

**Between the minor and the intimate: Encountering the authoritarian (extra)ordinary in  
Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine**

Sven Daniel Wolfe

University of Lausanne; University of Zürich

[dwolfe@geo.uzh.ch](mailto:dwolfe@geo.uzh.ch)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4517-6056>

AUTHOR'S ACCEPTED VERSION

**CITE AS:** Wolfe, Sven Daniel. "Between the Minor and the Intimate: Encountering the Authoritarian (Extra)Ordinary in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine." *Geopolitics* 28, no. 2 (2023): 820–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1988930>.

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**Introduction: encountering the multiscalar geopolitical**

There is an established and growing body of literature that endeavors to make sense of the geopolitical, writ large, from smaller scales. Drawing from feminist scholarship, this work seeks to ground geopolitical discourse into practice and place, making sense of how national and international scales are implicated in and indeed co-constructed by the everyday and the body (Dixon 2015; Dixon and Marston 2011; Dowler and Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2004). This work explores a geopolitics that transcends territory, category, and scale, and functions through affect and emotion (Massaro and Williams 2013; Militz 2019; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Pain and Smith 2016; Secor 2001; Smith 2020).

Following this line, this paper begins from the notion that geopolitical state functioning can be understood more fully by plumbing the intimate – understood as translocal and multiscalar spatial relations, modes of interaction, and sets of practices (Pain and Staeheli 2014, 345), relationally co-produced and predicated on attachments, interactions, experiences, and emotions (Barabantseva, Mhurchú, and Peterson 2021, 347). This is not intended to privilege the state level of analysis, but rather an argument that intimate and ordinary scales are where geopolitics take shape, and that there is a need to underscore the value in the quotidian and apparently mundane (Carter and Woodyer 2020; Pratt and Rosner 2012a). Thus, the paper investigates an intimate geopolitics by foregrounding bodies, feelings, encounters, everyday objects, and ordinary situations in order to make sense of recent geopolitical closures and openings in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. It follows work on body politics, borders, and territory (Martin 2010; Prokkola and Ridanpää 2015; Smith, Swanson, and Gökarıksel 2016), in an exploration of the intimately geopolitical and (extra)ordinary collisions between

authoritarian state practices and individual lives. Empirically, these are arranged as a series of encounters with state authority figures that occur in quotidian moments: arriving at an airport, checking into a hotel, going for a hike. The paper engages these (extra)ordinary encounters by thinking through minor theory (Katz 1996; 2017), in order to approach the practical challenges of living and working in conditions of increasing authoritarianism. This is not a study of authoritarianism per se, though it overlaps with much of that scholarship. In particular, what it shares is the basic fieldwork difficulty of sourcing meaningful information in contexts dominated by authoritarian and illiberal practices, given that these environments tend to create recognizable methodological challenges for scholarship (Goode and Ahram 2016).

In this light, the paper offers three contributions. First, it argues that a minoritarian engagement with the conceptual vocabulary of intimate geopolitics can help make sense of the spatial and multiscale complexities that characterize the geopolitical, particularly in regards to life under authoritarian conditions. Second, the paper proposes a loose ethnographic framework to guide the production of nuanced qualitative inquiry in challenging political environments – while remaining sensitive to history, culture, and the co-constructed-ness of individual and geopolitical scales. This is an attempt to fashion a transparent and transferrable methodological apparatus that can make sense of the tensions, fleeting interactions, and situatedness that constitute the intimate (Schroeder 2021). And third, these efforts are situated within a larger ambition to destabilize the Orientalizing tendencies too often color discussions of the post-socialist Global East (Müller 2018). This is accomplished through a focus not on authoritarian *states*, but rather on authoritarian *practices* – a view that emphasizes the territorial unevenness of authoritarianism, allowing for spaces of openness in states that might be considered as uniformly closed and, conversely, identifying subtle and pervasive authoritarianisms in states that might be considered open.

### **Getting intimate with minor theory**

Minor thinking is not a discrete theory, nor necessarily dedicated to working from the margins or the small, but rather something “relentlessly transformative and inextricably relational... a different way of working with material,” (Katz 1996, 489). There are endless ways to practice this, but in keeping with established minoritarian work, this paper suggests that the “fugitive moves and emergent practices” (Katz 2017, 598) of minor theory start most productively with ruptures, with the messy and situated states of betweenness. One way to approach this betweenness is to work through the lens of the intimate, analyzing geopolitical complexities from the perspective of the domestic (Barabantseva, Mhurchú, and Peterson 2021; Botterill, Hopkins, and Sanghera 2020). This resonates with work on feminist geopolitics, illuminating situated, embodied geographies to explore the operation of power between seemingly disparate individuals, events, and scales (Massaro and Williams 2013; Williams and Massaro 2013). Another, related way to approach betweenness is through the playful non-linear theories of Deleuze and Guattari, whose rhizomatic philosophies include a concern with making ruptures in hegemonic constructs (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 5–9 and *passim*). In their reading, “everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a *macropolitics* and a *micropolitics*” (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 249). This paper is grounded in the idea that macro- and micropolitics are mutually constitutive, that neither can be understood without the other, and that these notions cohere with recent work on the intimate geopolitical.

There is a potential danger, however, that attending to ruptures or betweenness might divert attention from the value of the intimate and the ordinary, while the reference to scalar orientations like *macro* and *micro* risks a reification of binaries and hierarchies. This paper addresses these dangers in two ways: First, in seeking to destabilize universalist assumptions

by interrogating the links between the intimate and the global (Pratt and Rosner 2012b), and second, through a wholesale embrace of minoritarian thinking. In this reading, the minor does not mean an automatic focus on the small, but rather an understanding of inherent political immediacy: the minor exists separate from but suffused by dominant orders, and minor thinking has the omnivorous potential to use anything at all in the creation of new assemblages – from literature and music to everyday objects and mundane encounters (Deleuze and Guattari 1986). Thus, within an understanding of multiscale interrelatedness, the paper advances minor thinking as a means to explore multiple flavors of the intimate, encompassing the quotidian, the rupture, and all manner of moments in between.

