

Negotiating Ethics and Methods: Knowledge Co-Production in the Russian Arctic in Uncertain Times

Karolina Sikora

This article reflects on the ethical, and methodological complexities of conducting fieldwork in the Russian North in a period of heightened uncertainty. While the prevailing assumption in Western academia is that field collaboration in Russia has become entirely impossible, this paper complicates that narrative by drawing on the author's field experiences between 2022 and 2024. Rather than offering a generalisable model or prescriptive guidance, the article explores how fieldwork unfolds at a level of interpersonal interaction in unpredictable circumstances. Three assumptions are critically examined: that borders are closed; that academic exchange is no longer viable; and that local interlocutors need protection from engagement. These assumptions, while rooted in legitimate concern, risk oversimplifying the situated agency, strategic discretion, and ethical deliberation exercised by both researchers and field partners. Through narrative accounts and analytic reflection, the paper shows how trust, discretion, and flexibility can – under specific circumstances – make continued fieldwork possible, though not without emotional and ethical strain. The article contributes to current debates on research ethics, risk, and presence in sensitive contexts. It argues for a more relational understanding of ethical responsibility – one that acknowledges ambiguity, respects local agency, and resists binary frameworks of engagement versus disengagement. Ultimately, it calls for sustained reflection on how knowledge is produced, withheld, or silenced in times of uncertainty.

Introduction

Periods of "opening and closure" in Russian social science research have been a recurring phenomenon since the 18th century (Schweitzer 2024). However, never before has the Russian field been as accessible to Western-origin researchers as in the past 30 years (Gray et al., 2003). Since the late 1980s, institutional cooperation in social science research between Russian and Western academic communities has steadily progressed, fostering the co-creation of knowledge, in which Russian scholars, Indigenous communities in the Russian North and Siberia, and Western researchers actively shaped research questions, methods, and interpretations together. In this context, long-term ethnographic research required Western scholars to develop not only proficiency in Russian and local languages but also to invest years in cultivating mutual trust with local communities. This trust was essential not only for gaining more nuanced insights into local

dynamics but also for advancing an ethically responsible, decolonizing approach to research, particularly in anthropology (Toivanen, forthcoming).

In the wake of the Soviet Union's decline, international cooperation in Arctic research began to flourish following Mikhail Gorbachev's pivotal 1987 speech, where he envisioned the Arctic as a 'zone of peace.' This concept framed the region not only as a space free from military conflict but also as fertile ground for academic, economic, and cross-border collaboration (Cambou & Heininen, 2018). Gorbachev's rhetoric, notably his emphasis on "people's common sense" as a counterbalance to geopolitical strife, reinforced the belief in the resilience of scholarly and human connections across borders.

Recent geopolitical developments have thus become a critical test for the viability and future of that cooperation. Scholars working with partners in Russia – including Indigenous and minority populations – have been forced to reassess whether and how such cooperation can continue. The ethical, political, and practical implications of this reassessment remain unresolved and deeply contested.

Yet, the significance of the Russian North is not diminishing. On the contrary, it is becoming more geopolitically, culturally, and environmentally central to global conversations. At the same time, it is becoming one of the least accessible Arctic regions for researchers. Our understanding of the Russian Arctic is shrinking – not only because of geopolitical tensions, but because we are increasingly unable to spend time in the region and engage meaningfully with its people. As Mamontova (Kasten et al., 2025) reminds us: "It is our professional duty to examine, understand, and document the evolving landscape of Siberia, regardless of our own opinions or judgments."

While most Western-based researchers lost access to the field, a few have managed to maintain personal and professional ties with individuals and communities in Russian North. Some chose not to publicly disclose their field plans or past visits, keeping details minimal when speaking in Western contexts. For those who did undertake fieldwork after February 2022, the decision was not taken lightly. Each had to weigh the potential risks and responsibilities for themselves and their Russian interlocutors. At the same time, articulating these dilemmas openly in Western academic environments can feel difficult, morally fraught, or even inappropriate.

This article revisits the widely held assumption that fieldwork collaboration in Russia has become "completely impossible." Without dismissing the very real risks – especially for Russian partners – I aim to complicate this picture. Drawing primarily on my ethnographic research with Indigenous communities in the Russian North between 2022 and 2024, and informed by insights from three Western-based researchers who also conducted fieldwork during this period, I identify three common assumptions shaping academic and public discourse. Rather than comparing methodological approaches in the abstract, the paper examines how ethnographic methods – participant observation, informal conversations, and field-based engagement – are adapted and inseparable from ethical and relational considerations.

