

Empowerment of the disempowered: Assessing the impact of young Muscovites through ecological practices

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, the problem of environmental degradation has become particularly significant in global public discourse, with states, international organizations and the general public articulating the urgency of ecological problems (UN Environment 2021). Russia is no exception, as, according to opinion polls, half the population believes that the overall ecological situation in the world – in Russia and especially in their place of residence – is getting worse (FOM 2021). The most recent ecological disasters and catastrophes make the need for environmental action all the more pressing (VCIOM 2019; FOM 2021).

Yet when it comes to caring for themselves and the environment, Russians – unlike the populations of most developed countries – are prone to paternalistic patterns of behaviour. For most Russians, the area of personal responsibility and influence is limited to the family and work (Levada-center 2020). According to opinion polls, 44 per cent of Russians emphasize that state leaders should take the lead in ecological matters, attributing to them the primary role in caring for the environment, while 34 per cent and 10 per cent of Russians accept that responsibility lies with the general public or entrepreneurs, respectively (FOM 2021).

At the macro level, ecological policy remains at the periphery of political and public debate, with discussion of ecological issues constituting a field of power struggles in political, economic and social domains (Yanitsky 2011; Human Rights Watch 2017). Experts claim that the prospects for ecological modernization are still quite limited, while the government's declared ecological and sustainability goals are vague and tokenistic, following the former industrial logic (Potapov 2020). The implementation of environmental policy lags behind what individuals believe needs to be done to care for the environment and does not meet the population's expectations, even though Russia has ratified a number of international programmes and agreements (Rossijskaya gazeta 2020).

The state's weak engagement with the ecological agenda frames the latter as unimportant to citizens, a state of affairs that is exacerbated by the poorly developed infrastructure and low ecological culture and consciousness of the population. All this prevents the population from really engaging in pro-environmental activities. Environmental practices therefore seem controversial and marginal, as there is a gap between individuals' attitudes towards ecological activity and the meanings society attaches to it, between the global social discourse on ecological issues and the real implementation of pro-environmental policies in Russia.

Nevertheless, some Russians do take a proactive stance towards caring for the environment, despite the ambivalence of social meanings attached to the agenda. According to opinion polls, the sector of society that is most ecologically active is young people aged between 18 and 30 (VCIOM 2019). They also express high anxiety about the environment and passionately bring up environmental issues in public debates (UN Environment Programme 2019; Gudkov et al. 2020).

Taking account of the ambiguous lines of responsibility for ecological activity in present-day Russia, this study investigates why young people still engage in everyday ecological practices, despite environmentalism being a peripheral issue in relation to the dominant political agenda. The research is guided by the following research questions: how do proactive and ecologically responsible young Muscovites justify their everyday engagement in individual ecological practices, and what motivates them to actively care for the environment? Does the ecological agenda become, for them, a field of power struggle and a means of alternative political representation? Do young people, by engaging in ecological practices, become empowered, taking a stance against the official rhetoric?

In this study, ecological practices refer to an individual's conscious actions, aimed at interacting with the natural environment for its

conservation and sustainability (Dunlap and Catton 1979; Stern 2000; Hargreaves 2011). We rely on the interpretative paradigm of social analysis and focus on how individuals mark and enact particular practices that have a preserving effect on the environment. This approach captures the whole spectrum of everyday practices which are usually taken for granted by individuals, looks behind the formal representations of care for the environment and reveals how these practices are legitimized (Volkov and Kharkhordin 2008, 22).

The chapter is divided into four sections: it begins with a brief description of the theoretical framework of the research, before outlining the research methodology (justification of the chosen methodology, data collection and analysis technique, sampling and recruitment). The results of the empirical stage of the study are presented in the third section. Finally, the results are conceptualized and discussed, and the limitations as well as the possible directions for further research are outlined.

Theoretical framework

In modern society, relations between the people and the natural environment have become acute, giving rise to a gradual shift in human values, from the anthropocentric mindset of consumerism and the technological mastery of people over nature (the 'human exceptionalism paradigm') to the biocentric ideology of the balance between nature and human activity – the 'new environmental paradigm' (Dunlap and Catton 1979). Post-materialist values are also considered to be a significant precondition for the manifestation of environmental concern by individuals (Inglehart 1995).

The link between pro-environmental values and behaviour was suggested by Stern (2000) in the 'values-beliefs-norm' theory. Motivations that encourage individuals to have a positive attitude towards the environment imply a complex of (1) biospheric, (2) altruistic and (3) egoistic values. Individual pro-environmental behaviour is an output of multiple coexisting motifs. They include attitudes (knowledge, emotions and intentions), non-ecological motifs (including market-based drivers) and institutional conditions (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002) and should be considered collectively.