Further, this paper follows Jellis and Gerlach (2017), who argue that both micropolitics and minor thinking exist apart from labels, scales, and ideologies. Instead, “micropolitics and the minor are always, already present; it is what one makes of it as a mode of action that matters,” (Jellis and Gerlach 2017, 564). If everything is political, and if this political everything is not already formed, but rather in a constant process of becoming, then it is our sensitivities within given registers that lead to actions that, in turn, can bring the minor to attention. In this vein, Secor and Linz (2017) offer eight actions or tools to create ruptures, to expand them, sustain them, and work within them – though they use the term *impasse*, from Lauren Berlant’s notion of hypervigilant yet wandering awareness (Berlant 2011). Their tools are irrational and rhizomatic, assembled from Deleuze and Guattari, and feature titles like “Freeze” and “Give what you don’t have.” Their point is not to offer a menu of options for researchers to engage in order to arrive at the minor. Instead, these tools – both their content and their way of telling – are meant as a sensitizing device to help the reader grow aware of the minor permeating the world. And in growing aware of the omnipresent minor, to embrace it and to let the implications of this embrace expand through the work and the self.

Thus, minor thinking is attuned to context and positionality, and takes shape in practices that are situated and responsive, rather than universalizing (Lancione 2017, 575). This means that a minor, micropolitical ethics depends on the individual, their positionality, history, and particular concerns, all in relation to the situations and societies in which they find themselves. For Michele Lancione, this takes the shape of an activist politics based on combating injustice, building relationships through praxis (Lancione 2017; 2019). Instead of an extractive model of research, Lancione becomes part of the communities where he works. This relational work is slow and subtle, riven with failures and missteps and muddled emotion, and requires transparency throughout (Schroeder 2021). Fitting with minor thinking, Lancione's approach is unique to him, and other scholars have different sensitivities and divergent methods to make sense of the minor. Some eschew a focus on the oppressed (Jellis and Gerlach 2017), while others emphasize that micropolitical work does not necessarily have to be politically oppositional (Anderson 2017). While this paper is sympathetic to Lancione's activist ethics, it is constrained by (geo)political factors that make a similar activist approach challenging, if not dangerous or outright impossible. These constraints are caused by contingent issues of positionality and by authoritarian and illiberal practices in the countries that constitute the empirical grounding of this paper: Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.

### **Working in the authoritarian minor**

Authoritarianism in post-Soviet countries has been a favorite topic for scholarship since the fall of the USSR. Rather than engage in definitional debates about democratization, transitology, regime type, state building, electoral competitiveness, or arguing for which prefix to attach before “-authoritarian,” the focus here is on what authoritarian states *do*. More precisely, this is a move away from states towards a discussion on authoritarianism from the

perspective of practices (Glasius 2018). Focusing on practices is a crucial step to understanding geopolitics from below and from within, and destabilizes theoretical nationalisms by acknowledging authoritarian and illiberal actions regardless of ideal-type regime identification or dualist-thinking geopolitical imaginaries (Koch 2019b). Further, these practices can be differentiated on a spectrum, increasing conceptual precision and allowing for spaces where they might overlap or operate alone. Following Glasius (2018, 526–28), authoritarian practices are those that sabotage accountability, both in terms of disabling public access to accurate information, and by disabling public ability to question authority. Similarly, illiberal practices are those that violate individual rights, autonomy, and dignity, in both political and quotidian senses (Glasius 2018, 530). Rather than a concern with the specificities of regime type, then, this paper’s focus on practices – located on the more authoritarian and illiberal ends of the spectrum – enables a legible comparison between and beyond Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.

In Koch’s (2013a) methodological explorations of closed contexts, she avoids binary normative language and assumptions, and instead advocates for an attention to practices, performances, and positionality. Crucially, Koch destabilizes the stereotypical presentation of post-Soviet authoritarianism as uniform, totalitarian domination by acknowledging the *inconsistency* of closures in authoritarian contexts. There are parallels between these *inconsistencies*, the *betweenness* of intimate geopolitics, Secor and Linz’s *impasses*, and Deleuze and Guattari’s *ruptures*. These notions seem to indicate a similar kind of phenomenon, a deviation or breakage in the supposedly normal flow of things. From a minor perspective, these breakages are crucial, and it is a goal of the minor theorist to stay suspended within them. But what does this actually look like? What exactly is this rupture, how can we recognize it, and how can we understand it? Situated within the realm of practice, this is an argument for using the register of the body, because “that bodies speak has been known for a long time,” (Deleuze 1990, 285). This is

another acknowledgement of the value of feminist geography's longstanding commitment to the individual scale in understanding the construction and maintenance of power, brought to bear in the everyday and understood through the body (D. Rose 1993; Moss 2002; Nast and Pile 2005). These approaches commonly make use of emotion and affect in the identification of particular visceral intensities, moving through the web of intimate and ordinary experiences that constitute the everyday and blur the scalar thinking, particularly regarding the interplay of the domestic and the geopolitical (Barabantseva, Mhurchú, and Peterson 2021; Carter and Woodyer 2020; Hyndman 2004; Marston and Smith 2001; Whatmore 2006).

Grounded in these theoretical ambitions, this paper moves through an array of intimate, ordinary, and everyday moments drawn from nineteen months of fieldwork conducted over seven years of living, working, and travelling primarily in Russia, but also in Ukraine and Belarus, between 2013 and 2020. These moments are oriented around specific encounters with authoritarian and illiberal practices, where encounters are conceptualized as inter-subjective phenomena stemming from engagements across difference (Faier and Rofel 2014). Understood relationally, an ethnographic approach to these encounters not only works against essentialism and category thinking, but also helps reveal how various shades of authoritarianism and illiberalism are made and sustained.

Framed within a messy and experimental ecology of practices (Stengers 2005; Whatmore 2006), these encounters are arranged according to a loose methodological framework inspired by Michele Lancione (2019), Marie-Eve Reny (2016), and Anna Secor and Jess Linz (2017). This framework has several aims: to sensitize the researcher to the minor found in the intimate everyday; to guide the creation and analysis of these minoritarian moments beyond the immediate and the quotidian, over time and in concert with other scales; and to represent these

moments with integrity, in ways that are sensitive and ethical. The framework consists of four elements: *rupture*, *digestion*, *connection*, and *representation*. These are illustrated by a minor key collage of autoethnographic vignettes, narrated in first person, and describing personal encounters with authoritarian and illiberal practices in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.