In doing so, the paper reflects on how fieldwork is shaped by unpredictable conditions, where ethical decision-making is intertwined with personal, relational, and situational factors. These dilemmas are rarely abstract or procedural; they are lived, negotiated, and deeply contextual. While these reflections focus on ethical and methodological practices, they do not suggest that systemic risks are eliminated. I suggest that *under particular alignments of conditions*, such as careful topic framing,

pre-existing trust, and low-profile strategies, some forms of engagement may remain possible. These cases *are not generalisable*, and the situation is highly dynamic: what was feasible last year may no longer be today. These reflections highlight what was practically possible in the specific contexts observed; they are not prescriptive, and do not imply that any form of engagement is risk-free or universally replicable.

Methodological Constraints and Risk assessment

To explore how researchers have navigated ethical and logistical challenges in post-2022 fieldwork, this study primarily draws on several months of my ethnographic fieldwork in the Russian North. Additionally, I conducted individual conversations with three Western-based colleagues who also maintained field engagement in Russia during this period. These discussions provided valuable comparative and contextual perspectives, helping situate my own experiences within a broader, though limited, frame. These perspectives are complemented by observations from conferences and informal discussions during this period.

To protect confidentiality, all identifying details such as field sites, affiliations, and risk assessments have been anonymized. Each person's decision to travel and maintain collaborations with Russian-based field partners was deeply personal, shaped by private circumstances, values, research focus, and, in all cases, existing relationships with field partners. Importantly, none of us engaged in formal collaborations with Russian state institutions or universities during this time; interactions were personal, community-based, and without institutional ties or agreements. In my own fieldwork, I relied on participant observation and conversations, with local interlocutors facilitating access to sites, connecting me with people already expecting me, advising on where to go, and occasionally accompanying me in the field.

Thus, attempting to generalise about risk assessment standards, of what constitutes acceptable or excessive risk, or motivations to travel is unfeasible, as these factors are highly individual and would require disclosing and analysing sensitive personal details, and potentially even bordering on psychological analysis of individual researchers. When risks cannot be clearly assessed or identified, preparation, both technical and mental, becomes challenging. Being hypervigilant throughout the high-risk fieldwork, is a feeling that was very well described already by Karaseva (Karaseva, 2024).

I largely share her feelings of anxiety and fear in response to perceived threats, often without knowing how realistic they truly were. Each field visit I had undertaken was different, yet one particular trip stood out. Before I even crossed the border, a series of delays made me wonder if maybe I was simply not meant to go this time. I thought, "*Mozhet byt' ne sud'ba*" – maybe it is not meant to be. Nevertheless, I decided to go.

At the border, the guards asked me several detailed questions about my purpose, destination, affiliations, visas, and invitations – far more specific and thorough than earlier. The questions were posed in such a way that I began to doubt my answers, even though I had nothing to hide. Everything was in order, transparent, and legal, and I had all the required documents. Still, I became stressed, wondering if my responses sounded suspicious. I tried to calm down, thinking that the authorities knew where I had been before and what my interests were – why should anything be different this time?

After crossing the border, I stayed for a few nights in a mining town, as I could not find any accommodations in the village where I wanted to do the interviews. I booked a room in a large Soviet-era hotel located in the center of the main square. My car, with foreign plates, parked in the open parking lot in front of the hotel, immediately drew attention. The town was not that small, but locals quickly noticed that I am new to the area. At a local café where I went for dinner, the waiter commented on my accent, which sounded Slavic but was clearly not Russian. He asked, “You’re not from here, right? Is that your car in front of the hotel?” Suddenly, I started worrying about the car, thinking if it might get destroyed overnight. It was old and not particularly valuable, but being a foreign car, it attracted attention, since these days there are almost no foreigners around. I even considered moving it somewhere else, to a less visible place, but eventually that felt even more suspicious.

From my hotel room, feeling anxious, I called two close friends back home, to share my concerns – about the border questions, the car, and the general sense of anxiety I felt.

