

Therapy in turmoil

Russian psychotherapists navigate war and ethics

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Fig. 1. October 2021, a supermarket bookshelf displaying popular psychology books by Jen Sincero, Robert Anthony, and Robert Leahy; an autobiographical novel about her prison detention by Kira Yarmysh, the former press secretary of Alexei Navalny; and a collection of autobiographical essays by Sergei Shoigu, Russia's Minister of Defence (2012–2024) who oversaw the invasion of Ukraine.

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This ethnographic study offers a critical anthropological perspective on the intersection between therapeutic culture and political crisis in contemporary Russia. By examining how psychotherapists navigate professional ethics and personal values in the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, this research illuminates broader cultural processes of meaning-making and identity negotiation in rapidly changing sociopolitical landscapes. Through a detailed analysis of boundary-making practices within a psychotherapy training centre, this study contributes to an anthropological understanding of how professional communities mediate between individuals and states, how cultural norms adapt to political pressures and how therapeutic practices reflect and shape societal responses to political events in authoritarian contexts.

Critical social science literature has argued that psychotherapy and therapeutic culture psychologize social issues, rendering collective concerns personal, thus depoliticizing individuals (Furedi 2003; Lasch 1979; Rieff 2006). This perspective contends that psychotherapy encourages self-care over communal welfare and individual responsibility for problems without taking into account structural factors. Consequently, 'therapized' people may become compliant consumers, employees or citizens, relinquishing agency to capitalist or state power and reinforcing individualism and existing inequalities.

Recent debates in therapeutic culture studies and psychological anthropology, however, recognize the complexity of psychotherapy's political dimensions (Leykin 2015; Matza 2018; Salmenniemi 2022; Zhang 2018, 2020). Whilst some researchers acknowledge that psychotherapy may sometimes render clients into neo-liberal subjects (Sointu & Hill 2022), others argue that psychotherapy can also empower clients, foster community formation and provide resources to challenge prevailing political orders (Leggett 2022; Salmenniemi 2019; Wright 2015).

Parallel discussions within professional therapeutic communities acknowledge the influence of political matters on therapeutic sessions and alliances (Farber 2018; Farrar & Hanley 2023; Frosh 2014; Winter 2021). Psychotherapists have explored some of the political dimensions of their therapeutic practices, including power dynamics between clients and therapists.

The idea that psychotherapy (de)politicizes or (de)individualizes issues rests on two assumptions: (1) a descriptive assumption that intrinsically political and psychological spheres exist with a clear boundary between them, and (2) a normative assumption that this boundary should be respected.

This article analyzes a scene observed in March 2022 during my fieldwork at a psychotherapy training centre in Russia (2021–2022). I first contextualize this scene by discussing the status of psychotherapy among the Russian middle class. I then examine a specific incident where the boundary between politics and psychotherapy was evoked following the onset of the invasion.

The context

Between 2017 and 2022, I observed that the discourse of psychotherapy was strikingly prevalent in Russian big cities, particularly among middle-class individuals in their 20s and 30s. This phenomenon permeated private conversations, social gatherings and social media.

People openly discussed the progress of their therapy, reasons for seeking treatment and insights gained. Therapy



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recommendations were frequently exchanged, with conversations like:

- 'Could you ask your therapist if she'd take me as a client? Mine isn't helping'
- 'I need someone more experienced; does your therapist know anyone?'
- 'I've been in Gestalt therapy, but want to try Lacanian analysis; any recommendations?'

Psychotherapy had replaced other discursive topics such as urban development and television series among these socio-economic groups. By 2021, when I began my fieldwork, these groups viewed psychotherapy as essential, comparable to going to the gym or attending dental check-ups. They framed it as self-care ('*zabota o sebe*') and advocated a 'careful' self-approach ('*berezho k sebe*'), replacing an earlier emphasis on 'stepping out of one's comfort zone'. Celebrities and influencers either genuinely adopted or satirized therapeutic language.