In so doing, the vignettes highlight some of the challenges and sensitivities in doing qualitative inquiry in contexts shaped by authoritarian practices, and reveal some of the ways in which a minor key attention to the everyday can help reach the politics at stake from below and from within, without reifying the representations of those in power. The presentation and analysis of contextualized ethnographic encounters is not a theoretical flight of fancy, nor an attempt to inflate great meanings out of the mundane, but rather a bid to inhabit and expand interstitial spaces, to ground geopolitics into the geographies of the everyday, and to explore how the intimate and ordinary might shed light on the geopolitical and produce something new (Dowler and Sharp 2001; Katz 1996, 496).

The methodological framework through which this exploration is conducted is particularly useful for environments shaped by authoritarian practices, where geographies of power, political closure, and surveillance can affect the research process – notably but not exclusively for foreigners (Koch 2013b; Menga 2020). In elaborating each of these framework’s elements through my lived experience in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, I endeavor not to reinscribe misrepresentations of the post-Soviet Global East, even as I remain aware of the practical and academic dangers of navigating through spaces shaped by authoritarian practices. Instead, this attempt at a nuanced, transparently positional, and intimately geopolitical methodology is intended to destabilize Orientalizing tendencies by working from an intimate recounting of everyday authoritarian encounter.

## **Rupture**

The first stage in making minor key sense of the intimate is the ethnographic encounter, which relies on a broad understanding of contextual engagements across difference. These encounters “prompt unexpected responses and improvised actions, as well as long-term negotiations with unforeseen outcomes” (Faier and Rofel 2014, 364). The goal is to explore the power dynamics revealed within the encounter by examining the elements that constitute it. These include speech, of course, but also emotions, beliefs, actions, objects, and environments, all of which contribute to the reproduction (or contestation) of geopolitical imaginaries (Sharp 2020). These views owe much to Doreen Massey, who opens *For Space* with three propositions on social space (2005, 9): that it is produced through interactions, from the global to the minute; that it is heterogenous and multiple, with nothing being able to stake claim as the only reality; and, finally, that it is never complete, but always being produced. The intimacy of encounter – between bodies, feelings, things – is what produces social space, and it is these encounters that also make geopolitical territories (Smith 2009; 2012; 2020). A sensitivity towards the heterogenous production of social/geopolitical space guides all four stages of this framework, but it is most profoundly felt – though not necessarily yet understood – in the encounter. And it is in the moments of rupture that the dynamics of the encounter are rendered most visible.

A scene of rupture: my wife grew up in a countryside village outside Sochi, Russia’s Black Sea resort. When she was a teenager, she would visit her best friend by walking to the river, crossing a rickety footbridge, passing down through a secluded meadow, and climbing up the boxwood forest to the village on the opposite mountainside. These visits became a shared tradition for me too, when I came into the picture years later. It was always a gorgeous hike. During the 2013 – 2014 winter holidays, we tried to make our normal visit but, for the first

time, we failed. We crossed the rickety bridge as usual but when we descended the path on the other side, there simply was no meadow anymore. Everything was gone. In place of grasses and flowers, a row of huge towers strung together with high voltage wire. Steel pylons stacked like oversized lumber. An entire compound of new buildings and parking lots enclosed by barbed wire fences. And where the meadow used to hide a small swimming hole ringed by chamomile flowers, the earth now was piled into an enormous berm for two newly-built multi-lane highways, streaming directly into tunnels now bored into the mountainside. We were dumbstruck.

And we were stuck. It was impossible to walk the usual way through this radically new environment, so we returned flabbergasted to the bridge and ventured directly up the mountain to pass over the new highways. We threaded through the steep forest, unable to ignore the new buildings and towers that stared at us through gaps in the trees. We passed the crest without problems, but after we managed a steep descent, we stumbled into another unexpected construction. It was a concrete wall riddled with holes. On the other side was a clearing, an artificially flat and open emptiness. On the other end of this clearing I saw a small hut and what looked like a poster of the Russian president. We saw no one nearby, so we emerged from the brush into the clearing, looking for the road that would lead us to the village and our friend. My feet crunched metal on the ground: piles of small metal casings. This was a military firing range (Figure 1).



*Figure 1: Accidentally stumbling onto a military firing range by a remote mountain village in Sochi. A picture of the Russian president overlooks piles of used ammunition.*

Immediately I felt exposed and vulnerable. It was a sudden sense of *not-belonging*, and I wanted to run back the way we came. But it had been steep and filled with prickly bushes, so we hurried through the empty range and found the village road. But there was a military base sited there, green tents behind portable concrete walls. We ran into a group of soldiers leaning against them, guarding the entrance and looking bored. We gave our best nonchalant hellos as we passed, but a minute later two soldiers past us in a jeep, pulled to a stop in front of our path, and asked for our papers. We had no documents at hand, so we shared a surreal circular discussion:

“We can walk back to our house and get our passports. We live in village Y.”

“Where is village Y?”

“It’s just there across the river. Look, you can see our house. With the green roof.”

“No, that’s too far.”

We smiled. “Well, you could let us go?”

They did not. “You’re in a controlled territory. You have to show your passports.”

“But our documents are in our house.”

“Where is your house?”

After several rounds of these Kafka-esque negotiations, the soldiers radioed for instructions. It was decided that they would drive us home, fetch our passports, and then write up our infraction for passing the controlled border that had been established in the mountains. During the drive, I felt overpowered by the urge to establish rapport with the soldiers and communicate my love for their country. I failed badly and blurted out: “I want you to know that I’m a patriot.” The driver turned to stare. “For whose side?” In English, my wife whispered for me to be quiet. When the jeep pulled up to our house, I stayed with the soldiers while my wife fetched the passports. My mother-in-law fluttered out in near-panic, hovering around the jeep and speaking in half sentences. The soldiers took a long time filling out the paperwork for our trespassing infraction, writing each report in duplicate by hand. At last they gave us our copies and made ready to leave. My father-in-law appeared with a bottle and passed it to them in the jeep. “For you, or your commander,” he said. My father-in-law was a boss, a dominant man used to authority and given to temper and volume. It was strange to see him with a humble and ingratiating smile, making himself low as he leaned close and presented his offering.