According to the interpretative risk paradigm (Gavrilov 2007), risk perception is socially constructed. Public discourse on environmental issues (what problems are being raised, what knowledge on the problem is being disseminated and what the interests of the various actors with

regard to this problem are) determines how they are perceived. At the societal level, environmental concerns mark how significant the issue is in the social order in terms of how (dys)functional it is for the system. The ecological agenda constitutes a political question due to the fact that particular issues are discussed and others are silenced (Dake 1992). Hence, environmental concerns serve as a means of social control, prescribing peoples' specific attitudes towards the environment and encouraging them to act accordingly. As Douglas highlights, 'taken too much at face value, such fears [of pollution] tend to mask other wrongs and dangers' (Douglas 1975, 215).

Accordingly, environmental governance has gradually shifted from direct enforcement to a discourse of proactivity, of institutionalized 'active citizenship' (Buttel 2003; Shamir 2008). The discourse of responsabilization produces a particular social actor: the 'reflexive subject' is individualized and proactive, making decisions rooted in her/his personal interest. The mechanism of 'green governmentality' is implemented in the form of 'simple solutions' (Soneryd and Uggla 2015). They encourage individuals to engage in everyday practices, linking behaviour to personally significant aspects of their lives and emphasizing the value of proactivity.

In modern market societies, ecological consumption becomes a significant means of engaging in pro-environmental behaviour (Welch and Warde 2010). Patterns of 'green consumption' (such as rejection of consumerism, minimizing consumption and waste, choosing certain brands, sharing economy, and boycotting particular goods or brands) give individuals a voice and an opportunity to personally influence the ecological agenda. Through their economic behaviour, consumers acquire the status of 'citizen-consumers', expressing their personal beliefs, attitudes and position in the social structure.

Power relations produce ambivalence for those who have limited access to resources and status; the more rigid the social structure, the more challenging it is for the powerless to express themselves (Room 1976). Their intentions are ambivalent, oscillating between the need to obey the dominant mode of power and the will to resist it in order to realize their aspirations.

However, power itself should be conceptualized in the broad sense (Haugaard 2012; Ledyayev 2019). Apart from traditional 'power over' as a mechanism to force individuals to obey, actors might also manifest their will and identity (Haugaard 2012). This dimension of power is expressed as 'emancipatory, giving capacity to action' (Haugaard 2015, 147). Furthermore, as individuals collectively engage with significant agendas,

they jointly exercise ‘power with’, acting in concert with others (Haugaard 2015). This framework consolidates the different conceptualizations of power relations.

Accordingly, ecological activity – understood here as a set of an individual’s pro-environmental attitudes and activities – constitutes an ecological lifestyle, which organizes eco-friendly dispositions, tastes and practices into an integral eco-habitus (Carfagna et al. 2014) and engages socially excluded groups (Rudel et al. 2011).

However, the rethinking and criticism of the ‘green choice’ policy shows that the latter exaggerates the impact of individual action on the environmental agenda. It shifts a large share of the responsibility for market failures and environmental policy decisions to individuals (Maniates 2001; Evans et al. 2017). The ‘green choice’ is a responsabilization mechanism, but it should be actively supported by the state. Responsibility is shared among social actors who occupy their niche in environmental discourse and collective action (Rudel et al. 2011; Karlsson 2012).

The coexistence of different motivations as well as the ambivalence and distribution of power in the field may create contradictions and clashes in individuals’ understanding of their activities (Ledeneva 2014). However, justifications for ecological practices might not contradict but rather complement each other, together fostering pro-environmental activity and redefining power in the field.

Data and methods

To identify the justifications that young people ascribe to their everyday ecological practices, qualitative methodology was applied. The choice of the methodological framework is justified by the focus on the way justifications unfold in everyday experience and how they are interpreted by individuals (Charmaz 2006). While previous sociological work on the issue of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviour is very diverse, little attention has been paid to individuals’ personal arguments for their pro-environmental engagement (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002).

We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with young Moscow citizens aged between 16 and 30 who were engaged in environmental activities in their everyday lives. The minimum age threshold of 16 years is associated with the methodological norm of not collecting data from minors, while 30 is considered the upper threshold for ‘youth’ in the latest research in the field of youth studies in Russia (Sedova 2016; Gudkov et al. 2020), although this is a matter of academic

debate (Omelchenko 2020). By focusing, in particular, on young people with pronounced pro-environmental attitudes, we assume that they can be considered a more progressive sector of the population and become a driving force for ecological engagement (Sedova 2016).