Psychotherapy in Russia at that time had rapidly evolved from a service sought through personal connections to one accessible via social media and digital platforms. By 2021, at least four Uber-like psychotherapy platforms existed in Russia, offering databases of approved therapists. Users could select therapists based on specific parameters or receive recommendations.

These platforms maintained active social media accounts, disseminating psychological expertise. Many psychotherapists managed Instagram accounts and podcasts, offering in-person and online consultations. The pandemic further boosted the availability of online therapy.

This digital transformation, in addition to still existing word-of-mouth referrals, allowed individuals to find and schedule therapy sessions within minutes, often for the next day, at around 40 euros per hour.

Around 2020, some members of these middle-class circles began discussing politics using psychotherapeutic language. They framed contemporary political issues in terms of enduring Soviet trauma, outdated child-rearing methods and personal boundaries. This approach overlapped with discussions of 'new ethics' ('*novaia etika*'),

encompassing Western social justice concepts like harassment, gaslighting, toxic masculinity, racism and sexism.

'New ethics' called for a critical reconsideration of ingrained attitudes. While clear on which practices to abandon, participants were initially uncertain as to what could take their place.

By 2021, psychotherapy had come to be seen as one such replacement, capable of transforming unhealthy attitudes towards self and others. Its lexicon ('personal boundaries', 'resources', 'separation', 'acceptance' and 'self-care') was believed to promote expertise and contribute to national healing (Aronson 2021). Some argued that psychotherapy could even help to develop a new political language and socially responsible group, compensating for the lack of public sphere and electoral politics in Russia.

The goal was personal healing and to pass on healthy attitudes to future generations, potentially ending the cycles of violence in Russian history. The prominence of this therapeutic culture, however, was shaken by Russia's attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Nevertheless, as of the summer of 2024, this framework still influences discussions among Russian middle-class members in Russia and abroad.

Having established the broader context of psychotherapy's prominence in Russian urban middle-class culture, I now turn to a specific incident that crystallized the tensions between therapeutic practice and political reality in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the following, I will examine how the full-scale invasion of Ukraine shook these aspirations, impacting a training session and sparking discussions around therapists' professional values and sense-making in a new reality. One such discussion, described below, reveals fault lines within Russian psychotherapeutic communities and illustrates how professional identities are shaped during wartime. The discussion took place during a training session focused on genogram analysis.

Fieldwork in Russian psychotherapy training

My fieldwork involved active participation in the first year of a two-year private psychotherapy training programme in Russia from autumn 2021 to summer 2022. I attended weekly classes, engaged with fellow students and participated in local and online therapeutic events. Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022 bisected my fieldwork, allowing me to observe the war's impact on the community first hand.

The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt) approved the study in 2021. Before commencing this study, I informed the leadership of the training centre, my instructors and fellow students about my role as a researcher, my research objectives, the project's title and its context. I obtained their explicit consent and clarified that they could decline participation before and during the fieldwork phase and throughout the research project. During the fieldwork phase, I adhered to the principle of personal data minimization by collecting only necessary personal information. In drafting this text, I took all reasonable measures to eliminate direct or indirect identifiers. Regarding data protection and research ethics, I adhered to the guidelines established by the National Research Ethics Committees (NREC) of Norway and the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA). My role as a researcher appeared to pique my research participants' interest and foster a welcoming attitude.

To maintain participant anonymity, I will omit programme details. The programme covered various psychotherapy modalities. The scene I analyze, occurred after a systemic psychotherapy class, referencing this approach.

Systemic psychotherapy originated in the 1950s in the USA, particularly at California's Mental Research

Institute, where Gregory Bateson studied communication (Anderson 2017). It is rooted in general systems theory and cybernetics.

The intersection of psychotherapy and politics in our training predated Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Instructors often explained therapeutic concepts using political analogies and vice versa. For example, one instructor explained interpersonal boundaries by referencing the Soviet Union's strict borders with the West.

This interplay positioned politics and therapy as reciprocal metalanguages, each illuminating the other. The two domains were thus closely linked in our training context, seemingly confirming the psychologization of politics thesis.

