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Lebedeva Daria

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From responsabilization to responsibility: justifications of everyday ecological practices of Moscow youth and worth of proactivity

Lebedeva Daria 

Department of Economic Sociology, National Research University - Higher School of Economics (HSE University), Moscow, Russia

ABSTRACT

In modernity, responsabilization has become a tool for addressing public issues in citizens' access to public goods, including the sphere of environmental protection. In Russia, having insufficient institutional, legislative, political, and discursive support, the emphasis has lately been put on the role of individuals in protecting the environment. Taking account of the ambivalent context of environmental activity, this paper aims to reconstruct the justifications that environmentally engaged youth in Moscow attach to their environmental engagement. We focus on the case of Moscow as a 'bridge' between the Western templates and the local institutional setting. The empirical basis of the research is 36 in-depth interviews with Muscovites, who are persistently engaged in caring for the environment. The empirical results show that the environmental engagement of the youth is justified as an anchor of one's identity of a reflexive, autonomous, self-managing subject. The results allow to broaden the concept of responsibility and citizenship among the youth in the states where a clash between neoliberal policies of responsabilization and the actual institutional context can be observed.

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, environmental problems have become particularly significant in global public discourse. States and international organizations articulate the urgency of ecological problems that have become all the more pressing (Lockie 2015). The environmental agenda is global and requires all the nations to engage, without it no single country's activity will matter for the environmental change (Zinn 2016; Lidskog and Waterton 2016).

Due to the states' economic and institutional crisis as well as market failures in managing environmental issues, personal individual responsibility has become a tool for addressing public issues, including the sphere of environmental protection (Dean 2010; Soneryd and Ugglå 2015). This mode of governance of responsabilization is aimed to create mobilized, self-sufficient, and autonomous citizens, responsible for their wellbeing (Shamir 2008; Birk 2018; Zinn 2020). Importantly, a shift to the governance mechanism of

CONTACT Lebedeva Daria  dlebedeva@hse.ru  Department of Economic Sociology, National Research University of Wyss Skola Economics, 20 Myasnitskaya str., 101000, Moscow, Russia

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responsibilization started in advanced capitalist societies as a tool of neoliberal countries. Individual activities are systematically enforced by strong policies, consistent narrative of individual responsibility, and social institutions, empowering individuals (Dean 2010; Birk 2018). Respectively, if neoliberal policies are not enforced, individual responsibility is poorly attributed and exercised at the micro-level.

In this regard, it is important to remain reflexive with respect to the social grounds of advancing the environmental agenda by studying political regimes that do not completely correspond to the institutional pattern of models of capitalism. In particular, the case of Russia is illustrative of this contradiction (Blackburn and Petersson 2022). In environmental politics, the scholars claim, the government's actions are vague, supported by neither institutional reforms nor prominent narrative of responsabilization, and environmental activism is being prosecuted as a hazard to the state legitimacy (Tynkkynen 2014; Tulaeva, Tysiachniouk, and Henry 2017; Newell and Henry 2016; Tulaeva and Snarski 2022). The low effectiveness of environmental and climate action of the Russian state is exacerbated at the micro-level by the weak civil participation of the population (Kulmala et al. 2014; Mersiyanova 2018; Yudin 2021). However, the public discourse of caring for the environment still puts the load of caring for the environment on firms, local communities, and individuals (Newell and Henry 2016; Tulaeva and Snarski 2022). This contradiction between the discourse of responsabilization in caring for the environment and the actually implemented policies in Russia, we assume, shifts the perceptions of individuals' actions. In the controversies of Russia, people may engage in the same ecological practices (such as separate waste collection or ethical shopping) based on different assumptions and consequently attach to them ambiguous meanings. The given study investigates the indicated contradiction between micro and macro level of sociological analysis from the perspective of the micro-level of ecological practices. This study aims to reveal the justifications that are attributed to individuals' environmental engagement. Environmental engagement refers in this paper to the devoted and meaningful participation of an individual in practices that are aimed to protect the environment, which is based on one's intrinsic values and a proactive position to change the existing social order (Adler and Goggin 2005; Clément and Zhelnina 2020).

In this study, we particularly investigate the case of the youth as an outstanding social group in terms of its environmental engagement. They appear to be more enthusiastic and ambitious in their pro-environmental attitudes and behavior (EVS 2020) and engaged in a wide range of daily ecological practices (FOM 2021). To capture the stable meanings of environmental engagement, we focus on the proactive individuals, who persistently participate in caring for the environment, and introduce the threshold for the duration of activity of more than one year. Also, this study particularly addresses Moscow residents because currently Moscow is the 'bridge' between the Western templates and the local Russian institutional conditions. It is considered one of the richest in economic resources regions, a site for piloting institutional models for the further implementation of successful practices in other regions (Zubarevich 2010). Thus, the aim of the study is to reconstruct the justifications that environmentally engaged youth in Moscow attach to their environmental engagement.

