new figure cannot be understood through the familiar binaries of resistance and complicity, victim and perpetrator, or center and periphery. In the Russian information environment, his departure is staged in advance as gendered collapse, through comedic skits that humiliate the man who chooses comfort over duty, through songs that recast independence as avoidance, and through realist vignettes that elevate endurance as the sole marker of mature manhood. These representations do not merely circulate as propaganda; they travel into intimate spaces, shaping how mothers, fathers, and communities interpret the choice to leave. Yet once that symbolic disqualification has been issued, some men describe a paradoxical release: the demand to prove oneself according to the old scripts begins to loosen. The figure who has already been declared “dead” to the nation finds small openings, in colorful clothing, in music played in bars, in the everyday refusal to perform stoic endurance, that allow him to inhabit manhood differently. At the same time, the regime’s domestic disciplining of those who remain reveals that the demand for affective loyalty extends far beyond exiles.

Central to this transformation is the regime’s treatment of visibility itself. Even those who remain inside Russia and never openly opposed the war are rendered disposable the moment they fail the post-performative test of loyalty. The explosive “Almost Naked” celebrity party scandal turned a glamorous, seemingly apolitical gathering into a nationwide spectacle of public shaming and forced repentance. In a single night, what began as an elite birthday celebration, complete with provocative outfits and hedonistic excess, became proof that no amount of prior loyalty or silence could shield even the wealthy and famous from the new demand for total affective alignment. The backlash was swift and orchestrated: apologies were extracted on state television, careers were suspended, and the public was invited to consume the humiliation of the rich as cathartic justice. Similarly, the wildly popular *Kholop* film franchise dramatizes this logic

through staged moral re-education: a spoiled oligarch's son is subjected to simulated serfdom, humiliation, and eventual submission to hierarchy and patriotic duty. These cases reveal an "eat the rich" politics that delivers popular catharsis without threatening the underlying distribution of power. For the new Russian male figure, whether inside Russia or in exile, this internal logic is decisive. It shows that masculine citizenship has become radically conditional: visibility itself is now a liability, and no performance of loyalty is ever secure enough. Exile is therefore not an isolated rupture but the logical extension of a domestic system in which every man is potentially disposable.

In the Georgian borderland, this figure encounters a different but equally demanding gaze. Here, his refusal to fight is interpreted not as principled dissent but as an evasion of the very courage Georgians associate with their own history of resistance. Younger Georgians in particular demand visible anti-imperial humility, acknowledgment of occupation, quieter speech in public space, and concrete acts of atonement, while older generations sometimes extend pragmatic tolerance shaped by Soviet-era nostalgia. Everyday encounters in taxis, cafés, and volunteer initiatives become sites where reputational labor is performed and evaluated. The figure must continually prove he is not the occupier, even as his presence reactivates those memories. Yet in the same spaces where suspicion is most acute, moments of shared practice, delivering aid near occupied territories, standing together in protests against Georgia's own authoritarian turn, open the possibility of something more generative. Russian men shift away from imperial entitlement toward quieter practices of care and presence; Georgian participants encounter living counter-examples to the monolithic Russian man they have long imagined. What takes shape is neither seamless solidarity nor outright rejection, but a borderland masculinity that remains contradictory, relational, and still marked by historical pain.

This reckoning with the new Russian male figure advances Global Studies in three distinct and original ways. First, it offers a gendered extension of necropolitics that foregrounds the symbolic elimination of subjects who refuse state-sanctioned embodiment. When physical discipline is no longer possible, the regime turns to media and discourse to withdraw masculine recognition, rendering refusal legible only as failure. Second, the dissertation identifies the post-performative shift as a defining feature of contemporary authoritarian war-making. Earlier reliance on outward conformity has given way to a demand for internalized, affective loyalty; departure therefore becomes not dissent but ontological betrayal. The analysis of disposable celebrity culture inside Russia is crucial here because it demonstrates that this shift is totalizing, it governs the entire gender regime, not only exiles. Third, it extends borderlands theory into the post-Soviet South Caucasus by showing how Russian exile and Georgian postcolonial memory actively co-produce hybrid masculine subjectivities. These subjectivities are neither purely imperial nor purely resistant; they are forged in the friction of everyday encounters and evaluated differently across generational lines. In this sense, the figure of the Russian exile man becomes a powerful lens through which we can see larger processes of empire's afterlives, gendered discipline under authoritarianism, and the contested production of belonging in borderland spaces.