We walked inside the gate, but were not yet inside the house. I started to comment but my mother-in-law shushed me. She made a strange sign with her fingers, taking the first and second fingers from each hand and crossing them perpendicular, like a hashtag. I asked her what that meant. “37,” she said, as though it were obvious, and bundled us inside.

## **Digestion**

It takes time to make sense of encounters and ruptures. I did not immediately understand my mother-in-law's cryptic communication after the soldiers left, but in time I learned that she was using shorthand for 1937, one of the years of bloody repression in the Great Terror of the Stalinist purges (Khlevnyuk 1995). Her gesture was a sign of bars in a prison cell window. She was warning me not to speak in the open where we could be heard, and she was warning of political volatility and vulnerability that was clear to her but invisible to me. And she did this in modern Russia, in the shadow of the 2014 Winter Olympics, by a quick and intuitive reference to Stalinist repressions. This moment changed me and my life within Russia, but it took time for the understanding to bloom.

The allowance for time and change resonates with the notion that social space is never complete, but always being produced (Massey 2005). Thus, my mother-in-law was not just referencing the dangerous silences of the Terror – she was recreating them, though recast with modern characters. Time does not just ripen the understanding of the encounter, but also opens up the potential for further encounters. Underlying these notions are Deleuzian conceptions of time, repetition, and difference: we can notice and catalog similarities, repeated instances that do not duplicate one another but that exhibit genetic similarities with earlier iterations (Deleuze 2014). These subsequent encounters might echo or rhyme and, strung together, they might reveal something meaningful.

Another scene, this time a rhyme: sitting in a bar in Volgograd, Russia, with my friend Artyom.<sup>1</sup> He tells me to be calm. I tell him I'm fine but he doesn't believe me. He leaves to fetch more beers and I think about that morning, about the security services knocking on my hotel door. I think about them asking for my passport and, unsatisfied with my status, taking me to a grim building in a part of Volgograd I had never seen. I think about the hours of questions and about their offhand threats ("This is a dangerous city – one night you could drink too much and wind up under a tram"). I think about how casually they verified my wife's and children's names. About how I signed everything they gave me, in a blur. About how they fingerprinted me: one of the interrogating officers led me the end of the corridor and we did it on the windowsill. He took a little plastic roller and made it wet with ink from a pad, then rolled it up and down on each of my fingers and thumbs. It felt like kindergarten, like we were painting. I remember his care in placing each of my inky fingers in the correct box on the paper, and rolling it to make a good impression. He did it gently and I was struck by the warmth and softness of his hands. I don't share these details with Artyom when he returns.

I got in trouble because I gave a talk at Volgograd State University. I had been invited to campus to meet World Cup volunteers, but my talk happened spontaneously – they led me unprepared into a room packed with students, stood me in front of a podium with a microphone, and I improvised. The officers who detained me explained that I was forbidden from the territory of the university, that it was no different than entering the country with no visa. But I wondered: was my invitation to campus legitimate, or was I set up? I'd never met the professor who invited me, and I didn't know the man who introduced us, but it was Artyom who started

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<sup>1</sup> Names and details have been changed, though there is debate whether anonymity is possible while working in police states (Driscoll 2015). One of my goals is to find the extraordinary within the ordinary, which might expose others to less risk by not subjecting them to politically sensitive questions. It could be argued, however, that even my presence is political and thereby any interaction with me might constitute a risk. This is a limiting factor on my research and personal activities.

this process as a favor. Was my detention simply bad luck, or was someone in this chain monitoring me? Could even my friend be complicit? How many times had I spent the night at Artyom and Irina's house? Am I now doubting my closest friends? Or is Artyom uninvolved but, merely by associating with me, is he now a target himself? Are we – am I – being watched even now? Artyom sets down another pair of beers. "Listen, don't tell Irina anything about what happened to you. She doesn't understand how these things work, and she'll worry." I notice on his face a familiar kind of supplicating smile, as if he is making himself low in the face of something powerful.

### **Connection**

The value within everyday encounters can be revealed through a process of connection, which I understand in two ways: a resonance with other encounters over time, and a series of linkages to other people, encounters, and scales. The first connection can be encouraged by generating further encounters, while the second can be nourished by exposure to other means of thinking. For me, this second connection meant reading academic (and non-academic) literature to build bridges between individual experience and broader relevance. This is crucial in order to escape the trap of remaining in the micro, and instead move towards an exploration of how individual and geopolitical scales are co-constructed.

In my case, after my encounter at the military shooting range, I searched for news about the destruction and construction in the meadow and the mountain. I discovered that these projects were linked to some of the most powerful oligarchs in Russia, part of the massive urban development projects to prepare Sochi for the 2014 Winter Olympics (Gazeta.ru 2013). This was a national state effort at globalized place-making and an attempt to assert great nation status after the Soviet collapse (Golubchikov and Slepukhina 2014; Trubina 2019). At stake

were issues of international prestige, geopolitical positioning, and a new sense of Russian-ness, all of which outweighed the destruction to Sochi's protected natural environment (EWNC 2011a; 2011b; Grix and Kramareva 2017; Wolfe 2016). Whether establishing blanket police surveillance, criminalizing protest and imprisoning opposition figures, or beating activists on Sochi streets, a dramatic increase in authoritarian and illiberal practices made clear that the state would brook no dissent (Soldatov and Borogan 2013; Walker 2013).

Similarly, my detention in Volgograd and ejection from Russia sparked a search for other academics targeted by the authorities, which uncovered a rash of researchers suffering from repressive practices in Iran, Egypt, and Turkey (Degirmen and Atik 2017; Peltier 2020; Reuters 2016). Since I was forbidden from returning to Russia, I began looking at the intersection of digital methodologies and authoritarian research, trying to continue research from afar (Akbari and Gabdulhakov 2019; Ash, Kitchin, and Leszczynski 2018; Pospieszna and Galus 2019). I also found inspiration in feminist geopolitics, where an attention to the domestic and seemingly mundane can produce new understandings of political developments at all scales (Dixon 2015; Smith 2020; Williams and Massaro 2013). Establishing connections through these readings revealed deeper meanings within ordinary acts – visiting a friend, giving a talk, sharing a beer – and it explained how geopolitical thinking and subject positioning can shape and shatter the conduct of daily life. These connections meant that I was sensitized to these issues in later encounters with authoritarian practices outside of Russia, and made me better able to perceive multiscale meanings in situ.