The basic assumptions of the study is that environmentally oriented young people's concern for the environment and personal engagement in ecological practices are essential components of their modern lifestyles and identities (Spaargaren 2003; Rudel et al. 2011). Young people are, probably, largely concerned about environmental degradation as a violation of moral norms and a threat to their future life chances and perspectives. For young people, the ecological domain could become a field in which they can exhibit personal proactivity and responsibility (Nartova 2019). Thus, we assume that ecological activity establishes a field of symbolic power struggle, in which young people can declare care for the environment as a significant public issue and manifest their personal interests, attitudes and citizenship (Soneryd and Uggla 2015). For young people who are suspicious of the official political space and who are basically excluded from it, the ecological niche constitutes a means of political participation and representation.

To examine the implicit justifications of daily ecological activity, the data collection and analysis were performed in line with the grounded theory tradition (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2006). According to this strategy, theoretical sampling was applied as it is an effective means for the researcher to develop research questions according to category saturation from the empirical data (Charmaz 2006). For the initial sampling we used characteristics such as the range of ecological practices (such as waste separation, zero waste and volunteering in ecological organizations) and residence in Moscow (as Moscow is highly heterogeneous in terms of the quality of the environment).

To recruit participants, we used social networks such as Vkontakte and Facebook. As a starting point to recruit individuals involved in ecological practices, we reviewed public posts and discussions on ecological topics, in public pages and groups. We also browsed groups dedicated to the regions of Moscow. In order to avoid the systematic bias of capturing the justifications of successful practices, performed by people active on social networks, participants were also recruited from the acquaintances of the initial informants. At the stage of recruitment, the individuals were asked about the practices they actually performed in order to specify the intensity and type of ecological activity carried out.

Additionally, people of other age cohorts, ecologically indifferent individuals and experts in the sphere of environmental public

administration were included. Combining the recruitment strategies was beneficial for the results of the study, allowing us to compare discourses on environmental issues.

As a result, 25 interviews were conducted. [Table 17.1](#) presents the core information about the respondents in the final sample.

In line with grounded theory methodology, the data analysis aims to develop a conceptual framework of the social phenomenon. The narratives were coded in several iterative stages, moving from *in vivo* codes to categories and concepts ([Strauss and Corbin 1990](#)). The coding was carried out manually, using MS Word software. Field notes (memos) were collected during the interviews and used afterwards as additional sources of insight and illustration and to help structure the analysis ([Charmaz 2006](#)). Overall, we suggest enriching and broadening the theory on the justifications of ecological practices of individuals within their daily experience, as follows.

Results

The results show that young people find themselves in the ambivalent context of performing pro-environmental practices. On the one hand, they feel the urgency of tackling environmental problems and have an interest in making a personal contribution to pro-ecological activity; on the other hand, they perceive the lack of support from the state, which depreciates their beliefs and practical attempts. Moreover, ecological practices themselves are ambivalent in the daily experience of young people. On the one hand, they are politically neutral, justified as morally loaded caring for the environment or pragmatically as ensuring future well-being. On the other, since young environmentally conscious Muscovites have limited capacity to express civic and particularly ecological demands and publicly promote their interests in the current dominant political field, simple everyday practices become a form of empowerment – the civil representation of the officially powerless. The results of our research show that environmentalism is a political issue and young people use pro-environmental arguments to formulate general civic demands. In their everyday ecological practices, individuals take personal responsibility for the global and their own personal futures, claim moral principles and defend their civil and political positions.

Table 17.1 Characteristics of the respondents

No	Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Place of residence	Engagement in ecological activity
1	Daria	f	18	BA student, economics; employed	Kuzminki	Occasionally engaged in waste sorting and zero waste consumption; pronounced ecological mindset
2	Michail	m	22	MA student; freelance at web-dev	Fili-Davydkovo	Actively engaged in waste sorting; popularizes the topic on social media
3	Vlada 1	f	21	BA student, economics	Troparevo	Actively engaged in waste sorting and zero waste consumption; active pro-environmental concern
4	Kirill	m	34	Expert, PhD ecology; worked at the national project 'Ecology'	–	Apart from professional activity: occasionally engaged in waste sorting and popularization on social media
5	Angelina	f	21	BA student, sociology	Moscow region, Odintsovo	Occasionally engaged in waste sorting and the consumption of eco brands
6	Daniil	m	30	Self-employed teacher; BA in finance	Presnensky	Occasionally engaged in health-related practices; no proactive attitude
7	Lena	f	20	BA student, journalism	Nearest Moscow region	Actively engaged in waste sorting, occasionally in zero waste consumption; moderate ecological mindset
8	Ksenya 1	f	23	MA student, PR; employed teacher	Dynamo	Occasionally engaged in waste sorting and zero waste consumption; pronounced ecological mindset and concern
9	Alexandra	f	20	BA student; employed	Nagatinsky Backwater	Rarely engaged in practices, occasionally waste sorting and consumption of eco brands; no ecological mindset or concern