It was a heat wave in the North, and on the fifth floor of the Soviet hotel, the room was stuffy at night, even with the window open. I was struggling to sleep when, around two in the morning, I woke in a panic, hearing the word “Finlandiya” coming from the parking lot below. My first thought was that someone indeed was about to destroy my car. Looking discreetly out the window, I did not see anyone. Soon, however, two cars pulled up to the hotel entrance. Three people were talking outside – two men and, I assumed, the hotel receptionist. From the fifth floor, I could not hear everything, but I heard “Finlandiya” again, and then the woman asked, “Will you take her with you?” I could not hear the answer. I froze.

In my panic, I prepared fresh clothes and shoes, just in case. I had no computer with me, only a clean phone, some clothes, sweets, a notebook, and a few books – nothing extraordinary. But no one came to my room that night or even in the following days. I stayed a few more days before driving back towards the border, all the time thinking who were those people. Why would they come at two in the morning, why did they not approach me? Is it a coincidence that they appeared right after my phone calls with friends? I heard stories from colleagues who did research during the Soviet era about “special” hotel rooms, but initially I even did not consider that maybe I was placed in one?

After a couple of days, I shared the story with my Russian friends. They seemed far less terrified than I was. One of them, perfectly calm, told me, “You should have revealed that you heard them. Looked out the window. They would have disappeared in no time. Or if not, just tell them you have rights – it was the middle of the night, and they were bothering you! Tell them to come back in the morning if they have questions, or you will complain to their bosses.”

That night, I did not consider any rights I might have. It did not feel like I have any protection in that moment either. The idea of showing a sense of authority or threatening to complain never crossed my mind – it felt like I want to run away. My friend continued, “They rely on your fear and lack of knowledge. Study the regulations! They have rules too. If there are complaints about their work, they can lose benefits, and that is the last thing they want.”

During a panel in 2024, I was thinking a lot about this situation, when a speaker raised a thought-provoking question: “How risky is fieldwork when you assess the risk from outside Russia?” I still could not answer that. I did not know even how risky was that situation while assessing it from

within Russia, as in the end nothing had happened. One of the researchers with whom I spoke, told me “you cannot objectively assess the risk, you can only take it or not.” Indeed, I could not have agreed more. The skill we must cultivate, I believe, is not just risk assessment in the abstract – but the ability to pause, observe, and reinterpret a situation in real time, even when overwhelmed by uncertainty. Still, I wonder: if the same set of events had happened in another country, or region or under different circumstances, would I have interpreted them as threatening? Would I have simply brushed off the waiter’s questions as local curiosity? There is a real possibility that I misread the situation – amplified by the atmosphere of fear, and ambiguity. That is the paradox of fieldwork in high-risk environments: Risk is not always visible, measurable, or externally verifiable, you may never know whether something was truly dangerous – or whether it only felt that way. In such contexts, fieldwork becomes a negotiation not just with external conditions, but with one’s own personal thresholds.

Assumption 1: “The Borders Are Closed”

One of the most persistent assumptions I have encountered – both among colleagues and members of the broader public – is the idea that the borders with Russia are closed. Even Russia-based researchers and colleagues familiar with cross-border mobility note that they are frequently asked, *“How were you able to travel if the borders are closed?”* This question reflects a widespread perception shared by both ordinary citizens and academics not closely involved in Russia-related research.

As of May 2025, only Finland has fully closed all its land border crossings with Russia. This measure, introduced in November 2023, was originally framed as temporary and aimed at curbing the movement of third-country nationals into the EU. However, the closure has since been extended indefinitely (YLE, 2024). The policy has sparked mixed reactions – some support it on security grounds, while others, including human rights organisations, have criticized it for potentially infringing on the rights of asylum seekers, including Indigenous individuals and those fleeing repression. Additionally, the European Court of Human Rights is currently reviewing a case filed by nine Russian nationals residing in Finland, who argue that the border closure violates their human rights by disrupting their ability to maintain familial and religious connections across the border. This case highlights the tensions between national security concerns and individual rights in the context of the border closure (ECHR, 2024).