The paper is divided into five sections: it begins with a brief description of the theoretical framework of the research, then, the research methodology (data collection and analysis technique, sampling, and recruitment) is outlined. The results of the empirical

stage of the study are presented in the third section. Following this, the results are conceptualized through the prism of the theoretical framework. Finally, the limitations, as well as the possible directions for further research are outlined.

Theoretical framework

Macro and micro foundations of environmental engagement

Within neoliberal ideology, governance and political economy are tied together, aimed to construct the particular subject of modernity. This subject is seen as a self-managerial entrepreneurial project, guided by personal maximization, is self-directing and autonomous, exhibits agency (Dean 2010; Birk 2018; Batchelor et al. 2020). Responsibilization is a technique of shifting responsibility from the state to the non-state actors, making them accountable for dealing with public risks as a part of individual biographies (Kelly 2001; Zinn 2020). Empowered individuals, in their turn, are expected to learn in the process of political socialization and then exhibit attitudes toward proactivity and responsibility. Importantly, the policies of responsibilization are based on the assumptions that the society has social institutions and consistent discourse of responsibility (Dean 2010; Birk 2018).

The rethinking of human-environment relations, a critical reflection on the paradigm of human exemptionalism led to increased environmental awareness and engagement of individuals (Pellow and Brehm 2013; Lockie 2015). Factors like acute environmental risks, post-materialism, and political-economic processes contribute to this growth (Inglehart 1995; Zinn 2016). Developed countries play a crucial role in promoting the global environmental agenda as part of modern economic systems. In the circumstances of economic and institutional crises, responsibilization has become a tool for addressing public issues in citizens' access to public goods, including the sphere of environmental protection (Shamir 2008; Soneryd and Ugglå 2015). It is realized in the everyday routine practices that are close to individuals' identity (Shamir 2008; Soneryd and Ugglå 2015). Being eco-friendly is currently normative, and responsibilization mechanisms successfully foster environmental engagement by appealing to individuals' self (Shamir 2008; Soneryd and Ugglå 2015). Consumption and housework play a significant role in implementing environmentally friendly behaviors in one's private space (Hargreaves 2011; Welch and Warde 2015; Soneryd and Ugglå 2015; Evans, Welch, and Swaffield 2017; Bissmont 2020). The concept of 'everyday politics' serves here to expand the notion of political engagement, encouraging individuals to question political ideas, values, and practices through the principle 'think globally, act locally' (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014; Clément and Zhelnina 2020). Environmental activity, in this regard, is also seen as a form of civic engagement.

Young people play a crucial role in the modern social order as they turn out to be trendsetters in the labor market, in politics and public sphere. By mid-twentieth century, the 'youth' became a value itself, so their personality traits are '*desirable, if not imperative*' (Blatterer 2010, 71). They are characterized by flexibility, mobility, agility, risk-taking, and thirst for change (Blatterer 2010; Ikonen and Nikunen 2019). These specific personal characteristics make them highly conducive to the discourse of personal responsibility and responsibilization.

The political participation of the youth, its forms, frequency, and institutional foundations are drastically influenced by the patterns of their political socialization. Studies suggest that their exposure to political information is often short-term, fragmented, digitalized, and inclusive due to their reliance on social media (Copeland and Feezell 2017; Andersen et al. 2021). The scholars also suggest that *'digital media enable "connective action," which facilitates crowd-enabled, non-electoral political participation'* (Copeland and Feezell 2017, 15). Contrary to the perception of youth being detached from politics (Pilkington and Pollock 2015; Andersen et al. 2021), research indicates that they are motivated to participate but engage in politics in non-traditional ways (Bennett 2008; Blatterer 2010; Cohen and Kahne 2012; Andersen et al. 2021). In particular, the youths tend to participate in case-oriented and short-term activities, they gravitate to 'autonomous' and 'digital' citizenship in nongovernmental areas such as volunteer work, consumer activism, fundraising, demonstrations, discussions on social media (Bennett 2008; Kyroglou and Henn 2022; Andersen et al. 2021). Thus, the youth are far from politically inactive; on the contrary, they are eager to find 'their' way in order to make the world a more livable place.

The youths are highly concerned about their future and the associated uncertainties (Cook 2016; Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016). Extensive research focusing on the environmental attitudes of young people highlights their worries about life chances (Threadgold 2012; Henn, Sloam, and Nunes 2022). Kyroglou and Henn (2022) demonstrate that young individuals are drawn towards political consumption as a means of engaging in pro-environmental behavior. Furthermore, online activities, boycotting, and signing petitions are prominent among environmentally mobilized youths (De Moor 2017; Marquardt 2020; Kyroglou and Henn 2022; Boulianne and Ohme 2022; Sloam, Pickard, and Henn 2022; Scherman, Valenzuela, and Rivera 2022). Being pushed away from electoral forms of political engagement (Andersen et al. 2021), young people channel their environmental engagement through non-governmental and individualized activities.