Another vignette, another border: I was invited to Minsk, Belarus, to speak at a conference co-organized by the Belarusian Ministry of Sport and a Western European foundation. For the first time, I had a government invitation, but even so, I was nervous about the Belarusian police

state, and the echoes of my encounters in Russia colored my thinking. At the Minsk airport, I approached border control and my heart began to pound. A woman in green military uniform sat in a booth and took my passport. She scanned it and then paused, frowning at her screen. She picked up a phone and spoke, but I couldn't hear. I saw people in other lines being processed and crossing the border into the country. The people in my line looked frustrated. I felt trapped, guilty, exposed.

Another woman in uniform came to fetch me, older and of higher rank. She was flanked by two soldiers with shaved heads under camouflaged caps. I explained about the conference, but my mouth was dry and the words didn't come out right. I found myself smiling humbly and making myself low in front of the officer. She wanted to see my email correspondence with the conference organizers. I fumbled when opening my laptop because my hands were trembling, and I felt embarrassed about this visible nervousness, because my body was betraying me. I opened the relevant emails and the officer began to read. That was when my laptop battery died and the screen winked off. I held my breath and smiled, dumbly. At last the officer took my passport, told me to wait, and disappeared. The soldiers sat me on a bench and stood guard. They were soon joined by three more, all looking bored.

I sat on the metal bench for about two hours, feeling alternately peaceful and panicked, and tried but failed to make small talk with the guards while their bosses figured out what to do with me. Periodically I saw two men in suits – one blue, one brown, of an old cut – striding across my field of vision. They stared at me in passing but never spoke. Clearly my arrival had caused a fuss. Because I had been sensitized through establishing connections, I understood that the problem was not specifically me and these others at the airport in Minsk. The problem was geopolitical: I was an American citizen in a time of increasingly curtailed domestic

political freedoms and heightened geopolitical tensions. My years of living and working in Russia did not matter. My marriage and family connections did not matter. What mattered is that I was marked on a Russian security database.

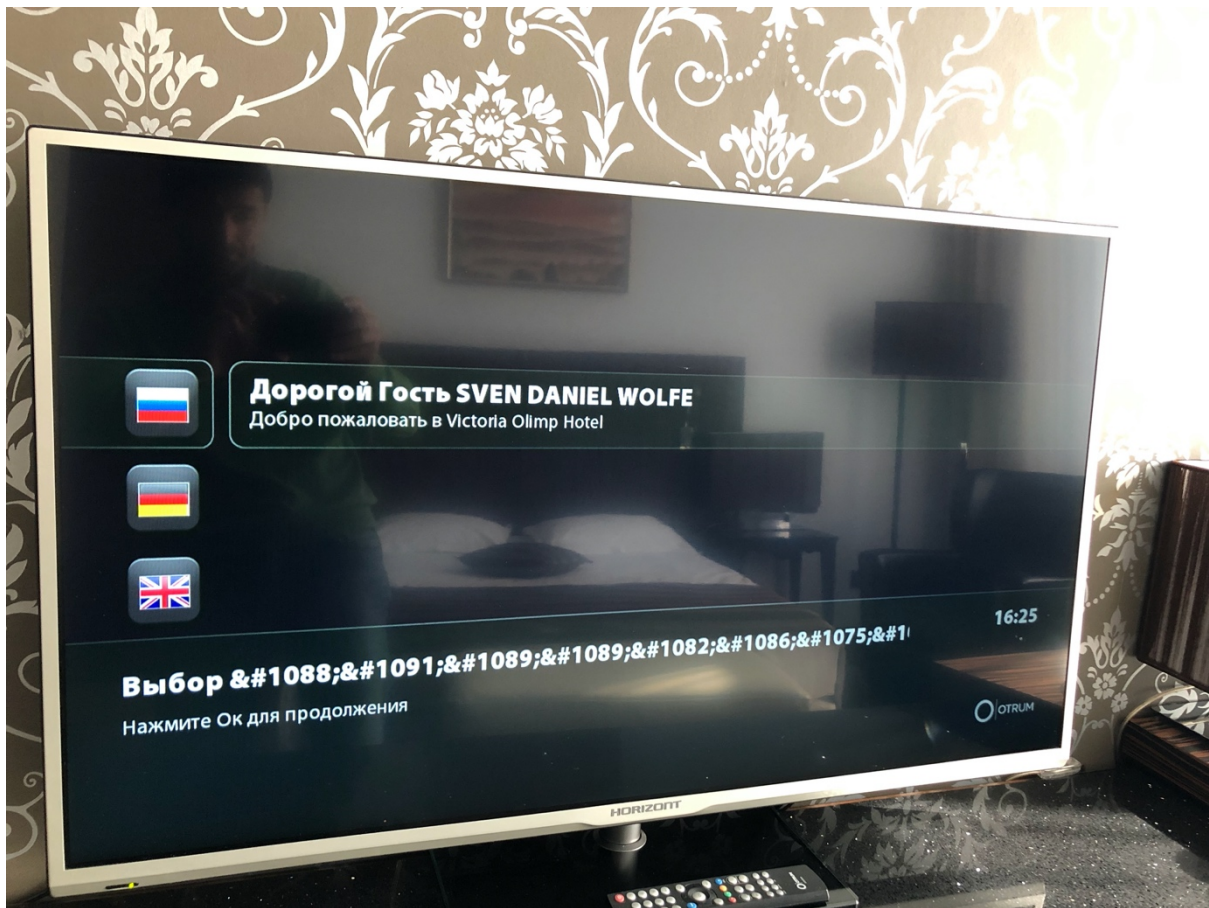
Russia and Belarus are closely allied: they are part of the Union State, an agreement that allows free movement between the two nations (Soyuz.by 2006); the Eurasian Economic Union, a free trade agreement (Eurasian Economic Union 2014); and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a military alliance (CSTO 2012). They have numerous mechanisms to share information on security risks, and since Russian authorities after my expulsion called me a secret agent and a western threat (Karpova 2017; Rossiya24 2018), it makes sense that they would flag my name. The Belarusian authorities could not ignore this fact. And yet, I had been invited to Belarus as a foreign expert to give my assessment of their preparations for the 2019 European Games, a second-tier mega-event in the style of the Olympics. In this context, my status as a westerner was prized, because I could bestow foreign credibility on their event. The authorities wanted me in the country but at the same time they could not let me in. Somebody, somewhere, had made a mistake in allowing me to get this far. By all accounts, I should not have been invited. But there I was, stuck in the airport on a metal bench and surrounded by soldiers, a foreign expert to be wined and dined, but also a security threat.