In response to growing criticism, the Finnish government introduced exemptions for specific categories of Russian citizens, such as diplomats and humanitarian cases (RAJA, n.d.), though also they must enter Finland through third countries, typically Estonia, Norway, or Turkey. When I crossed the border between Norway and Russia at Storskog (Kirkenes), Norwegian officers asked Finnish customs officials to inspect my Finnish-registered vehicle. This was unexpected, as the crossing is located in Norway, and I had not encountered this arrangement before. When I inquired about the nature of this cooperation, the Finnish officer declined to comment. While such cross-border collaboration may reflect standard procedures in the current security climate, it also illustrates the degree of ambiguity and shifting enforcement norms along northern borders – further contributing to the perception that movement is more restricted than it actually is.

On the Russian side, visa and entry policies for foreign citizens have remained largely unchanged since 2022. The same documentation is required for tourist, business, study, or humanitarian visas

as before. Several of my colleagues confirmed that Estonian border crossings remain active and busy, with thousands crossing each month, including tourists, dual citizens, and international students. According to Estonia's border authority (Kriis, 2024), between 45,000 and 120,000 people cross at Narva each month, depending on holidays and travel peaks.

This leads to an important clarification: while there are significant restrictions on Russian citizens entering the EU or Schengen area – particularly for tourism – there are no equivalent legal prohibitions enforced by Russia on Western citizens traveling into Russia. The absence of direct flights between Russia and most Western countries likely reinforces the perception that the borders are closed, even though land crossings remain open through Norway, Estonia, Georgia, Turkey, and other third countries.

Media headlines often further contribute to this confusion. Phrases like *“Norway closes last land border with Russia”* or *“Poland-Belarus border to remain closed”* are sometimes taken out of context, without explaining that these restrictions do not apply to all travelers, nor to all crossing points. In many cases, the actual closures apply only to Russian citizens, not to EU or Western passport holders.

In sum, the idea that *“the borders are closed”* is not entirely unfounded – especially given the complexity of new visa regimes and geopolitical tensions – but it is also not entirely accurate. This misconception may discourage researchers from even exploring the practical possibilities of entering Russia, when in fact, border crossings remain legally and logistically feasible for certain individuals, especially those holding EU or affiliated passports. For those of us who have conducted fieldwork in the past three years, crossing into Russia has not been easy – but it has been possible.

Assumption 2 – “Academic exchange is not possible”

In the months following February 2022, internal pressures in Western academic spaces to sever ties with Russian institutions – and, to avoid any engagement with Russian based scholars – were intense. These calls, often framed as moral imperatives, sometimes extended to discouraging or stigmatizing individual researchers who continued contact with Russian colleagues, regardless of the context or ethics of their work. While this “blackout” approach is still present, it appears to be softening. Increasingly, critical voices are emerging to question the unintended consequences of blanket disengagement. These concerns are now surfacing not only in informal discussions within conference corridors but also during formal presentations. “Without being there we are not able to understand what is happening in Russia. And so, we have no right to act as experts on Russian affairs” – said one of the panellists during an international conference in 2024. This sentiment, while powerful, left unanswered the complex question of how presence in Russia can or should be ethically and safely exercised under current conditions. A similar concern was articulated during a closed seminar in October 2023, where a small group of scholars convened to reflect on the future of research with Indigenous communities in Russia. Participants emphasized that the inability to maintain physical presence in the field not only restricts empirical access but also has epistemological consequences. As geopolitical distancing increases, so too does the difficulty of sustaining grounded, context-sensitive understandings of local realities (Morris, 2023). The absence of direct engagement risks producing knowledge that is increasingly speculative, second-hand, or shaped by external narratives rather than by lived experiences on the ground (Morris, 2025).

At the same time, there is growing mutual hesitation on both sides of the border. A colleague of mine, who has worked closely for years with an Indigenous community in the Russian North, told me they had refrained from contacting a long-time friend in Russia, fearing that doing so might place that person at risk. Eventually, the friend initiated contact and admitted they had also hesitated – concerned that reaching out might expose the colleague to scrutiny from Western state bodies. From their perspective, it had not occurred to them that being contacted by someone in the West might raise concerns on the Russian side; rather, they were more worried that their own outreach could become a liability for the person abroad. Doubts and fears of exposing the other party to potential risks is slowly raising on both sides of the border, steadily eroding the trust in relationships that both sides hoped would withstand geopolitical upheavals. What once felt like a bridge now increasingly resembles a point of tension and potential exposure on both sides.