Empirical context: Russia on its way to environmentalism

Russian environmental policy has faced numerous challenges and ambivalences throughout its history (Weiner 1999; Josephson et al. 2013; Beumers et al. 2018; Tulaeva and Snarski 2022). Scholars highlight the lack of a clear federal environmental strategy, extensive industrial development, weak environmental protection institutions, and poor regulatory system in the field of nature management (Henry 2010; Tynkkynen 2014; Newell and Henry 2016; Tulaeva and Snarski 2022). Moreover, since 2012, environmental activism has faced consistent oppression, ecoNGOs have been disregarded as legitimate participants in environmental discussions (Tulaeva, Tysiachniouk, and Henry 2017). Citizens' general dissatisfaction with politics and distrust of it, highly atomized communities, and weak democratic institutions considerably constrained opportunities for individuals to formulate civic requests from below (Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, and Erpyleva 2014; Kulmala et al. 2014; Mersiyanova 2018; Yudin 2021). In response to the shortcomings in centralized environmental modernization, grassroots movements aim to fill the gaps by actively engaging the resource of the population. Grassroots environmental initiatives distance themselves from state structures and gain social capital through volunteering, charity, and local citizen involvement (Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, and Erpyleva 2014; Tulaeva, Tysiachniouk, and Henry 2017; Ermolaeva, Basheva, and Korunova 2021).

In these circumstances, citizens' environmental engagement acquires multiple meanings from biocentric caring for nature to defending political interests of national minorities (Tulaeva and Snarski 2022), expressing lifestyle (Tykanova and Khokhlova 2020), protecting quality of life (Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, and Erpyleva 2014; Halauniova and Chernysheva 2017; Ermolaeva, Basheva, and Korunova 2021). Environmental protests in Russia are rare due to the political and physical risks to individuals (Chmel, Klimova, and Mitrokhina 2020). The scholars note the rapid spread of strategies like household waste management, ethical and 'green' consumption, especially in megacities (Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, and Erpyleva 2014; Shabanova 2019; 2021; 2023; Pupysheva, Zakharova, and Kuznetsova 2023).

Research indicates that the Russian youth is a barometer of the position of Russian society in relation to the international agenda (Omelchenko 2020; Omelchenko and Lisovskaya 2022). They were raised in a period of relative economic stability in the 2010s and, respectively, were taught the values of freedom, autonomy, free choice, and personal responsibility (Matza 2012). They are involved in global youth trends, demonstrate proactivity in exploring and transforming the world around them (Nartova and Fatekhov 2021), and exhibit a strong request for democratic changes in social structure (Krupets et al. 2017; Omelchenko 2020; Omelchenko 2021). Scholars also highlight their predisposition to new forms of civic solidarity and citizenship, which involve moving beyond private life and actively developing civil society to foster positive social change by challenging existing dispositions of power (Omelchenko and Pilkington 2013; Krupets et al. 2017; Nartova 2019; Omelchenko 2021).

Similar to the Western youth discussed above (Bennett 2008; Pilkington and Pollock 2015; Copeland and Feezell 2017; Andersen et al. 2021), young Russians are gradually shifting away from traditional forms of political participation like in elections to online activity and political consumerism due to the absence in the arena of official politics of goals and strategies that are important to them (Andreeva and Kosterina 2006; Erpyleva 2014; Nartova 2019; Omelchenko 2021). Thus, youth's activities are directed inwards toward the construction of their identity in lifestyle, labor, and leisure practices, connection with communities and infrastructures (Halauniova and Chernysheva 2017; Nartova 2019; Omelchenko 2020; Tykanova and Khokhlova 2020; Omelchenko 2021; Ermolaeva, Basheva, and Korunova 2021; Pupysheva, Zakharova, and Kuznetsova 2023). Young people aged 18–30, especially those living in large cities, are more inclined to engage in everyday practices of ethical consumption (namely, to prefer goods from responsible manufacturers, pay attention to information about ethical standards by manufacturers, and pay more for ethical goods) (Shabanova 2023).

Materials and methods

The study was carried out in a qualitative paradigm. The methodological tradition of grounded theory was applied, enabling an empirically based development of the existing conceptual explanation of the research focus (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2006).