The research design that made this analysis possible combined critical media and cultural analysis with life-history interviews and participant observation conducted in Tbilisi during the summer of 2023. These were supplemented by extensive fieldwork in activist spaces, volunteer initiatives, and everyday urban settings, as well as close readings of viral videos, celebrity scandals, and popular films. The global transdisciplinary framework developed by Darian-Smith and McCarty (2017) guided the integration of these methods, allowing me to trace how gender,

exile, and mediated national identity are lived together in the post-Soviet borderlands. Critical discourse analysis revealed the ideological scripts promoted by the state, while ethnography exposed how individuals navigate, contest, or internalize those scripts once they cross borders. This mixed-method approach was essential for capturing the complex, large-scale phenomena at the heart of Global Studies without reducing them to isolated variables or universalizing narratives.

Like any project conducted in real time amid an ongoing war, this one has limits. The empirical core rests on a focused sample of urban, educated, opposition-adjacent men who self-selected into exile networks. Working-class voices, women, queer exiles, and those who remain more ambivalent or quietly aligned with the regime are underrepresented. Generational and regional differences within Georgia, particularly outside Tbilisi, are evoked but not exhaustively mapped. The study's emphasis on one borderland site, while analytically powerful, leaves open questions of comparison with other post-Soviet destinations where Russian exiles encounter different imperial legacies and gender regimes. The research was also shaped by the political and emotional stakes of the moment; access and silences were inevitably influenced by wartime sensitivities. These constraints reflect the inherent messiness of fieldwork in conflict-adjacent spaces rather than shortcomings of design, yet they point toward necessary extensions.

Future research could pursue several promising directions. Longitudinal work with the same interlocutors would illuminate how the new Russian male figure evolves as the war continues and possibilities of return remain foreclosed. Comparative studies across multiple post-Soviet borderlands could test the portability of the dynamics examined here and reveal how different host-society gender orders and imperial memories shape exile experiences. Greater attention to queer and female exiles would enrich the gendered analysis, showing how non-

normative subjects navigate or subvert the same scripts of masculine failure. Finally, scholars might examine how these dynamics travel back into Russia itself, through digital networks, family ties, or eventual return, complicating the binary of “inside” and “outside” the regime. Such work would continue the global-transdisciplinary project of this dissertation: tracing how war, gender, and empire are lived and contested not only at the level of state policy but in the intimate, everyday spaces where belonging is made and unmade.

In the end, this dissertation has been an attempt to reckon seriously with the new Russian male figure who now moves through the post-Soviet borderland. He is a product of the regime’s demand for total loyalty and of the host society’s demand for moral accountability. He is also more than either of those things. In the friction of these encounters, something unsettled and still forming begins to appear: a masculinity that is neither the militarized muzhik of Putin’s Russia nor the historically wounded protector of Georgian sovereignty, but a hybrid form forged in the everyday labor of listening, atoning, and persisting across difference. The borderland does not offer easy resolutions or harmonious integration. It sustains a condition in which meanings remain provisional, belonging cannot be fully secured, and the afterlives of empire continue to structure even the most ordinary interactions. Yet it is precisely in that incompleteness that possibility resides. Refusal also opens space for new ways of seeing and being. Russian exiles and Georgian hosts are, however uneasily, beginning to inhabit that space together. The borderland offers something more modest and more durable than solidarity: the slow, friction-filled possibility of living otherwise. This dissertation has tried to listen to that possibility, to name its gendered contradictions, and to hold open the question of what comes next.

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