At the same, in 2024, two panel sessions at a major international research conference were devoted to the future of academic cooperation with Russia. In the first, one convener stated firmly, “*We would not have travelled to Russia, even if we could,*” implying that such travel is now impossible – or, at the very least, inappropriate. Yet, two of the subsequent speakers in the same session described their recent fieldwork experiences in Russia. Both were affiliated with Western universities, and one was based in the same department as the panel organizer who made the earlier statement.

This contrast did not go unnoticed. Audience members – including Russian scholars who had traveled to the Western city for that event – raised questions about the inconsistency of such declarations, and the tensions they create within research communities. The reality is not that academic exchange with Russia has become completely impossible, but that it is fragmented, unevenly accessible, and politically fraught. Public narratives of total rupture often obscure the quiet, careful, and sometimes cautious work that continues in the shadows of official policies.

Assumption 3 – “They do not understand the risks, we need to protect them”

In Western academia, voices advocating for caution to avoid putting field partners at risk and emphasising the anthropological principle of “do no harm” are critical and should not be underestimated. These voices rightly emphasize the ethical obligation to avoid endangering research participants, especially in politically sensitive contexts. However, the assumption that Western scholars better understand the risks facing local people who engage with incoming researchers can unintentionally reflect a paternalistic attitude, casting community members as uninformed and in need of external protection. This logic risks reproducing the very colonial dynamics that contemporary research ethics seeks to undo.

Such a stance may obscure the situated knowledge and agency of local actors, who often possess a far more nuanced understanding of the sociopolitical landscape they inhabit – including the roles and routines of state enforcement bodies. All of the researchers I interviewed for this study emphasized that, to their knowledge, none of their collaborators had experienced interrogation or repercussions after their departure from the field. While this absence of evidence does not rule out the possibility of consequences, it suggests that local actors are generally well aware of potential risks and make informed decisions about whether and how to engage.

One presenter at a 2023 seminar offered a pointed reminder of this agency:

“People are not naive; if they agreed to talk with me, they knew what they were doing. We cannot deprive them of their agency. If there is unrest or tension in the

village because of my presence, someone will likely tell me before I realise it myself.”

This view underscores a key principle: that collaboration must be based on mutual awareness, not one-sided assumptions about danger or vulnerability.

Still in 2021, while staying with an elderly woman in a village, the police unexpectedly came to the house to check on me. She met them at the door and kept them in the corridor, speaking with them calmly but firmly. Then she let them in and gestured toward me, saying simply, “*Look, she is just eating breakfast.*” I was sitting at the table, surprised and unsure how to respond. The officers left without further questions. We never spoke about the incident afterward. When I tried to bring it up, she just waved her hand dismissively. Yet her actions revealed deep contextual knowledge and strategic agency: she had assessed the situation, maintained control over the interaction, and re-framed my presence in a way that neutralized suspicion.

Her response was neither overt resistance nor passive compliance – it was a calibrated, relational manoeuvre, grounded in her lived familiarity in handling uncertainty. This moment illustrated how contextual intelligence is often embodied rather than articulated: enacted through the control of space, the pacing of interaction, and the performance of ordinariness. It also reminded me that the ethical conditions of fieldwork often rest not only on what researchers do, but on the quiet, deliberate acts of those who host, mediate, and absorb risk on their behalf.

This experience also shaped, in part, how I collected data in the field. I made a conscious choice not to record any conversations. Instead, I took notes by hand in a notebook, keeping two copies: a rough version written during the conversation with direct citations, and a clean, largely coded version written immediately afterward. This decision, made in early 2021, was personal and not driven by fieldwork risks or sensitivity. First, if I were in the position of an interviewee, I would not want to be recorded myself, and I did not feel comfortable recording others. Some field partners had previously been interviewed and recorded by visiting Russian students and found the experience unsettling, describing it as being ‘chased’ with the recorders. One remarked that they were glad I was writing things down instead. Second, after the officials’ visit, it became clear that having any data carrier that could be confiscated might pose a potential threat to my interlocutors, who sometimes shared personal opinions on sensitive topics.

Still, it is important to acknowledge that perceptions of monitoring and regulatory power differ significantly across contexts. In Russia, such interactions are often normalised, understood as a routine, if uncomfortable, part of public life. In contrast, for many Western scholars, such encounters signal exceptional threat. This divergence in perception may help explain why some academic institutions express deep concern over the potential targeting of Russian collaborators, even when local interlocutors themselves view the situation more pragmatically.