Sampling and recruitment

The research methodology employed theoretical sampling, which allowed for a systematic reflection on the emerging codes and categories derived from the data (Charmaz

2006). The core of the sample included young people aged 16–24, residing in Moscow, who had been actively engaging in everyday ecological practices for at least one year. Following the grounded theory principles, specific individual traits that would differentiate participants in their environmental engagement were identified in the previous research (Stern 2000; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002; Carfagna et al. 2014; Shabanova 2019; 2021; Ivanova, Agissova, and Sautkina 2020). These initial selection criteria were gender, subjective assessment of economic well-being, level and programme of education, area of residence. Additionally, participants were differentiated by the actual ecological activities they participated in, the frequency of engagement, and the approximate time spent on such practices. Additional traits that appeared to differentiate individuals in their environmental engagement were identified through the analysis of empirical data. These included household composition (living alone, with family, or with peers), childhood experiences related to ecological activities, political orientation, and involvement in activism within other social spheres (such as electoral activities, pro-feminist movements, and LGBTQ+ activism). The variation in these socio-demographic characteristics proved to be valuable in enriching the data and establishing connections between individuals' structural characteristics and their justifications for environmental engagement.

The inclusion of negative cases, individuals who do not align with the research focus and provide contrasting perspectives to the observations of the core sample, proved to be a valuable tool in broadening the empirical view of the problem and identifying patterns in the data (Charmaz 2006, 102). Interviews with individuals who were not actively involved in daily ecological practices, held negative attitudes towards the environmental agenda, or belonged to older age groups were conducted. Their narratives provided additional topics for discussion in subsequent interviews and enriched the development of explanatory hypotheses.

Informants' recruitment occurred in social networks, we used groups dedicated to environmental topics and various types of ecological practices (separate waste collection, zero waste, and eco-volunteering) on V Kontakte (the most popular Russian social network), Instagram, and Facebook as an entrance to the empirical field. Additionally, we recruited individuals in offline ecological communities on the sites of activities (such as the recycling projects Sobirator and Ecosborka).

In total, 36 in-depth interviews were conducted. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the sample according to key socio-demographic characteristics and environmental engagement. The full list of informants is available in the supplementary materials.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through in-depth interviews. The major blocks of the guide covered the following topics: environmental concern and attitudes to the agenda; environmental awareness and practices: engagement strategies, biography in the activity, motivations, and barriers; subjective assessment of necessary and sufficient resources; conceptions of environmental responsibility. Routines, bodily experience, and competencies were highlighted; thus, individuals' biography of ecological practices was the key to the meanings of activity.

The interviews were conducted in-person and online via Zoom depending on the privacy and safety preferences of informants, ranging from 45 to 100 min. No contribution

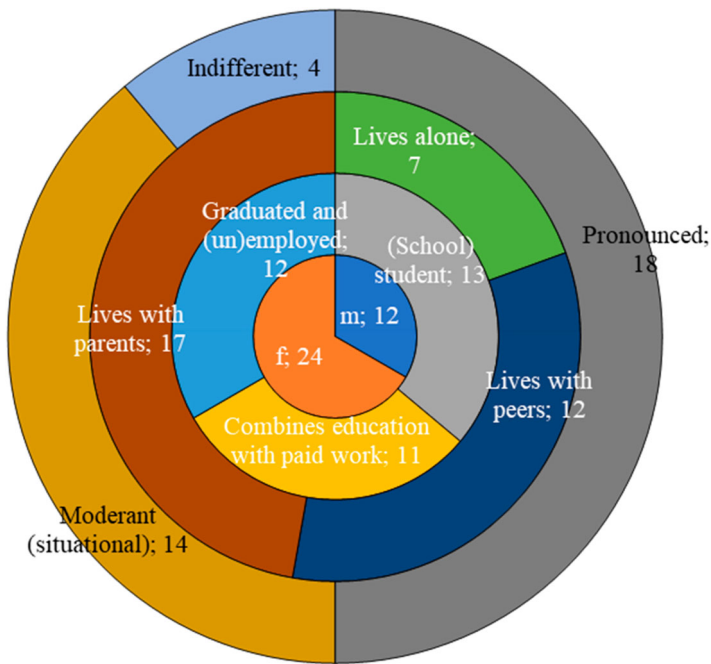


Figure 1. Distribution of the sample.

for participation was paid, still, the informants were highly involved in the conversation and talked extensively about their experience and concerns in caring for the environment. The interviews were fully transcribed in Russian. Ethical issues that might have arisen within the study are mainly connected with the privacy of participants, which was addressed by the informed consent of informants to participate in the study and record the conversation, and further by the anonymization of the data in the text by changing names and omitting personal details.

The data analysis employed grounded theory techniques to develop an explanation from the empirical data. For that, the patterns deduced from the data were constantly compared to each other and to the existing theoretical explanations. The analysis was abductive as throughout the iterative stage-by-stage coding (Charmaz 2006). During the stages of open and axial coding, the negative cases helped to highlight, identify, and accurately interpret codes and concepts.