The Minsk authorities resolved this dilemma through bureaucratic duplicity. According to the security database, I was barred from the country, so they stamped my passport with an official NO ENTRY, and then added an exit stamp to indicate that I was sent away from Belarus on that date. In other words, I had officially been denied entry into the country, as expected. Then, the officer who originally disappeared with my passport walked me to the booths, held open the metal gate, and welcomed me into the country. That is how I entered Belarus,

bureaucratically invisible and technically illegal. According to the paperwork, I had been sent away, but there I was in Minsk.

It was a long and silent ride into the city proper, on a smooth highway cut through deep green forests and lined with billboards for parquet flooring, new housing developments, a Russian bank, and the value of serving in the military. We entered Minsk through new apartment towers and gleaming starchitecture-style buildings. When the driver pulled into the hotel, he escorted me inside and passed me to the organizers, a Ukrainian named Tanya who had arrived from Kyiv that morning, and Dima, her Belarusian colleague. Tanya was effusive (“Thank god they let you through! I don’t understand any of this!”) but Dima was more composed. He nodded thoughtfully and said, “They let you go in about two hours. That’s really not bad.” They accompanied me through registration and insisted on shepherding me to my room. Were these the friendly actions of proper hosts, or concern for a foreigner who had already gotten into trouble? Were they “minding” me? It was impossible to tell.

We said goodbye when I opened the door to my room. Inside, the television was on, displaying a welcome screen that greeted me by name. This is standard practice in many hotel rooms worldwide, but given the context of my arrival, I confess it felt ominous – particularly with the jumbled characters at the bottom of the screen (Figure 2). Harmless error from an attempt at personalized hospitality, or ominous sign of glitchy surveillance?



*Figure 2: Welcome screen greeting me, the “dear guest” at a hotel in Minsk, Belarus, with harmless/suspicious characters at the bottom of the screen.*

I spoke to an imaginary hidden microphone: “Hello KGB. I’m not an enemy.” This became my tradition in Minsk, pronounced in Russian to an empty hotel room every morning and evening. After the Soviet collapse in 1991, every former republic rebranded its security services, from the NSC in Kazakhstan to the FSB in Russia. Only Belarus kept the original name of the Committee for State Security of the USSR, the KGB. Name changes might seem a small thing, particularly if these usually unaccountable state security organs continue to act much the same as before. Still, there was something remarkable about the insistence in Belarus to keep the name, despite the notorious history of KGB surveillance, violence, repression, and murder, both abroad and within the USSR (Andrew and Mitrokhin 2018; Knight 1988). It was

impossible to lose the feeling that I was in KGB territory and, especially after my peculiar entry, I couldn't imagine that my room – in a hotel chosen for me – wouldn't be monitored.

## **Representation**

If the first three quarters of the framework are about generating and making wider sense of encounters and ruptures, the final element concerns issues of communication. This brings up issues of ethics, safety, and the politics of representation. My autoethnographic narrations are framed within, delimited by, and contingent on my own positionality, and as such, require reflexive thinking and cannot be communicated uncritically (G. Rose 1997). More broadly, I follow Cindi Katz in her call for researchers to position themselves “between description and analysis... between us and them... between the exotic and the mundane” (Katz 1992, 505), in order to contribute to a more egalitarian geography. I chose this first-person style of thick description because of its usefulness in dissolving barriers between subjects, objects, and scales, and because it is an invitation to intimacy (Butz 2010). Along these lines, I crafted narratives in reference to Ellingson (2011), whose continuum approach to qualitative methodologies attempts to dissolve a number of persistent dichotomies in social science inquiry. Inhabiting the center-left of her continuum, I engaged a first-person voice, based the empirical parts of the paper around vignettes oriented on my interactions in quotidian moments, and embraced ambiguity and nuance in an inductive, emergent interplay with the field (Ellingson 2011, 597).

Aside from being reflexive about positionality and open about process, I frame myself within a tradition of intellectual humility and authentic listening (Koch 2019a) – arguably necessary in any context, but particularly important in spaces shaped by authoritarian and illiberal practices. This is a bid to move beyond the (re)production of Cold War-era metanarratives that

present the nations of the former Soviet Union in particular and limited ways. But this effort conceals a conundrum: how can I avoid reifying the Orientalizing imaginary of authoritarianism or totalitarianism when discussing authoritarian and illiberal practices in these post-Soviet nations? Without care, research in more closed contexts can contribute to a monstrous imagination of authoritarianism that has little to do with actual lived experience (Glasius et al. 2018, 8). This dovetails with another theoretical problem in my focus on authoritarian interactions. Though these moments and ruptures are not unusual, they are imbued with a sense of danger that risks becoming the focus of attention and overshadowing the ordinariness of the encounter (Nelson 2013). In contrast to the totalitarian imaginary, my border crossings and movements within these countries are quite ordinary and not inherently dangerous. Travel and mobility are part of everyday life for large segments of the population, and even those who do not travel are still affected by the logics of borders and spatial control through quotidian practices of document checks, registrations, and selective surveillance. In representing encounters and ruptures, I strive to encompass the tension between the ordinariness and extraordinariness of authoritarian practices, though without fetishizing danger or seeking any supposed rewards for pursuing these avenues of inquiry (Driscoll and Schuster 2017).

At the same time, the dangers and indeed terrors of authoritarian practices are very real, and they are creating increasingly problematic conditions for growing numbers of people. This results in more potential risks for ordinary people, as well as for people like me in my blended roles of resident and researcher. It also implicates those who interact with me, since my foreignness can easily be construed as a threat, and my work confused with spycraft (Driscoll and Schuster 2017). This is especially true in reference to the authoritarian Red Line (Glasius et al. 2018, 38–47), referring to an invisible border that demarcates what can and cannot be

discussed or done, under penalty of attracting unwanted attention from the authorities. Crucially, the Red Line is fluid and contingent, and depends on context, time, and positionality.