The following section reconstructs and analyzes a conversation between an experienced therapist-instructor and students, which took place in March 2022, i.e. shortly after the war began in February 2022. I will examine the conflicting interpretations of politics and psychotherapy, which go beyond this depoliticization thesis.

The scene

On the morning of the event, students were anxiously discussing recent news: southern Russian airport closures, currency fluctuations and changing global attitudes towards Russians. Concerns were both personal and professional, including potential exclusion from international networks valued as symbolic capital in the Russian therapeutic field.

To address these concerns about 'the ongoing events' (as participants referred to the invasion), we met with an experienced therapist-instructor at day's end. About 30-35 individuals, all women except me, gathered in our usual classroom. This gender composition was typical for our cohort and the Russian therapeutic community (Griffin & Karepova 2011).

The therapist-instructor, a woman in her 50s, began with a monologue. Recognizing its significance, I took detailed notes, omitting only individual names. What follows is my reconstruction of these notes.

The therapist-instructor began by acknowledging the magnitude of the situation and the need to clarify our professional stance. She drew a genogram of two parents and a child, with a line symbolizing tension between the parents. She explained that children perceive parental conflicts as all-encompassing, often overlooking their own emotions. The child may sympathize with one parent, disregarding their own life phase goals.

Here she was referencing the life phase concept which had already been introduced in our systemic psychotherapy module: a child starts as both a monad and part of the parental system, ideally detaching psychologically at the right time. Adults form dyads, then triads with children, returning to dyads as children separate. When we challenged this theory in class, referencing less traditional family structures, the instructors showed how these could still fit within the theoretical framework.

Returning to the therapist-instructor's speech: she emphasized that while families have diverse structures, it is important to recognize the state as a system where citizens are the offspring of conflicting parents. She urged us to 'de-triangulate' ourselves from this parental conflict.

She explained that lacking full knowledge of the conflict's context, we risk taking sides and becoming triangulated, hindering our psychological development and potentially remaining in a subordinate 'adult child' position. She added that if proper separation does not occur, discontent may be directed at those in power, a 'legal' way of confronting parents.

As professionals, she advised us to reduce our anxiety and avoid involvement in the conflict. She criticized psy-

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Avisar, N. 2007. Politics and Israeli psychologists: Is it time to take a stand? *The Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences* 44(1): 1-8.

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Bateson, G. 1976. *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology* (5th edition). New York: Ballantine.

Farber, B.A. 2018. 'Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right': Politics and psychotherapy, 2018. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 74(5): 714-721.

Farrar, N. & T. Hanley 2023. Where 'culture wars' and therapy meet: Exploring the intersection between political issues and therapeutic practice. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* 23(3): 593-597.