Results: justifications for environmental engagement among the Moscow youth

'The support is minimal': social context of environmental engagement

The interviewees actively seek opportunities for ecological participation and turn to state institutions as providers of public goods. However, they express frustration over the insufficient state capacity to embed environmental care principles such as separate waste collection or zero waste consumption. Yet, the informants note that despite

one's financial capabilities, alternatives for environmental care exist referring to bins for recyclable and general waste due to the 'waste reform' or non-profit recycling projects.

The 'garbage reform', initiated in 2019, aimed to reorganize the municipal waste-management system (Semenova 2021). Officials claimed that the introduction of dual-flow separate waste collection improved the municipal solid waste systems. However, the experts in the field of waste management doubt that ecological reform managed to provide ecological infrastructure and, deliver the principles of separate waste collection and the importance of personal contribution within the population:

The questions of environmental protection are mainly dealt with by those who are directly affected by it: 'If I have a landfill under my window, I am against it. If not – then I do not care. I will buy a huge number of plastic items made of an unknown material and throw them all away. I can afford it'. After the 90s there appeared a phrase: 'You need not to spend less but to earn more'. (Kirill, m, 34, Moscow, works in The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment)

Even though the young informants admit positive changes in the ecological agenda, their perceptions of ecological infrastructures are filled with distrust. The informant expresses the feeling of detachment from the state and suspense that it is not interested in the improvement of citizens' welfare:

I have a selfish desire to leave the country, to go to some kind of Germany, where there are not only bins for plastic, but several of these bins for different types of plastic. This is exactly the level of recycling that we should probably all strive for. But this is done not just to show other countries how cool they are. This is done so that people live with quality. And, probably, the biggest problem in Russia is that our citizens do not understand that it is possible to live and get high on life[truly enjoy the quality of life each day instead of struggling to get through each day]. (Julia, f, 24, lives alone, engaged in separate waste collection (further – SWC), pronounced ecological concern)

In the narratives, participants highlight that the implementation of the ecological reform 'passed by them', they describe in detail the sharp lack of trust in the environmental initiatives and challenges of daily ecological lifestyle. This hinders their utilization of the established ecological infrastructure. However, some interviewees continue using them due to economic circumstances such as access to ecological and zero-waste shops, and recycling centers.

Informants strive for a social contract in which the state creates favorable conditions for individuals for personal responsibility. What needs to be altered at the state level for individuals' engagement, the interviewees believe, is the implementation of unified unambiguous rules and regulations in the field of environmental care that would stimulate proactivity and penalize the 'dishonest evaders':

In Russia, we have not only corruption, but also vague laws. And people try to avoid rules all the time. And then you are smarter and get more respect. (Ksenia1, f, 23, marketing and PR, occasionally engaged in SWC, pronounced civil participation and ethical considerations)

This, in their understanding, is the key to individuals' environmental engagement, and their sense of responsibility towards the environment and society. The interviewees are cautious about explicit political participation because public activism is seen as dangerous. Instead, they turn to horizontal local communities like university eco-clubs and area cleanings as more feasible means of engagement. Student interviewees highlight

extracurricular activities as a means to discuss and enact their environmental protection intentions. For example, several interviewees initiated the introduction of separate waste collection on their campuses. Yet, participants outside of the education system, such as university graduates or those with a school education, are unable to participate in these initiatives. It significantly limits their space for realizing personal responsibility in caring for the environment and forces them to either give up eco-proactivity or look for other channels for its actualization.

The capacity for individual proactivity is also acquired by interviewees in business, which, according to the interviewees, compensates for the lack of state infrastructure. In the narratives, participants tend to align with left-wing political orientations (justice, equality) and at the same time facetiously call themselves 'bad capitalists'. They support ESG trends and rely on market mechanisms to make ecological activity accessible to the general public. At the same time, they recognize the existence of greenwashing, unconscionability of businesses, and their dishonest exploitation of eco-labeling.

The systemic conditions contextualize and determine the practices as well as their meanings. We assume that in the lack of state's support of their initiative and personal responsibility, young informants normalize their individualization in caring for the environment. In the following section, we will demonstrate how engagement in ecological practices reflects the youth's understanding of their proactivity in Russian society.

Individualization as the grounds for responsibility

Our interviewees, as we showed above, find themselves in harsh circumstances when they 'have to rely on themselves' in terms of Russia's lack of responsabilization tendencies. Moreover, the data suggests that the participants are critical of individuals who employ inconsistencies in infrastructure as 'an excuse' to avoid engaging in ecological practices.

By engaging in ecological practices, the young interviewees distance themselves not only from the state but also from people around them, even in their nearest circles such as parents. This is particularly evident when conflicts arise within households between different generations. This conflict is likewise explicated in the narratives of older interviewees, who grew up and have lived most of their life in the USSR and whose daily practices are rooted in the principles of deficit and paternalism as well as the people's slogan 'initiative is punishable'.