That said, the core uncertainty lies in the opacity of Russia’s legal framework, particularly laws concerning “foreign influence.” For a rural resident with no political affiliation, the consequences of being associated with a foreign researcher remain difficult to predict. They may include administrative sanctions, reputational damage, or the intangible – but persistent – experience of being monitored without clear legal recourse.

It is also worth noting that Russia’s so-called “*foreign agent*” legislation has been in place since 2012. Scholars such as Kryazhkov (Kryazhkov, 2013) have long pointed to the vagueness of these laws

and the highly discretionary, sometimes inconsistent ways they are enforced. As with many aspects of Russian law, enforcement often depends not only on formal statutes but also on informal networks, local bureaucratic culture, and discretionary power.

In certain regions – especially those near international borders – monitoring tends to be more pronounced. Both Russian and foreign researchers may be approached by authorities and asked to explain their activities. As one panelist at a 2024 conference explained, routine visits from officials had long been part of their fieldwork experience in the Russian Far East. Interestingly, they noted that one of the state agents initially tasked with monitoring their work eventually became a key informant. Relationships with officials may be tense, but they can also be negotiated, repurposed, and embedded into the fieldwork process itself.

Sustainable fieldwork practices

While fieldwork in Russia is not formally prohibited for most Western researchers, choosing to engage there today carries a significant stigma. In the cases I am familiar with, ongoing research has not arisen from new institutional partnerships, but from long-standing relationships – particularly with Indigenous communities in the Russian North and Siberia. These connections have been shaped over time through mutual trust and slow, reciprocal engagement.

For many of us, fieldwork is not a short-term project but a sustained commitment. What might seem ethically responsible from one perspective, cutting ties can, from another, feel like abandonment especially when collaborations have been nurtured across years and shared histories. Absence, like presence, carries political meaning. It can signal protest, but it can also be experienced as silence, erasure, or a withdrawal of care. In some cases, continuing to engage – quietly and with sensitivity – can affirm the enduring value of human connection beyond official narratives.

What is often missing in polarised debates is the recognition that fieldwork is never ethically neutral – and rarely governed by fixed rules. It unfolds through ongoing negotiation, trust, and shared decision-making. Sustainable fieldwork demands not certainty, but humility, attentiveness, and the capacity to adapt to shifting conditions.

Today, when much field research is fast-paced, extractive, and driven by publication pressures, it is easy to “fly in and out” without fully considering the implications for those involved (Morris, 2024). The current moment should prompt us to pause and revisit foundational questions: how, why, and with whom do we conduct fieldwork?

This is not a call to defend or condemn research in Russia. Rather, the constraints of the present – geopolitical tensions, restricted access, and monitoring – expose broader issues in field-based research. As Russia becomes harder to reach, it reminds us how other, more accessible sites are often approached with far less ethical scrutiny. The challenge now is to reflect more carefully on our methods and responsibilities – not only in difficult contexts, but in all contexts where fieldwork takes place.

Trust and Personal Relationships

Trust is one of the most frequently invoked concepts in social science fieldwork – so often, in fact, that it risks becoming a cliché, a kind of box-ticking exercise rather than a deeply considered

element. Yet in high-risk settings, trust is no longer just a strategy for gaining access; it becomes the very condition that makes fieldwork ethically and practically possible.

In the Russian context, fieldwork has made visible what trust and relationship-building actually mean beyond rhetoric. Success in such environments does not hinge solely on permission or presence, but on the slow cultivation of mutual confidence – often through shared experience rather than formal roles or ideological alignment. This reflects a kind of phenomenological approach: trust is not declared, it is lived (Manen, 2016).

However, trust is not solely an enabling condition; it also constitutes a mutual and often complex burden shared between researcher and interlocutors (Dudeck, 2014). This relational trust demands from both parties a continuous commitment to protecting one another's well-being, navigating ethical dilemmas, and exercising discretion amidst uncertainty. For researchers, this entails a heightened sense of responsibility to minimize potential risks to their partners, which may constrain their methodological freedom and introduce emotional labor. Simultaneously, interlocutors bear the vulnerability of exposing themselves to scrutiny and potential repercussions, investing their trust in contexts where the stakes can be profound.