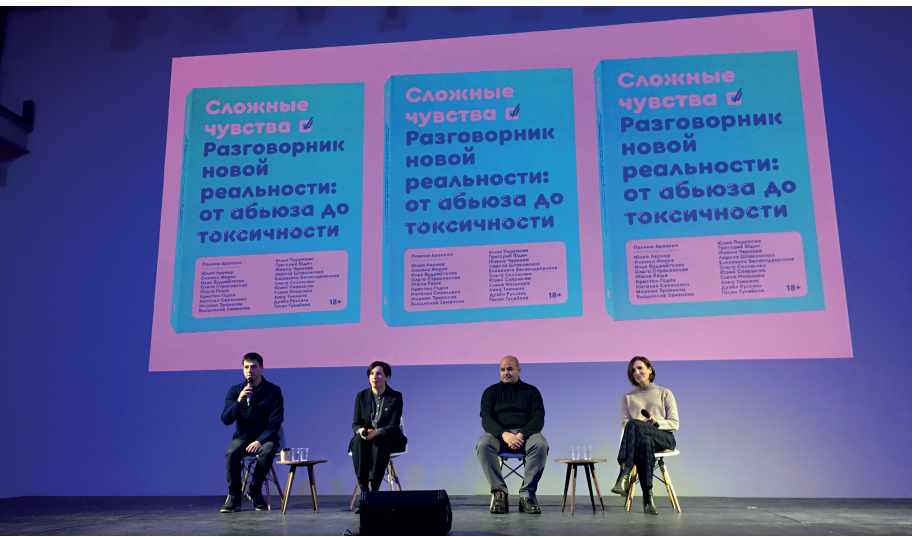


Fig. 2. December 2021. Presentation of a book edited by sociologist, journalist and social critic Polina Aronson titled *Complex feelings*. A phrasebook of a new reality: From abuse to toxicity at the Moscow cultural centre, DK Rassvet. From left to right: the chief editor of publishing house 'Individuum Felix Sandalov' and the three contributors to the book: Polina Aronson, political theorist and activist Ilya Budraitskis, and psychotherapist Marina Travkova.

Fig. 3. March 2022. A view from a fast train travelling from Moscow to St Petersburg, a route taken by many, including the author, to leave Russia for Finland following the closure of European Union airspace to Russian planes on 27 February 2022.

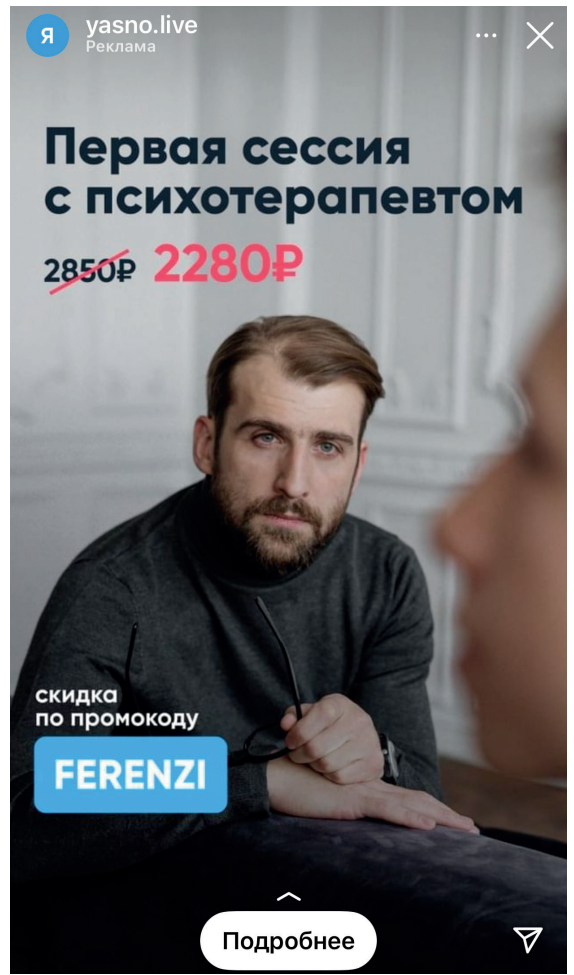
Fig. 4. January 2022. The back of a shopping centre in Moscow visited during fieldwork.

Fig. 5 (above right). January 2022. An Instagram advert for the psychotherapy platform Yasno (literal translation: 'it is clear' or 'I get it') saying that the platform is offering the first session for just 2,280 rubles (27 euros in January 2022) instead of 2,850 (33 euros). The discount is available with the promocode 'FERENZI'. The standard cost of psychotherapy at that time ranged from 3,000 to 5,000 rubles per hour (35-59 euros). 'Ferenzi' is the Russian transliteration of the name of psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi.

Fig. 6. 28 February 2022. Graffiti stating 'No to the war'. In March 2022, the written or verbal expression of such oppositional statements became illegal, carrying a potential sentence of up to 15 years in prison.

chologists who had expressed shame about Russia on social media, reminding us that we are experts in conflict management, not content. She suggested we maintain the position of a child who does not know who is right in the current situation.

The students, previously quiet, began expressing discontent. One asked: 'What if a child knows the father beats the mother?' Another added, 'The father is clearly an abuser'. The therapist-instructor replied that without knowing if it is a cycle of violence or sociopathy, responsibility cannot be determined. She warned that a triangulated child might burn out trying to intervene.