No	Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Place of residence	Engagement in ecological activity
10	Dina	f	23	BA in sociology; employed	Marina Roscha	Rarely engaged in practices, occasionally waste sorting and consumption of eco brands; poor ecological mindset
11	Ilya	m	23	MA student, philology; self-employed	Timiryazevsky	Actively engaged in waste sorting and zero waste consumption daily; vegetarian; volunteer in an eco-project; pronounced ecological and civil responsibility
12	Vasily	m	18	BA student, aircraft; employed	Severnoe Tushino	Occasionally engaged in waste sorting and zero waste consumption; moderate ecological attitudes
13	Danil	m	20	BA student, management; employed	Putilkovo	Occasionally engaged in waste sorting and consumption of eco brands; pronounced ecological and civic position
14	Beata	f	20	BA student, ecology	Chertanovo South	Actively engaged in waste sorting; eco activist; vegan; member of a student eco organization; pronounced ecological and civil responsibility
15	Libov' Alexeevna	f	65	Pensioner	Zapadnoye Degunino	Occasionally engaged in waste sorting, ecology as neatness; low level of ecological attitudes
16	Lubov' Vasilievna	f	76	Pensioner	Troitsk	Not engaged in practices, ecology as neatness; no ecological mindset
17	Katya	f	18	School, 11th grade	South Butovo	Actively engaged in waste sorting and zero waste consumption; pronounced ecological mindset
18	Vladimir	m	22	MA student, chemistry; employed	Odintsovo	Actively engaged in waste sorting, occasionally in zero waste consumption; records a podcast about ecology; pronounced ecological mindset

No	Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Place of residence	Engagement in ecological activity
19	Sergey	m	22	BA student, international relations	Odintsovo	Occasionally engaged in waste sorting and zero waste consumption; records a podcast about ecology; pronounced ecological concern
20	Vlada 2	f	22	BA student	Troparevo	Actively engaged in waste sorting, occasionally in zero waste consumption; pronounced ecological reflexivity
21	Ksenya 2	f	25	MA; employed, artist	Sokol	Occasionally engaged in waste sorting, actively in zero waste consumption; pronounced ecological reflexivity and anxiety
22	Oksana	f	21	BA student; eco-volunteer	–	Actively engaged in waste sorting and zero waste consumption; founded the eco club in university; volunteer; pronounced ecological reflexivity and civic responsibility
23	Yulia	f	24	Employed	Zhulebino	Occasionally engaged in waste sorting, actively in zero waste consumption; moderate ecological responsibility; pronounced ecological and health anxiety
24	Anastasia	f	29	MA in ecology, ecological expertise	–	Actively engaged in waste sorting and zero waste consumption; works in ecological expertise; has an eco-blog; pronounced ecological and civic responsibility
25	Ksenya 3	f	30	Employed in finance	Kapotnya	Actively engaged in zero waste consumption; participates in neighbourhood clean-up; pronounced civic responsibility, ecological and health anxiety

Environmental concern: 'now or never'

The data show that young people reflect on the environmental issues they 'see around them', with a particular emphasis on environmental degradation, its unpredictability and its negative impact on human life.

It would be better if this does not continue. We are now familiar with the problems. Now or never. It is better to start now, little by little, than later, when you'd have to use harsher measures that you do not even want to think about. (Interview 9)

The level of anxiety is different for young people; they can even be quite rational about it. However, we suggest that for them, environmental concern is an important life principle. It relates strongly to their futures as young people, aspiring for better life chances and personal success, and their ambition and proactivity prompt them to respond to the ecological agenda and to be willing to act pro-environmentally.

It seems to me that in 20 years everything will be very bad with the environment. It will be similar to China and there will be smog, probably everywhere. And people will pay for clean air. (Interview 1)

Participation in ecological practices, at the same time, is a response to the negative changes taking place 'here and now'. It is a mechanism of coping with the current threats to their personal life chances (such as quality of life, health, well-being and access to resources), safety and ontological security.