In my case, I was ignorant of the Red Line until my invitation to Volgograd State University, and my ignorance was caused by my positionality. I am American, but I had been living in and out of Russia since before Vladimir Putin was prime minister, much less president. My wife is Russian, our children are dual citizens, and these family connections – as well as a broad love of the language, culture, and country – blinded me to political developments and closures at larger scales. Despite a number of encounters with petty authorities, I never felt threatened or constrained by the state and, frankly, for years I ignored foreign reports of increasing authoritarianism and illiberalism, instead chalking these up to Russophobia. I am chagrined that it took the FSB actually knocking at my door before I awoke to the political closures in Russia, and to the series of state practices of surveillance, intimidation, interrogation, exclusion, and worse (Gentile 2013). Moving out of my intimate story, then, a minor theory approach to understanding the processes of growing Russian authoritarianism might note the increasing closures marked off by the constricting Red Line as demarcated by individual experiences. In this way, mapping the spatiotemporal specificities and uneven applications of the Red Line produces a unique, minor key cartography of Russian authoritarian and illiberal practices.

Aside from this, and framed within the broader project of making space for the post-socialist Global East (Müller 2018), I feel an ethical obligation to try to dissolve some of the Orientalizing presentations of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. This is especially challenging due to the supposed allure of fieldwork in dangerous places, such as the former Soviet Union (Driscoll and Schuster 2017; Nelson 2013), and I have noticed that more people were interested

in my stories about being detained by the FSB in Volgograd, as opposed to other aspects of my research. Overcoming Cold War-era stereotypes is not easy, particularly when discussing the KGB or FSB, but even small moves towards nuance matter.

In this light, the ambiguities of authoritarian encounter often reveal my own paranoia, and my empty hotel room in Minsk underscores how difficult this project can be. Interrogating my encounter with the invisible and imagined security services revealed that the jumbled characters I saw at the bottom of the welcoming television screen (shown in Figure 2) were, perhaps, not as suspicious as assumed. Over time, and after establishing connections beyond the immediate, I learned that these were Unicode Decimal Codes, a computer standard for consistent text communication (Unicode 2021). With this knowledge, I was able to translate the jumble into legible text. It was in Russian, and it spelled out the beginning of the phrase “Russian-speaking”. Now, it is possible that this was an error of surveillance technology, that the security authorities had flagged me as a Russian speaker, and somehow this information leaked onto my welcome screen. Or, more plausibly, this could be a simple language option menu, presumably inviting the guest to press a button to switch their television menu between Russian, Belarusian, and English. What I initially took as a sign of KGB surveillance was, most probably, a common language encoding error resulting from an incompatibility when working between languages with different scripts. It is impossible to know for certain, of course, and still this is no guarantee that my room was not monitored. The point is that in an ethical telling, these ambiguities are important to identify and explore.

### **Unpacking the multiscalar geopolitical**

A few weeks after Minsk, I flew to Ukraine and arrived in Kyiv at an airport that had been renovated for another second-tier mega-event: the UEFA European Football Championship,

hosted by Poland and Ukraine in 2012. The Ukrainian entry procedure felt no different than in Russia or Belarus: crowds of travelers sorting themselves before a row of booths staffed by women in military uniform, looking bored. This crossing was another moment with the potential to experience geopolitical scales at play in the body. But Ukraine is not a member of the same security and economic intergovernmental organizations as Russia and Belarus and, particularly after the geopolitical split with Russia starting in 2013-2014, it would be shocking if they shared a common security database and the same “no entry” lists. In contrast to Russia and Belarus, Ukraine was undergoing a process of relative political opening, but still I worried that my passport would flag unpleasant interest, as it carried the marks of my recent Belarusian airport misadventures. Would the Ukrainian SBU be as interested in me as the Russian FSB or the Belarusian KGB? It seemed reasonable that being marked as undesirable in one country might single me out for attention in another, regardless of geopolitical orientation.

When I showed my passport to the officer in the booth in Kyiv, she flipped directly to the final page as though she already knew about my Belarusian stamp. She paused and, just as in Minsk, my heartrate spiked. I visualized myself denied entry, surrounded by guards on another bench, sent home on the next flight. Instead, the officer raised an eyebrow, flipped back a page, and stamped my entry into Ukraine. Automatically, I felt my lips forming a strange, ingratiating kind of smile. Then I walked through and found my connection, but the feelings of vulnerability lingered. In the waiting area for the domestic flight, I watched a pair of police officers stroll among the passengers, lazily checking documents. They asked for the passports of some Swedish businessmen who were talking over beers, and they spoke for a long time to a young Kazakh with an overstuffed bag. I desperately wanted to remain invisible. That evening, I shared my entry stories to friends over dinner. We passed around my passport and laughed at

the absurdity of borders. A Ukrainian friend examined my stamps and said, “Why would you worry about the Russian blacklist? Any enemy of Putin’s is a friend of ours.”

This paper used vignettes like these to shed light on authoritarian and illiberal practices, ultimately providing a fuller exploration of geopolitical functioning in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. I generated, shared, and analyzed these vignettes from a minor key – a relational, transformative way of working (Katz 1996). Minor thinking is not orthodox and does not follow a prescribed recipe, but there is a general understanding that this work is messy and emergent, (Katz 2017), seeking the spaces of betweenness, impasses, or ruptures. Grounded in an understanding of the co-construction of macro and micro scales, I focused on (extra)ordinary moments of rupture, because these are where the intimate dynamics of authoritarianism can more easily be seen. In the paper, I presented these ruptures separately from one another, arranged according to the structure of a minor theory ethnographic framework. A disadvantage of this presentation, however, is that the structure complicates efforts to illuminate patterns between and beyond each isolated vignette. To address this lack, I focus now on three of the numerous patterns and themes running through these encounters.

