

Françoise Daucé (CERCEC/EHESS), Dmitri Dubrovski (Charles University & Svobodny University), Daniela Kanelovská (Charles University), Ota Konrád (Charles University) & Boris Melnichenko (CERCEC/EHESS & Svobodny University)

Contact: boris.melnichenko@proton.me

Study day

Ethnography of vulnerability on former soviet spaces

26 of May 2025 in Charles University, Prague

U Kříže 5, Praha 5 Jinonice.

Room: Jinonice C420.

EHESS-CERCEC-CHARLES UNIVERSITY and SVOBODNY
UNIVERSITY

Organizers

This study day will be organized by the Centre for Russian, Caucasian, East European and Central Asian Studies (CERCEC/EHESS) as part of “Global EHESS” program in partnership with Charles University and Svobodny University.

Please note, that the registration for the study day is mandatory:

<https://forms.gle/6KisBtSSu8KStyvY7>

Abstract

The conference will focus on reflections on social sciences in the context of war and authoritarianism in former Soviet countries. It will explore the vulnerability of researchers conducting « sensitive » fieldwork, as well as the study of vulnerable groups. We invite contributions on engaged or reflexive ethnographic research, including mixed artistic-research or documentary practices, alongside with autoethnographic reflections on positionality when doing « sensitive » fieldwork.

The Upheavals Caused by the War in Ukraine and authoritarian regimes in the Former Soviet Spaces

Political processes in the post-Soviet region have been marked by escalating authoritarianism in Russia and Belarus. Following the mass protests in Belarus from 2020 to 2021, the country has undergone severe political repression, with opposition figures receiving long prison sentences and credible reports of torture. Authoritarian trends in Russia have also impacted neighboring countries such as Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova, and culminated in a full-scale war against Ukraine, launched on February 24, 2022.

Over the past three years, this war has been accompanied by crimes against humanity and systematic attacks on civilian infrastructure, resulting in catastrophic consequences — including acts of genocide and ecocide, as well as mass displacement into neighboring countries.

This conference invites reflection on the drastic transformations occurring in several former Soviet states — including Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Russia, and among the Russian exile communities. These devastating processes, which disrupt self-identity, perceptions of reality, and social bonds, present serious challenges for individuals and communities alike.

For researchers in the humanities and social sciences, this context calls for heightened reflexivity. We propose to address these challenges through a conference focused on ethnography and collaborative autoethnography of vulnerability.

Participants registration 9h-9h30

Conference opening 9h30-10h

Introduction (10h-10h30)

Introduction by Francoise Daucé, Dmitriy Dubrovskiy, Ota Konrád, Daniela Kolenovská (15 min)

Contextualisation and presentation of panels by Boris Melnichenko (15 min)

Panel 1

Gender in Sensitive Fieldwork: From Everyday to Mass Oppression (10h30-12h30)

Discussant (Online): Ronan Hervouet, Professor (Centre Émile Durkheim CNRS/Université de Bordeaux)

La Mela Verena, PhD (Heidelberg University, Institute of Anthropology,)

Sensitive fieldwork and female vulnerability: Navigating illicit trade and shadow networks in the Sino-Kazakh borderlands

Based on 20 months of ethnographic field research in the Sino-Kazakh borderlands, Verena La Mela will reflect upon women in the field who experienced physical hardship as cross-border shuttle traders, as well as domestic violence. As a woman conducting research in a sensitive and oftentimes dangerous field, she was exposed to similar though more specific risks due to her different position in the field. In her presentation, she will reflect upon the various vulnerabilities that her female research partners and she faced in the context of illicit cross-border trade, both in the bazaar and at the border, and illustrate how they navigated these challenges.

Ricou Ludivine, PhD-student (Université Paris-Nanterre, LESC)

Destructive empowerment? On the ambiguities of calling back the “vulnerables” to ethics

Ludivine Ricou will present her fieldwork in a small town in Gagauzia (southern Moldova) that she was conducting during the first months of the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020 and for three months in 2023. In this autonomous and rural region, with largely pro Russian political views and administrative officials occupied by former communist apparatchiks, she explores the sudden vulnerability of bodies, caused by the ubiquity of viral risk, whose harmfulness was largely unknown, briefly created a paradoxical leveling of citizens' lives. While observing how

locals where coping with the diseases, L. Richou was concerned with documenting how some of her informants and state officials in Moldova were developing a "toxic individualism" (Ed Cohen, cit. by Fassin and Fourcade 2021, 433–445), in the sense of promoting — against a reified and oppressive Other — insensitivity, violent behavior, and individual freedom. This presentation will reveal the intricacies of producing and sharing ambivalent and violent experiences without silencing subalterns' voices (Das 2007).

Anonymous, independent researcher, MA-student in exile

We Were Invulnerable: Autoethnographic Observations by the Wife of a Belarusian Political Prisoner on Care and Co-living Across Prison Walls

This participant will present an autoethnographic reflection on her experience of the long-term political imprisonment of her husband. She is particularly interested in the perspective of ethics of care and care studies, and her presentation will be structured around this theoretical framework. It will focus on the nuances of sustaining the lives of prisoners, maintaining contact between prisoners and their families, as well as the role of intermediaries and prison staff.