Young people primarily aim to take practical steps to care for the environment they live in, which is close to their locality and day-to-day private lives. Yet, in comparison with older generations, they seem to have a broader understanding of 'the place' they associate with and for which they are responsible. It stretches from their backyard to the district, the city and even the planet.

It is such thinking, it seems to me, when you think: 'Oh, that's it, I will rid the whole world of plastic!' – this is not normal. This means that a person will not do anything. Another thing is that I will rid my own yard from plastic – this is a normal situation. And a person will really achieve this, and it will be very cool. (Interview 11)

'The support is minimal': contradictions in the experience of young people

Young people emphasize the perceived indifference of older people to the environmental agenda. Older generations, according to the narratives of young people, 'are stewing in their own issues and problems' and do not pay attention to potential threats until they actually affect them. As young people personally engage in ecological activity and attempt 'to reduce their impact on nature', they feel that their efforts are devalued by older 'stubborn, passive' individuals. This ignorance is considered extremely unjust, while taking 'real' action to care for the environment is perceived as progressive and 'simply right'.

You are sitting in your beautiful cozy little world, and the landfills are far away, it does not concern you. You do not see the air. Therefore, a significant part of the population does not care. People do not see the environment in mega-cities, they do not care. (Interview 4)

Young people are more likely to argue against the state's discrediting of the agenda. As the state is a more powerful and wealthy actor, young people expect it to assume responsibility and implement the environmental agenda. However, it is not seen as a real priority for the Russian state either in the present or in the near future.

In our country, the state itself is not very fond of talking about ecology. Many of our landfills belong to quite influential and wealthy people associated with the current government, the ruling power in Russia. It is not really profitable to talk about ecology in Russia. Therefore, the creation of infrastructure will take more time. (Interview 2)

This affects their attitude towards officials. As pointed out in the narratives, young people are mistrustful and sceptical of the way state-imposed environmental measures and infrastructures are legitimized.

It is difficult to hold out for a state that does nothing at all. It should do a little bit. Especially to the public. At least it relieves tension a little bit. But I would really like to have a waste separation system like the one in Singapore. (Interview 21)

Thus, young people face the ambivalent social and political context of performing care for the environment. Interestingly, even though the youth's pro-environmental attitudes are embedded in equivocal and de-motivating politics and state infrastructure, this does not prevent young people from engaging in ecological activity entirely. Ultimately, they tend to express proactive attitudes in opposition to the passivity of 'the ordinary people' and the state, paternalism or external enforcement. Those who are ready to take pro-environmental steps feel ambivalence in the contradictions between their internal proactivity and external constraints associated with ecological activity.

And this eternal contradiction of the laws to each other. No matter how strange it may sound. When people talk about environmental friendliness, and then try to prohibit the minimization of packaging. And you sit there and think: 'Well, somehow strange ... This is not how it works!' And you sit and wonder frankly. Therefore, everything should start with activists, and trust in the state system will appear when these activists interact with what they [deputies] really prescribe. (Interview 22)

Why do young people still engage in everyday ecological practices? What motivates them, and how do they justify it to themselves and to others? The results show that, by becoming engaged in ecological activity as an important personal and social agenda, young people become empowered, contrary to the dominant intention to keep them powerless and subordinate (literally and symbolically) within the social structure. And this ambivalence generated by the powerful empowers young people in the domain of everyday civic self-expression.

Well, generally speaking, I have always been somehow sensitive to some unfair things that are happening in the world. Probably, it nudged me to ecological problems and motivated me to think about how I could change this. (Interview 3)

'A simple man' in the care for the environment

Young people believe in the 'greening' of society globally and to some extent in Russia. For them, ecological practices are either a set of 'marginalized' practices of the 'green fanatics' (as described in the discourses about eco-activism) or a privileged activity (since zero waste

goods are generally more expensive). They believe that ecological issues are gradually becoming an everyday matter in contemporary society, which is not performed 'on the barricades' but is integrated into the ordinary course of life.

At present, it is a moral imperative and social norm to reflect upon the fact that 'we are not alone on this planet'. In this social order towards which younger people are oriented, pro-environmental activity is perceived as 'absolutely normal practice' not only at the level of value declarations but also as an everyday habit and a part of public discussion. Caring for the environment is regarded as a duty of and at the same time an opportunity for 'ordinary people'.

And people cannot even think that, firstly, they are really significant in ecology, it is not just some beautiful slogans, right? But they are really significant, they can really do something, that one drop in the sea is already cool ... (Interview 8)

For young people, the responsibility of each individual towards the environment and the attempts to make a positive contribution to protecting it (or at least minimizing the negative impacts) have become a marker of 'a good person' in modern society. This modern social actor is depicted as one who appreciates the environment and follows the principles of personal responsibility 'for oneself and for the space around' in their everyday lives. As the empirical data suggest, being responsible is crucial for young people and their interaction with the world.