The first is the theme of supplication, found in many moments of rupture, and embodied by a posture of humility and a fragile smile. My wife and I asking the military police to let us go; my father-in-law lowering himself to offer a gift; the same smile on my friend in the Volgograd bar; and my own lips aping these smiles with the airport authorities in Minsk and Kyiv. This supplication is a central theme in these experiences of authoritarian practices, and reveals the physical effect of the power differential over bodies. We smiled not from affection or warmth, but as an acknowledgment of our smallness in the face of a greater power. The supplicating smile is a plea for autonomy: let me leave, let me live, let me be.

Boredom is another theme running through these encounters. The petty agents of the state so often seemed unengaged and uninspired, leaning against walls and resting hands on chins. This does not mean that they would stray from procedure or orders, but rather that there was a sense of their unfulfilled time that permeated our encounters and seemed strange when contrasted against my feelings of vulnerability. It felt as if they did not care – not about their tasks and certainly not about me. In retrospect, this boredom and lack of care felt like the flipside of the powerlessness that creates the supplicating smile. It was a tacit admission that in our encounters we shared no commonality, no bond. At the same time, boredom reveals these people's own lack of agency in the encounter, and underscored their smallness as enforcers but not deciders. This adds a different dimension to Anderson's (2021) analysis of the politics of boredom. In contrast to the ways in which Anderson sees boredom preempted by promises of intensity offered either by participation in markets or by populist leaders, I see this flavor of petty authoritarian boredom as an expression of apathy stemming from a lack of agency in one's life (Adorno 2005, 192). There was a sense of mutual insignificance in our encounters, a feeling that we were locked into a path-dependent trajectory based on our pre-determined roles, and that our individual identities were diminished as a result. Thus, boredom. Nevertheless, small and bored as they were, these state agents also were the physical manifestations of state power, and in many of these encounters, I could hardly move unless they allowed it. This paradoxical combination of boredom and power seems, to me, indicative of a general mundane quality inherent in authoritarian practices. Most often, once the adrenalin of rupture faded, these encounters were in truth remarkably dull.

Finally, and more broadly, the encounters underscore the differing dynamics of authoritarian practices between Russia and Belarus on one side, and Ukraine on the other. People in both

Russia and Belarus are experiencing an intensification of authoritarian and illiberal practices of late, with stolen elections, police crackdowns, the destruction of independent media, and mass arrests (Lipman 2016; Kolarzik and Terzyan 2020). In contrast, policy in Ukraine has moved towards democratic representation, government accountability, support for independent media, and something of a haven for Russian speakers escaping from Russia or Belarus (Motyl and Soltys 2019). The encounters shared here reveal the unevenness and incompleteness of these imaginaries, however. Despite an alarming intensification of authoritarian practices, ordinary life continues in Russia and Belarus – even if I am not permitted to participate in person, and can only witness from afar. Conversely, Ukraine’s democratization and liberalization is more uneven and halting than presented (Knott 2018), illustrated here by the continued practices of police patrols and random document checking in the Kyiv airport. In this way, the encounters speak to the complexities and instabilities of multiscalar geopolitics, the dangers of essentialist thinking, and are a continued argument for nuance and humility (Koch 2019a). This also fits with minor thinking, where an ethical telling must reject a universalizing gaze, and instead work in ways that are situated, transparent, and responsive to the unique assemblages of person, situation, and society (Lancione 2019).

### **Conclusion: the minor intimate and the authoritarian (extra)ordinary**

Working in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, this paper advances an intimate geopolitics that highlights encounters, bodies, feelings, and everyday situations (Barabantseva, Mhurchú, and Peterson 2021; Carter and Woodyer 2020). It makes sense of recent geopolitical closures and openings through minor theory (Katz 1996; 2017), unpacking (extra)ordinary moments to explore the spatial and multiscalar complexities that characterize life shaped by authoritarian and illiberal practices. This is not to say that the micro is used as an entry to understanding the global, but rather an argument that individual and geopolitical scales are co-produced, and that

the intimate is where geopolitics takes shape (Deleuze and Guattari 2013; Massey 2005). Minor theory – as both political project and practice – is well-suited to plumbing the intimate geopolitical in closed contexts. It is attuned to encounter, sensitive to ruptures in the ordinary flow of things, and positioned against hegemony. A minor attention to the authoritarian everyday shows how quotidian encounters subvert the impression of universality even as they are interconnected with and suffused by larger scales (Guattari 2009). This is messy and often unsettling work, but this messiness serves to dissolve the notion that politics is stable and already formed (Jellis and Gerlach 2017).

Through an ethnographic framework of *rupture, digestion, connection, and representation*, this paper embarks on an intimate journey into spaces that are traditionally understood as hard, closed, dangerous, and not conducive for open qualitative inquiry (Goode and Ahram 2016; Koch 2013a). Within the constraints imposed by authoritarian practices (Glasius 2018; Reny 2016), the paper offers a collage of everyday encounters that help identify, expand, contextualize, and communicate about the intimate geopolitical. In this sense, and despite these autoethnographic vignettes, the story is not about me. Rather the story is about encounters – with relatives, friends, colleagues, strangers – and about our ordinary interactions (going for a visit, coming home, meeting in the bar, crossing a border), all shaped by authoritarian and illiberal state practices.

This minor key attention to the intimate geopolitical is intended to destabilize hegemonic knowledge, and instead offer situated, nuanced portrayals that are sensitive to the particularities of life under the influence of authoritarian and illiberal practices, regardless of national context. A minor mode does not deny the effects or dangers of these practices, but instead endeavors to incorporate them into exploring a more nuanced politics. This requires daring to be vulnerable:

by placing your body at some level of risk; by opening yourself to the possibility of unexpected connections; and by embracing the contingencies of this kind of situated research and the challenges of ethical representation that it entails.

And so, a concluding vignette from Minsk: feeling vulnerable after a long few days under real and imagined surveillance, I was driven back to the airport. The passport booths were fully staffed and a few soldiers milled about nearby. As usual, most of them looked bored. Somehow, I was the only traveler at that time, so there was no wait to approach a booth and present my passport. Immediately, the officer found my NO ENTRY stamp and demanded to know what I was doing in Belarus. As instructed, I gave her a business card, English on one side and Russian on the other, that belonged to an official in the Ministry of Sport. When she saw the card, the officer's demeanor flipped. She smiled – not in supplication, but warmly. “We’ve been expecting you. We received a phone call this morning.” Still smiling, she returned my passport and let me leave.

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