This response triggered a strong reaction. One student left in tears, slamming the door. Others whispered doubts about the therapist-instructor's confidence in her position. Someone calmly requested a course on crisis psychology.

One student mentioned global accusations against Russians, and the therapist-instructor expressed pain at such accusations against Russian children abroad. Another student advocated for professional restraint in expressing opinions to clients, referencing critically Ludmila Petranovskaya, a psychologist who had openly denounced the invasion. This sparked debate about Petranovskaya's role as a social critic versus a practising therapist.

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Furedi, F. 2003. *Therapy culture: Cultivating vulnerability in an uncertain age*. London: Routledge.

Griffin, G. & M. Karepova 2011. Psychological counselling in post-Soviet Russia: Gendered perceptions in a feminizing profession. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 18(3): 279-294.

Lasch, C. 1979. *The culture of narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Lazos, G. 2023. Transformation of psychotherapeutic relationships during the war. *Psychoanalysis, Self and Context* 18(3): 382-387.

Leggett, W. 2022. Can mindfulness really change the world? The political character of meditative practices. *Critical Policy Studies* 16(3): 261-278.

Leykin, I. 2015. Rodologia: Genealogy as therapy in post-Soviet Russia. *Ethos* 43(2): 135-164.

Matza, T. 2012. 'Good individualism'? Psychology, ethics, and neoliberalism in postsocialist Russia. *American Ethnologist* 39(4): 804-818.

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Rieff, P. 2006. *The triumph of the therapeutic: Uses of faith after Freud*. Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute.

Salmenniemi, S. 2016. Post-Soviet khozain: Class, self and morality in Russian self-help literature. In *Rethinking class in Russia*. London: Routledge.

—2019. Therapeutic politics: Critique and contestation in the post-political conjuncture. *Social Movement Studies* 18(4): 408-424.

—2022. *Affect, alienation, and politics in therapeutic culture: Capitalism on the skin*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sointu, E. & D.W. Hill 2022. Trump therapy: Personal identity, political trauma and the contradictions of therapeutic practice. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 25(3): 880-896.

Solomonov, N. & J.P. Barber 2018. Patients' perspectives on political self-disclosure, the therapeutic alliance, and the infiltration of politics into the therapy room in the Trump era. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 74(5): 779-787.

— & — 2019. Conducting psychotherapy in the Trump

Despite the noisy response, the therapist-instructor continued, 'How could I be ashamed of something I did not choose?' A student interrupted, saying people are ashamed precisely of this lack of choice. The therapist-instructor, somewhat apologetically, said she did not vote for the war and referenced Murray Bowen's theory of social regression, also calling the invasion an 'interspecies struggle'.

Another student highlighted the value conflict many were experiencing: a country that once defeated fascism was evolving into an aggressor state. The therapist-instructor concluded by quoting Mikhail Bulgakov's advice not to read Soviet newspapers and referenced Moominpappa's approach to the daily apocalypse – carrying on with everyday life.

The meeting ended with students talking loudly and some packing up.

Reflections

This discussion reveals how participants attempted to define certain issues and determine a legitimate metalanguage for addressing them. While it might appear as a simple case of the therapist-instructor psychologizing politics and students rejecting this, I argue that the account above reveals four distinct approaches to boundary-setting between the therapeutic and political realms. These approaches, which I will elaborate on in turn, can be categorized as follows:

1. A descriptive approach prioritizing systemic dynamics
2. A descriptive approach emphasizing psychology as the primary reality
3. A prescriptive approach calling for professional neutrality
4. A prescriptive approach advocating a childlike perspective

Recognizing that psychotherapy and politics intersect in ways beyond mere psychologization or politicization would enhance our understanding of their relationship. This goes beyond the current focus in therapeutic culture studies and professional literature.

The first approach, prioritizing systemic dynamics, is evident in the therapist-instructor's speech and may seem like an application of therapeutic concepts to international relations. However, I argue that she viewed both as expressions of underlying systemic dynamics. By stating, 'the state is also a system', she suggested that all processes follow the same systemic logic. This approach can be summarized as 'X and Y are A', where X and Y are empirical phenomena and A represents systemic relations.