You are the master – you are responsible. It is not that someone else is responsible, but you are also responsible. You are an active participant. That is, your role, it is also significant ... And if you, as an irresponsible consumer, simply consume and do not give a basis for the future, then ... I think it is irresponsible, and such people have problems not only with the environment and waste disposal, but with everything. (Interview 13)

Their understanding of what it means to be 'the master' is framed by the phrase 'my planet is me', marking a shift from reckless consumerism and wasteful predatory destruction to neatness, consciousness in daily decisions and activities. Interestingly, they express the components of biocentric value orientations (Dunlap and Catton 1979) and post-materialism (Inglehart 1995), while simultaneously maintaining the anthropocentrism framework. Moreover, such orientation is not solely

pragmatic (for instance, the desire to live in a clean environment or minimize future climate risks) and economically rational (namely, saving water or electricity in the home) but represents morality and social justice (Stern 2000). The discussion of ecological issues ultimately refers to human rights and dignity, questioning what a decent environment is and how people should act in order to achieve it.

Well, a person influences it [the state of the environment] and constantly worsens it. Accordingly, one can influence it in the opposite direction, improve it. At least when we stop turning a blind eye to problems and start talking about them, paying attention, express the attitude that we care ... I mean, we are aware that we need to sleep more, to eat well, to move – this is, probably, more inherent in us, it is more talked about. But that we must take care of the environment too – well ... But in fact we must send inquiries about the quality of water, demand to measure its quality in the laboratory, or think about what kind of air we have in our city. (Interview 24)

‘Not to be passive in this world’

Young people are not harsh on themselves and others in being environmentally engaged since they believe in the ‘small solutions theory’ as a means to achieve the eco-friendly lifestyle. Importantly, the responsibility is seen not as a burden but as an opportunity to be a ‘civilized citizen’ and ‘a good person’.

And at some point, something clicks in your head, and you think: ‘Is everything really so bad? Do I need to do it?’ But then you come back to reality and you realize that: ‘Well, yes, it needs to be done, because if not me, then who?’ (Interview 7)

‘Elementary, simple practices’ are an individualized tactic of managing ecological problems, making ecological activity a habit and embedding it in one’s daily routine. ‘Simple solutions’ seem to be a more worthy and effective strategy ‘than doing nothing’ and passively witnessing the unfolding of the environmental crisis. By making a ‘small but personal contribution’ to protect the environment, young people emphasize their intrinsic personal interest in the environmental agenda, to attempt to

make a personal contribution ‘to help the environment’ or at least try to feel engaged.

Because being a couch expert and saying that everything is so bad, but doing nothing is generally the worst thing that can happen. (Interview 17)

Ecological attitudes, values or emotions are essential, but the principle ‘you are what you do, not what you say’ is fundamental in relation to the environment. For young people, ecological practices become a crucial indicator of one’s mindfulness, as they expect other people and themselves to ‘do at least something’.

It was kind of romantic, yes. Then I realized that this is a big problem, and this problem needs to be solved, right? And it is in our hands – whether to solve this problem or not ... (Interview 1)

Embedded in the context of capitalist economic systems, consumption is a powerful framework, anchored to the idea of sustainability and ‘being green’ (Chappells and Trentmann 2015; Welch and Warde 2015). Within everyday ecological activity, young people engage in zero waste consumption, upcycling or the sharing economy (Spaargaren 2003; Chappells and Trentmann 2015). Their ‘green choice’ in the everyday domain becomes a tactic of opposition to violent environmental destruction and passivity in relation to the ecological crisis.

My sister, for example, asked me to buy bananas. She is like, ‘Buy the ones in the packaging’. Haha, hell no! I will never buy bananas in packaging! I told her: ‘Are you serious? Why? Oh, why?’ Or there is an orange or something like this, that they try to put into an extra plastic bag. Well, why? This worldview, I do not know ... Maybe, it is such short-term thinking, ignorance to what you leave behind. (Interview 23)

In pro-environmental discussions and activity, young people not only ask themselves ‘What kind of person am I?’ but also ‘What kind of environment do I want to see around me?’ Here we recognize the paradigm of the actor in modernity, who works on the ‘self as a reflexive project’ (Giddens 1991). In personal ecological actions, which are elementary yet meaningful, actors constitute the ‘self’, approaching the desired ideal of a modern person and citizen, and define who they are for themselves and

others. Here, the 'internal' ambivalence of pro-environmental activity of the youth can be identified. On the one hand, as was mentioned above, young people depoliticize ecological practices since they are available for everyone and represent the modern social morality. At the same time, the narratives suggest that the civil dimension is also inherent to pro-environmental activity.