30 min discussion

Lunch 12h30-14h

Panel 2

Research on the War and Mobilisations in Multicrisis (14h-16h)

Discussant: Adrian Brisku, Associate Professor (Charles University)

Baramidze Tsira, Professor (Institute of Caucasiology, Faculty of Humanities, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University)

Hate Speech in Georgian Political Discourse (Results of a Study of Newspapers for 2020 - 2025)

Tsira Baramidze will analyze the increased use of hate speech in Georgian political discourse as a form of communication used by the ruling power "Georgian Dream" in verbal, written or behavioral forms, attacking and discriminating against an individual or group of people on the basis of attributes such as political polarization. In her presentation she will present how through specific linguistic forms and the semasiological features of those lexical forms what may be called a "hate speech" enhancing social tension, erosion of democratic norms, international relations. In conclusion she will share some practices on how to combat hate speech in politics

through legal measures, public awareness, promotion of inclusive policies, promotion of a culture of tolerance.

Le Pavic Gaëlle, PhD (Ghent University/United Nations University)

Ethnography of social vulnerabilities in Georgia: empirics from the Samegrelo region and Tbilisi
Gaëlle Le Pavic explores the methodological aspects of research on social vulnerability. The study on social services in two key locations in Georgia: Tbilisi, and the Samegrelo region, conducted between October 2021 and November 2023, coincided with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which led to significant war-related migration to Georgia. These migratory movements entered in complex interconnections with Georgia's earlier fractures following the separation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the 1990s. She aims to reflect on methodological aspects of sensible fieldwork with social service beneficiaries and migrants, Georgian civil society and authorities, international organisations and donors. The contribution highlights also the researcher's active and generative role in knowledge production, adopting a monist ontological approach guided by reflexivity (Kurowska 20201). This perspective seeks to reveal patterns and relationships between seemingly disparate phenomena, such as (geo)political dynamics and social services addressing vulnerabilities.

Nersisyan Sona, PhD (Department of Diaspora Studies, Institute of Archeology and Ethnography, National Academy of Sciences)

Between War and War: Autoethnography in the Context of Russian Immigration to Armenia

This topic explores the complexities of war-related trauma and identity through the lens of an Armenian researcher working with Russian migrants in Armenia. Although the researcher and the migrants were physically removed from the battlefield, they bore the brunt of the war in very different ways. This topic is sourced by interviews with Russian migrants, revealing deep ethical and methodological questions regarding responsibility, engagement, and empathy in morally complex and politically sensitive fieldwork. Anchoring by the ethnography of vulnerability [Behar, 1996; Giordano, 2014], this topic tends to show how the researcher's own position is deeply embedded in the fieldwork process. Here vulnerability comes as a methodological condition that blurs the boundary between observer and observed, requiring an ethics of interaction that considers responsibility, emotional disclosure, etc. Drawing on autoethnographic reflexivity, Sona Nersisyan argues that war-related trauma is experienced not only individually, but also relationally and contingently, shaped by entangled histories and geopolitical landscapes that structurally meet between researcher and participant.

30 min discussion

Coffee break 16h-16h15

Panel 3

Coping With Oppression and Vulnerability in Authoritarian Context and Beyond (16h15-18h15)

Discussant (Online): Julie Hemment, Associate Professor (University of Massachusetts Amherst)

Storn Evgeny, PhD-student (University of Helsinki)

Empathetic Reporting and the Legacy of LGBTIQ+ Activists: Ethical Reflections on Fieldwork in Vulnerable Contexts

The presentation of Evgeny Storn explores the application of empathetic reporting in ethnographic fieldwork, drawing on the contributions and legacy of Russian LGBTIQ+ activists. It considers how the experiences and methodologies of these activists can inform the ethical dimensions of research when working with vulnerable communities under authoritarian regimes. The presentation aims to inspire a discussion on the intersection of vulnerability, ethics, and methodological innovation in the study of authoritarian regimes.

Loseva Olga, independent researcher, ex PhD-student in exile

Bodily precariousness as a feature of vulnerability in exile: Based on autoethnographic notes

Based on autoethnographic notes kept since emigrating from Russia in March 2022 Olga Loseva will present her autoethnographic reflection on how the war affect persons on corporal level at a distance. Inspired by the work of Judith Butler she observes a special and contradictory role of the body in practices of eluding legality. Drawing on her autoethnographic notes, she will present the bodily experience of forced emigration. She seeks to consider what additional vulnerability is born due to the fact that the body is torn away from "its natural environment", crossing a border with no final destination.

Spirenkova Anastasia, PhD-student (CRAL/EHESS)

Reflection of the linguistic vulnerabilities in art practices in Russia and among the Russian artists in exile

Anastasia Spirenkova will present her work dedicated to the artistic movement of actionism of the last decades in contemporary Russia and its exiled artists. Faced with increasing censorship, repression, a shift in state discourse and the closure of cultural institutions, actionist artists rethink their creative approach. They transformed the communicative principle of their works from a monologue addressed to the "vertical of power" to a horizontal dialogue with various vulnerable social groups, fighting against their stigmatisation. Through this study, she explores the speech act in performative utterances (Austin 1969) as well as the performative potential of silence as a "performative non-speech act" (Puccio-Den, 2022). In Anastasia's work, actionism rests as one of the last strongholds to overcome autocracy, ongoing violence, xenophobia and militarisation in Russia.

Ushakova Anastasia, PhD (Lancaster University)

Autoethnography of vulnerability in exile using poetic practices

In her paper Anastasia Ushakova will explore the concept of social vulnerability that is related to captured autoethnographically, personal experience of being exiled from an authoritarian regime (Russia) at the time of war in Ukraine. She is using an autoethnographic approach to find access into the most intimate spaces, while using poetic writing as an additional lyrical lens allowing to explore not only the experience itself but that of a lyrical voice representation and perspective. By reflecting on academic, personal, feminist and creative aspects in this paper she will explore the themes that relate to marginalisation, trauma and displacement.

30 min discussion

Dinner 19h-21h