This approach echoes Gregory Bateson's work in systemic psychotherapy. Bateson's theory of schismogenesis explains various social and cultural dynamics – including domestic politics under a dictatorship and international relations – through the same systemic lens. He applied this theory to interpersonal communication, which is foundational in systemic psychotherapy.

For Bateson, and likely for our therapist-instructor, the primary metalanguage is systemic theory, not psychology or politics. The therapist-instructor's interpretation treats systemic processes as the central reality, with interpersonal relations, emotions and international relations as phenomena exhibiting systemic effects.

The second approach, emphasizing psychology as the primary reality, is seen in the therapist-instructor's conceptualization of psychological and political domains. This suggests that psychological factors condition political actions. This can be represented as 'B is a manifestation of A', where B represents political actions and A represents psychological underpinnings.

This logic is based on the relationship between signifier and signified, surface and essence, phenomenon and nou-

menon. The therapist-instructor attributed political protests (signifier) to an unfinished process of psychological separation (signified).

This interpretation was consistent with her approach in other situations. For example, when the therapist-instructor addressed a dispute between students about Covid-19 precautions earlier in the programme, she suggested that the students' discontent with the precautions stemmed from unresolved issues with parental separation, recommending personal therapy rather than intervention from authority figures.

Within this approach, the therapist-instructor framed power struggles as being rooted in parent-child dynamics rather than adult-adult power relations. She viewed this parent-child dynamic as the fundamental reality and the language of separation as the primary or legitimate language for addressing challenges to authority.

The third approach, calling for professional neutrality, redefined the boundary between political and psychological aspects once again.

This attitude can be summarized as 'A must be free from B', where A represents a psychological attitude, and B represents a political opinion. Unlike the first two approaches, which describe the therapist's ontological position, this third type is prescriptive, demanding a particular attitude rather than describing a state of affairs.

The fourth approach is also prescriptive and calls for the adoption of a child's perspective, where they are unsure of which parent involved in a dispute is right. It can be expressed as the following formula: 'B should be like A', where B represents the political standpoint and A signifies a psychological process. This approach contrasts with the prevailing attitude in Russian psychotherapy identified by researchers of an autonomous, self-managing, self-confident and self-aware subject (Leykin 2015; Matza 2012, 2018; Salmenniemi 2016). While ostensibly encouraging self-awareness and autonomy in political matters, the therapist-instructor nevertheless addressed us as a group (who should follow her suggestion to withdraw) rather than as autonomous individuals capable of forming independent opinions. It was not the therapist-instructor's guidance, but the students' resistance to it, that exemplified the ideal of the autonomous Self.

My aim here is not to expose the logical contradiction of the therapist-instructor's arguments but to demonstrate that what can be perceived as a rather incoherent attempt to depoliticize certain issues via their psychologization involves in fact multiple and simultaneous attempts to draw boundaries between the therapeutic and political realms, to identify the primary reality and to find a suitable legitimate metalanguage.

These approaches reveal the complex negotiations that may occur within the therapeutic community as therapists grapple with their professional roles in a rapidly changing political landscape.

Two critical contextual factors are worth noting. First, the situation described above occurred in the context of daily increasing state repression in Russia against those who expressed their dissent regarding the invasion. The therapist-instructor's cautious stance may have been motivated, at least in part, by concern for the safety of the training centre and its students. Second, despite the therapist-instructor's position of authority, many students, later that year, openly expressed political views, condemned the invasion and volunteered support for those affected by the war. This suggests that the boundaries between the therapeutic and political realms remained fluid and contested, with individual practitioners continuing to negotiate their positions and sometimes taking a clear stance.

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Algorithmic policing

Part 1. Tech startups, venture capital and law enforcement in America

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This article is the first in a two-part series examining the rise of algorithmic policing in America. Part 1 focuses on predictive policing platforms and facial recognition technologies, exploring their development, implementation, and societal impact. Part 2, in a future issue, will expand the analysis to include acoustic gunshot detection systems and explores the political economy of policing. Together, these articles provide an anthropological perspective on how data-driven technologies are reshaping law enforcement practices and their implications for communities across the United States and beyond. Ed.