I would call it the 'attribute of a decent person'. That is, a conscious person who understands what he is doing and why. Everyone sees it in their own way, what a decent person is, but usually this person is good. And if you are good, then you must in some sense be responsible for the environment. And every person wants to be good. I think that precisely this concern for the environment should be such a basic concept of goodness. (Interview 18)

The worldview of self-management and empowerment, specific to young people, seems to be applicable to ecological activity as well. It becomes a pragmatic act of investing in their future and at the same time gives them the space to be proactive in shaping their personal life courses and the social order around them. Hence, pro-environmental behaviour shapes the proactive subject since one acquires agency in promoting the ecological agenda.

'Find like-minded people'

As 'no man is an island', young people seek individualization but not atomization in ecological activity: they try to be independently responsible, while relating to the community around eco-friendly activity. On a macro-scale, private practices make societal changes cumulatively. Given the importance of individual contributions, the latter are conceived as 'part of the overall picture, a fraction of the whole' of environmental protection.

This [engagement in waste sorting] gives you confidence, the hope that you do it for a reason, that it helps. And it helps not only you, but also other people, and this also helps our country and the planet. (Interview 7)

The ecological domain is a field of symbolic struggles in which actors distance themselves from 'non-ecological' people. However, the ideal eco-friendly social order, depicted by young people, is 'organically supported' by all social actors: the public, influencers, businesses and the state. All

actors are foreseen to be in dialogue with each other and responsive to ecological issues.

And everything should be in balance. But in such a balance that they interact without harming the planet, the object on which they are working. Now, if the object – the planet – will feel better from this kind of interaction, then it is a good thing. (Interview 8)

Ecological participation becomes for young people a means to engender solidarity by becoming symbolically integrated into the eco-community and being ‘part of something bigger’.

Discussion and conclusions

At present young people have limited resources and channels to express their political and environmental concerns. This study explains how they justify their ecological engagement via socio-political activity. Drawing on interviews with ecologically oriented young people from Moscow, we suggest that everyday ecological practices are understood by them as enacted in an ambivalent social environment (the ‘external’ ambivalence). Moreover, daily ecological activity is ambivalent itself, being both a politically neutral moral issue and at the same time an actively politicized field of civic and political representation for young people.

Our results are consistent with previous studies which suggest that everyday ecological activity is embedded in the concept of a proactive, individualized and responsible citizen (Welch and Warde 2010; [Soneryd and Uggla 2015](#)), while personal engagement enables individuals to enact the pro-environmental social order they yearn for. The results go in line with the studies, showing that young people uphold the idea of personal success and opportunity ([Matza 2010](#)). Due to these values they are extremely concerned about environmental problems as an unpredictable yet serious risk to the global and, importantly, their own personal futures. The narratives of young people illustrate that they have a ‘pessimistic attitude, but it includes hope for the future’. The importance of practical involvement seems to be a crucial insight of the study, highlighting the contribution of the individual to improving the ecological domain and taking charge of the global and their own personal futures, life chances and prosperity. In addition, young people demonstrate a gradual shift in their value and citizenship orientations, expressing components of biocentric ([Dunlap and Catton 1979](#)) and

post-materialistic (Inglehart 1995) attitudes, demanding civic activity as part of their personal contribution to positive social changes (Rudel et al. 2011; Nartova 2019).

The 'implicit' ambivalence of ecological practices exhibited by young people is depicted by the fact that they appeal to a moral norm of 'a simple man' distanced from the current controversial politics, and at the same time to citizen participation. At first sight, these justifications, rooted in moral values or pragmatic considerations, are apolitical. However, the ecological domain becomes politicized as, in the perceptions of young people, the state distances itself from the environmental issue. But for young people, caring for the environment is framed as a significant issue, and they prioritize their intrinsic personal pro-environmental choices in opposition to both paternalism and external enforcement. Remaining 'ordinary citizens', they support their personal claims and express their values and attitudes (Spaargaren 2003; Haugaard 2012), consequently reshaping power relations in the ecological domain. For them, ecological practices become tools for their civic and political representation and empowerment in the ambivalent social position between external resistance to the state agenda and internal pro-environmental attitudes. In this case, 'power' should be conceptualized as the capacity for action: 'power to' as emancipation, rather than 'power over' as dominance over other individuals or coercion (Haugaard 2015; Ledyayev 2019). More broadly, young people make political decisions by their everyday actions (Eliasoph 1998), being explicitly apolitical and at the same time acquiring power in trying to change the world around them, hence managing the 'implicit' ambivalence of ecological practices.