Back in the USSR, we handed the glass bottles over for the second usage. Of course, we didn't throw them away, they cost money. If it was for free, I think that not so many bottles would go back into use. And these string bags, we used them because there was nothing else. We didn't have any plastic bags. We couldn't take a plastic bag and then throw it away – we simply didn't have them. (Lubov', f, 65, pensioner, occasionally engaged in SWC, persistently teaches her grandchildren to be eco-responsible)

In these conflicts, young informants attempt 'to open the eyes of other people at the new world', but it is seen as a hard task. Thus, distancing themselves from the 'ignorant' people, the participants lose a huge part of ties with the significant others. It is marked by them as a 'price' for pursuing their pro-environmental values and lifestyle.

Still, the more the interviewees try participating in caring for the environment, the more they perceive themselves as marginalized in comparison to the 'average Russian'.

Marginalization as a state of living in the margins of mainstream society in their case stems from the fact that the young participants feel themselves between two important social groups: between, on the one hand, the general Russians, to which they belong in a civic sense, but who do not follow the principles of caring for the environment and weakly support the ideas of individual responsibility, and, on the other hand, the ‘progressive Western youth’ who are more likely to uphold both environmentalism and personal responsibility. For example, one of the respondents claims:

If tomorrow I’m a marginal if I throw a glass bottle in the wrong place, I’m okay with that. Our society still thinks that doing something as non-ecological as possible is very cool. And it annoys me. Such adult boyish games are aimless. (Ksenia2, f, 25, teacher in elementary school, occasionally engaged in SWC, actively engaged in zero waste consumption, pronounced ecological reflexivity and anxiety)

However, interviews show that feeling marginalized does not discourage young people from participating in ecological practices. Based on empirical data, it is evident that interviewees with strong pro-environmental attitudes prefer individualized forms of ecological activity. They search, mostly online, for examples and instructions, which they further enact ‘on their own’. They also highly value individualization, as it allows them to acquire and feel responsibility for their actions by doing ‘at least something’.

I have not bought anything in a one-time packaging in a long time. As a rule, I fill in my bottle from the filter at home, and then carry it with me. It is hard for me to carry my backpack. If I want coffee, but I didn’t take my reusable cup with me, I try to somehow change my mind and make myself to ‘unwant’ coffee. (Alina, f, 22, international relations and ecology, volunteer, actively engaged in SWC and zero waste)

‘Small but personal contribution’: the possibilities and limitations of individual responsibility

The environmentally engaged informants still are not ‘maximalists’ in their everyday practices. They strive to avoid extremes in eco-friendly lifestyle by focusing on ‘small actions’, they establish consistent routines that engage in ecological practices. This is particularly important in the Russian context of ongoing risks and frequent infrastructure breakdowns as ‘something always goes wrong’ technically and symbolically. Bitterly realizing the limitations and challenges of the environmental agenda and consistent responsabilization in Russian society, the young participants acknowledge the significance of their personal impact in terms of ‘sufficiency’ and ‘sensible participation’.

Such a way of thinking ‘I’ll rid the whole world of plastic’ – it’s not normal, in my opinion. It usually means that the person will not do anything. Another thing is ‘I will rid my yard of plastic’ – this is a normal situation. I believe that this person will really achieve it. (Michail, m, 23, student, active pro-environmental position, actively engaged in SWC and zero waste, vegetarian, volunteers at the recycling project)

The interviewees can clearly identify their own area of their responsibility, such as their homes, streets, neighbourhoods, universities, and workplaces. They prioritize caring for the environment ‘here and now’, even though they are future-oriented.

It’s sad that the efforts are difficult to commensurate with the benefits that can be obtained from them. The bin for recyclable waste under my window does not imply at all that the

plastic bottles will be recycled. However, that doesn't stop me from the idea of putting my recyclable trash in them. (Sergey, m, 22, actively engaged in SWC, studies sustainability, pronounced ecological and civil responsibility)

The 'small, but sensible' impact is enacted in several practices at the household domain. Firstly, household waste management, including separate waste collection, is seen as a crucial strategy of ecological activity. It is closely connected to one's living space and well-being, so personal waste is perceived both as an everyday hazard to security yet an opportunity for expressing responsibility. Importantly, these practices are emphasized by the participants to be available to everyone, regardless of one's financial and infrastructural limitations or position in society. Secondly, consumption is narrated as a crucial strategy to be eco-friendly throughout everyday activity. Participants emphasize that prior to recycling, it is crucial not to create and exacerbate waste problems in the first place. Practices such as zero waste, fair trade, upcycling, reselling are seen as the 'bare minimum' of one's caring for the environment in the modern market society. Markets are perceived in the narratives as suppliers of goods as well as measures of one's personal impact.