Imagine a summer afternoon in 2013 on Chicago's West Side. You're at home with your grandmother and siblings when two police officers unexpectedly knock on your door. Despite minor run-ins with the law, you've never committed a felony. Curious and slightly apprehensive, you invite them in.

The officers explain that a computer program has identified you as potentially involved in future gun violence – either as a perpetrator or as a victim. They base this on your location, social connections and proximity to past shootings. This visit marks the beginning of a harrowing experience.

In the following weeks, rumours spread. Some label you an informant, a dangerous accusation in your neighbourhood. The frequent police check-ins only fuel suspicion among your peers. You try explaining the situation, but it is pointless.

'Lotta folks think you're lying, brother', a friend warns.

Isolated and fearful, you find yourself caught between increased police scrutiny and community distrust. One day, leaving a friend's house, an unfamiliar car approaches. Gunshots ring out, shattering your knee. You survive but never report the incident, wary of being seen as an informant.

Meanwhile, unaware of these events, media outlets praise the university physicist behind the police algorithm. He will soon lead the artificial intelligence (AI) department of a Silicon Valley tech company.

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An early version of this article was presented as a keynote address at Universiteit Utrecht in November 2023, as part of a symposium co-ordinated by the Contesting Governance group. I am grateful to Lauren Gould and Tessa Diphoom for the invitation.

Fig. 1. New York Police Department surveillance cameras.

era: Therapists' perspectives on political self-disclosure, the therapeutic alliance, and politics in the therapy room. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 75(9): 1508-1518.

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Zhang, L. 2018. Cultivating the therapeutic self in China. *Medical Anthropology* 37(1): 45-58.

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These observations highlight the dynamic nature of professional ethics and identity formation in political crises, underscoring the need for further research into how therapeutic communities navigate such challenges.

Conclusion

This ethnographic analysis of a critical moment in a Russian psychotherapy training centre illuminates the complex cultural negotiations that occur when professional ethics, personal values and political realities collide. By identifying four distinct approaches to boundary-setting between the therapeutic and political realms, this study moves beyond simplistic notions of the psychologization of politics or the politicization of psychotherapy. Instead, it shows a nuanced interplay of descriptive and prescriptive strategies professionals use to navigate the intersection between their field and urgent political realities.

The therapist-instructor's attempts to maintain neutrality through familiar psychological frameworks and the resistance of some students to these efforts exemplify the broader cultural tensions in Russian society. This microcosm reflects larger struggles over agency, authority and moral responsibility in a context where political crises challenge long-standing professional norms and ethical guidelines.

This case study challenges the critique that psychotherapy depoliticizes social issues, demonstrating instead how therapeutic discourse can become a site for contesting and negotiating political meanings. The students' resist-

ance to the therapist-instructor's guidance indicates an emerging cultural shift in how younger generations of Russian therapists conceptualize their professional roles and responsibilities in relation to political events.

This research enhances our anthropological understanding of how professional subjectivities and ethical frameworks are shaped and reshaped under authoritarian regimes and during political crises. It illustrates that the boundaries between therapeutic and political realms are not fixed but constantly renegotiated through social interaction. This fluidity challenges the assumption that 'political' and 'psychological' spheres are clearly demarcated and are supposedly rigid.

By examining how therapists negotiate neutrality, personal values and therapeutic approaches in a charged sociopolitical context, this study highlights the importance of analyzing therapeutic cultures not as isolated phenomena but as integral parts of broader sociocultural systems. It invites further anthropological enquiry into how various contexts influence the development of therapeutic practices and how these practices, in turn, shape societal responses to political events.

This research contributes to the literature on the anthropology of therapy and politics, illuminating the interaction between professional ethics, personal convictions and political contexts in contemporary Russia. It highlights the necessity for context-specific examinations of therapeutic practices and their sociopolitical ramifications. ●