Furthermore, pro-environmental engagement allows ecologically concerned young people to take part in significant social activity (Spaargaren 2003; Welch and Warde 2015), rooted in expressing citizenship, collectively preserving the world and changing it for the better. Actors exercise 'power with' as the ability to act in accordance with others and discuss the issue with them (Haugaard 2015). Remaining a highly politicized field of power struggles, for young people ecological activity constitutes a space of communication and civil collaboration.

To conclude, young people make use of the 'implicit' ambivalence of ecological practices and their understandings since, even without making an explicit political statement, they express their desire for a particular type of civic engagement and citizenship, in contrast to the present distrust of official political discourse. Pro-environmental activity becomes a tool of civic empowerment and representation for young people. We argue that it is through ecological activity that young people communicate

their political claims, namely, their demand for justice and the right to a decent quality of life as a manifestation of socio-democratic values (Gudkov et al. 2020). Furthermore, this has the potential to establish local grassroots communities and movements, indicating a redistribution of power dispositions.

The example of proactive young people suggests that the imaginary representations of the eco-friendly social order can become the basis for real social changes (subject to the relevant efforts and support). Based on socially shared expectations, individuals structure their activity, thereby investing in foreseen 'imagined futures' (Beckert 2013). An important task of social researchers will be to study the vector of these changes and the subsequent dynamics of power in the field.

It is worth noting that the empowerment revealed in the interviews is not entirely straightforward, as young people still express contradictory attitudes towards ecological engagement. This stems from the fact that environmental responsibility has to be shared among social actors, while the 'politics of choice' approach exaggerates the reflexivity and autonomy of individual actors (Maniates 2001; Welch and Warde 2015).

Young people recognize the limitations of their agency in protecting the environment through personal actions only. Even though they perceive eco-friendly activity as an intrinsic interest, and while environmental responsibility 'does not kill you, but encourages you to keep going and strive', at some point caring for the environment becomes a duty in the negative sense of a burden. Ecological activity is seen by young people as resistance to the state (namely, to its ecological ignorance and passivity), but they still hope that the authorities will eventually follow a pro-environmental path and so all actors will act in accordance.

Ecological activity also turns out to be functionally ambivalent in its implicit meanings for young people, simultaneously constraining and empowering, assigning actors the obligation to protect the environment and maintain their engagement (Ledeneva 2014). We suggest that the particular focus on how multiple justifications and modes of power coexist, shaping the transitional yet specific patterns in ecological engagement, is productive for fostering the pro-environmental agenda and activity, relevant for the Russian institutional setting.

The ambiguity of personal responsibility exhibited by young people might also stem from the peculiar socio-cultural Russian context. In the case of young Muscovites, a combination of values and patterns from Soviet, contemporary Russian and Western models is probably captured (Yanitsky 2011). The study primarily refers to the context of the modern market society, capturing the deliberate actions of individuals who

attempt to assume responsibility for the environment. They are not motivated by the economic deficit or limited market options, which would be the case with older people who experienced the Soviet economic system.

Limitations

Since we rely on the narratives of young, ecologically oriented people, the results of the study might represent a pretty optimistic picture of personal pro-environmental behaviour. Young people tend to idealize eco-friendly activity. Still, it indicates a gradual shift towards the civic dimension of pro-environmental engagement and concerns. To ensure a more thorough analysis, we deliberately limited the scope of our research to proactive and ecologically responsible young Moscow residents.

Furthermore, young people do not always reflect on the meanings of ecological practices within their daily routines. Occasionally during the fieldwork, they failed to articulate their attitudes towards daily forms of activity. This highlights the problem of the answers given, or implicit meanings which eluded the research.

Due to the ethnographic framework of the research, we intentionally accepted the perspectives of the individuals and did not attempt to depict 'objective' ecological engagement. Additional experts from the field of ecology, climate studies, biology as well as political science in the sphere of ecological regulation could make a significant contribution to understanding the field and counterbalance the ideal-typical understanding of caring for the environment, translated by the young people.

As for the perspective of this study, we did not capture the macro context of the ecological activity and did not pay detailed attention to the perspectives of other social actors. The power dynamics in the field require further research, unpacking the whole spectrum of power relations between multiple institutional actors and the ways they frame, articulate and negotiate the environmental agenda.

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