Thus, in the practices of caring for the environment, the interviewees reflect on their place in it and view personal responsibility as an expression of their personality. The participants aspire to embody traits such as reflexivity, consciousness, flexibility, and future orientation, which they discursively associate with personal growth and success through personal efforts and responsibility for one's actions, autonomy, and self-expression.

For me, this eco-friendly way of life is an attribute of a new world that I can implement into my everyday life. This is a feeling of moving forward – that we are developing, the world is becoming cleaner, our life is becoming more pleasant. For me, happiness is in development. (Regina, f, 19, occasionally engaged in SWC and zero waste, runs own selective second-hand store)

Discussion

Our empirical findings align with the prevailing discourse among Russian youth, which is characterized by disenchantment with the state, skepticism, and pessimism about its actions and policies (Andreeva and Kosterina 2006; Nartova and Fatekhov 2021; Omelchenko 2021). Based on the analysis of young environmentally engaged Muscovites, we suggest that their pro-environmental beliefs and intentions are constantly questioned by the present-day policies. The interviewees emphasize the lack of infrastructural, financial, and power resources to communicate their ecological and civic interests (Krupets et al. 2017; Nartova and Fatekhov 2021; Omelchenko 2021). The interviews reveal a sense of disappointment in the state's managerial decisions, its detachment from the concerns of the population, and its lack of pro-social positions. This disappointment extends to the environmental domain, where the participants perceive limited opportunities for themselves to engage in green governance or protest activities, both in the present and foreseeable future. Despite these challenging socio-political circumstances, the participants consistently engage in ecological practices and assume personal responsibility for their role in the environment. The present study aimed to uncover the reasons behind this persistent engagement in the face of adversity.

The empirical data indicates that environmental engagement is viewed as an integral part of one's desire to be a reflexive, responsible, and autonomous subject of modernity. The interviewees comprehend their identity as an entrepreneurial project which should be worked on, while environmental engagement is seen as an integral part of identity. Justifying the daily practices of caring for the environment, participants of the study particularly discussed the importance of autonomy, reflexivity, system thinking, and independence as self-regulation and accountability. This framework of justification becomes the ground of their personal responsibility in caring for the environment. These findings align with the theoretical argument that responsabilization, as a neoliberal governance strategy, relies on functional social institutions, a consistent discourse of citizen accountability for well-being, and the promotion of individual responsibility (Shamir 2008; Dean 2010; Birk 2018; Batchelor et al. 2020). This empirical observation signifies differences in the discourse of responsabilization and responsibility in Russia and other western countries respectively. According to the theory of responsabilization (Dean 2010; Birk 2018; Batchelor et al. 2020), the lack of systemic support in Western societies discourages involvement, while the Russian audience continues to take personal responsibility despite the resistance of the state, since individual responsibility, as we showed above, is seen as dangerous.

The empirical findings also align with research on the socialization of Russian youth (Matza 2012). The author shows how in the post-Soviet Russia of 2000s the ideas of 'psychological education' to the children of the elite were implemented as a form of neoliberal subjectivation and spread further to the 'general public'. This discourse of self-work and self-development dominated the upbringing of the current youths and still can be found in their narratives. The social reality, however, has changed since that time, the social institutions hardly promote one's personal responsibility for well-being, leaving the youths with feelings of frustration.

The narratives emphasize that participants hold a proactive perspective on environmental risks, which drives their practical engagement in the rhetoric of 'small actions', integrated into one's lifestyle (Soneryd and Ugglå 2015; Clément and Zhelnina 2020; Omelchenko 2021). That is particularly significant in the Russian context of contradictory and ambivalent rules, constant failures, and malfunctioning of environment infrastructures, highlighted in both our narratives and the previous research (Zhuravlev, Savelyeva, and Erpyleva 2014; Ermolaeva, Basheva, and Korunova 2021).

Despite disillusionment with politics, the informants seek to be a 'good citizen' and turn to environmental engagement as a form of political involvement, which aligns with previous studies on civic participation among Russian youth (Omelchenko and Pilkington 2013; Krupets et al. 2017; Nartova 2019; Ermolaeva, Basheva, and Korunova 2021; Omelchenko 2021; Lebedeva 2022; Shabanova 2023) and confirm the conceptualization of 'everyday politics' (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014; Pickard 2022). These findings can be largely explained by the peculiarities of the political socialization of the studied group. First, their proactive response to environmental risks can be attributed to the immediate and severe nature of these threats (Cook 2016; Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016; Andersen et al. 2021; Henn, Sloam, and Nunes 2022). Secondly, the participants of this study have and actively use access to a wide range of digital citizenship practices, such as petitions, boycotts, and discussions on social media platforms. Digital technologies, social networks, and media are integral parts of their lives, blurring the boundaries

between online and offline realms in terms of their perceived significance for social order. Consequently, online activities are considered significant, legitimate, and even preferable forms of political participation, offering the participants valuable opportunities to express their citizenship. In this regard, our findings align with tendencies discussed in Western literature on youth political participation (Bennett 2008; Pilkington and Pollock 2015; Andersen et al. 2021; Boulianne and Ohme 2022; Scherman, Valenzuela, and Rivera 2022). Here, our data confirm that the studied group of environmentally engaged Muscovites is indeed integrated into global trends (Omelchenko 2020; Omelchenko and Lisovskaya 2022).

What significantly contradicts earlier research is that, based on the narratives, environmental engagement actually leads to a widening gap between the young interviewees and other social groups, as they symbolically distance themselves from individuals who are not environmentally oriented. The interviews emphasize that participation in ecological practices currently differentiates all the citizens by their proactivity and ability to take personal responsibility. Hence, environmental engagement works for detachment and isolation of the studied group from the broader population of Russian citizens. While scholars have discussed solidarity and networks formed through environmental engagement (Mol 2010; Boulianne and Ohme 2022), it appears in our interviews that such networks are formed only inside the small fraction of the population under investigation.

Conclusions

In this paper, we took the micro-perspective on responsabilization, using ecological practices as an example to shed light on how and on which assumptions individual activities are possible in the ambivalent circumstances of insufficient institutional, legislative, political, and discursive support. The given study aimed to reveal the justifications that the environmentally engaged youth in Moscow attach to their individual responsibility in caring for the environment. Drawing from the 36 in-depth interviews with environmentally engaged young Muscovites, we suggest that striving to construct and present themselves as a rational, autonomous, conscientious, independent subject, the participants exhibit proactivity in caring for environment. So, anchored in identity, ecological practices stabilize and can be continuously maintained in daily life in the discourse of personal responsibility.

The study uncovers a significant social conflict within Russian society that stems from social polarization, atomization, and limited social support (Kulmala et al. 2014; Mersiyanova 2018; Yudin 2021). The narratives reveal that, on the one hand, the interviewed individuals engage in caring for the environment within the framework of a neoliberal discourse, centered around self-management, rationality, and self-expression. In this respect, the studied sample of environmentally engaged young Muscovites are integrated into the trends that are common to all the Russian youth, such as strive for the democratic structure of the social order and the discourse of justice (Omelchenko 2021). On the other hand, the neoliberal social contract is challenged by Russian social institutions and relationships, as highlighted in previous studies (Yudin 2021; Blackburn and Petersson 2022) and emphasized in the narratives of our participants. In this regard, this study contributes to the existing literature on a clash between neoliberal policies of responsabilization and the actual institutional context in which they are implemented. Moreover, this

insight should be developed in further research to deepen our understanding of how the isolation of youth and the self-isolation of youth movements are reproduced.

Concluding, we must also note some limitations of the study to consider when discussing the results of the research. First and foremost, the outstanding circumstances at the end of February 2022 when the Russian invasion of Ukraine started, broke the reality into two periods. As experts point out, the ‘greening’ of the Russian economy has been significantly delayed, infrastructures and networks shrunk down, and ecological funds and organizations were one by one (e.g. WWF, Belonna) recognized as ‘undesirable organizations’. The current social, economic, and cultural isolation of Russia will probably limit the possibilities of the ecological agenda and activity. Yet, we argue that these circumstances depreciate neither the validity of the results nor their theoretical and practical significance. The revealed mechanisms of social order and environmental engagement, in our opinion, are still applicable to the post-soviet countries. Thus, the obtained results might be relevant and valuable for these states from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

Moreover, in the study, we gravitate toward a cohort perspective on youths, analyzing them as a particular generation of people who went through socialization in one period of time. Choosing this particular approach to the youth, we were aware that alternately environmental engagement might be peculiar to this stage of the life-cycle. The scholars discuss that the life-cycle and the cohort effects are difficult to distinguish empirically (Bennett 2008; Omelchenko, Nartova, and and Krupets 2018; Andersen et al. 2021). To deal with this issue in this particular empirical study, we differentiated the sample by age and stage of the life cycle. The interviews with people who already have substantial ‘hardships of adulthood’ (such as full-time job, marriage, and children) evidence that the ecological practices that are anchored in identity will probably remain. However, we do not eliminate the influence of youth as a stage of the life cycle on environmental engagement and suggest this for further research.

Also, our findings can be seen as a starting point for the research on the role of youth and their environmental engagement in the contemporary political process. In finding their own individualized way of environmental and political engagement, young people play a special role in the modern political process. Their modes of political participation, information consumption, and expression of interests may stabilize and become widespread, particularly if they remain consistent throughout the youths’ lives (Bennett 2008; Blatterer 2010; Andersen et al. 2021). We suggest both social researchers and policy-makers to pay special attention to the performative nature of youth’s activity.

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ORCID

Lebedeva Daria  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9529-5355>

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