In my own experience, one of my field partners in 2023 once asked quietly, “Aren’t you concerned there will be questions?” At the time, I took this as a general gesture of caution. Only later did I learn – through private conversations with two other trusted collaborators, both respected community members – that they had indeed been approached by officials with inquiries about me. This occurred in 2021, when such encounters were already part of the background landscape in some Russian regions.

They chose not to inform me then – not to conceal danger, but to avoid alarming me unnecessarily. In their judgment, no acute threat existed. Had there been, they assured me, they would have immediately advised my departure. Confident in their ability to respond to questions and diffuse tension, they carried this responsibility quietly.

This careful discretion – an act of care and trust – reminds us that trust in the field is not abstract. It lives in shared meals, casual warnings, small acts of protection, and in how others respond to uninvited attention on your behalf. These relational moments often go unmentioned in methodological accounts, yet they form the very terrain on which fieldwork in sensitive contexts depends (Manen, 2016).

While broader geopolitical constraints shape conditions of access, local dynamics remain complex and varied. In some places, longstanding relationships and community size still enable communication and cooperation. Existing trust may create space for ongoing exchange; at other times, contact fades without explanation, reflecting personal circumstances, heightened caution, or the unpredictable rhythms of life under pressure. These experiences highlight not only the precarity of fieldwork in tense environments, but also the enduring weight of mutual responsibility.

Such realities invite us to rethink fieldwork ethics beyond fixed rules or abstract ideals—reminding us that ethical research is a continuous, relational process rooted in attentiveness, humility, and care.

Ethical Sensitivity and Flexibility

In high-risk environments, ethical sensitivity is not a procedural requirement but a relational and ongoing practice. Researchers must continuously assess how their presence might expose others to scrutiny, risk, or unintended consequences. The boundary between what is ethically responsible and what is practically possible is fluid, shaped by shifting local dynamics and political climates (Karaseva, 2024).

In such settings, flexibility is not merely methodological – it is ethical. It requires researchers to respond to changing conditions with attentiveness and humility, often letting go of preplanned agendas in favor of what the moment demands (Scheper-Hughes, 1995). This includes making decisions to delay, obscure, or even erase data; to prioritize silence over exposure; or to follow the lead of those more attuned to the local terrain. Flexibility, in this sense, reflects not a lack of rigor but an ethically grounded responsiveness to power, vulnerability, and relational accountability (Sharma & Gupta, 2009).

This paper itself is part of the post-fieldwork ethical process. Writing it has involved an ongoing negotiation over what can and should be rendered public. That negotiation includes not only the protection of individuals and communities, but also questions of timing: has enough time passed for emotions to settle, for the immediacy of threat to recede, for the intensity surrounding research in and on Russia to ease?

The events and conversations it draws on were embedded in fragile contexts, shaped by trust, discretion, and unspoken agreements about what remains off the record. Decisions about inclusion and omission were not merely editorial, but ethical acts in their own right. This required a form of retrospective flexibility: a continuous revisiting of earlier judgments in light of evolving risk, responsibility, and relationality.

In high-risk settings, ethics do not conclude with field departure. As Morris (2023, 2025) has emphasized, they persist in the aftermath, shaping not only how we analyse but *what* we allow ourselves to make visible. The question is not simply whether a particular detail is sensitive, but how its publication might reverberate across relationships, communities, and the researcher's own accountability. The burden of trust does not dissolve with time.

Transparency (with limits)

In sensitive environments like those discussed earlier, transparency is not a straightforward or absolute value. Instead, it functions as a carefully calibrated strategy that depends heavily on local context and power dynamics.

Proactively informing local authorities about the research – explaining who you are and why you are there – can serve as an essential gesture of respect and professionalism. These steps also functioned as methodological checks: by clarifying my presence, I could safely conduct structured interviews and participant observation without compromising participants or the integrity of data collection. This openness is not about “hiding” anything but about building trust and reducing suspicion. Gatekeepers often prefer transparency over secrecy, and the absence of objections or warnings from them can act as an important informal signal of tacit approval. In practice, this creates a type of implicit local legitimacy, which is crucial in settings where official consent is rarely formalized but power structures strongly influence what is permissible.

This approach to transparency aligns closely with the cultural norms of bureaucratic institutions in many contexts. Politeness, deference to hierarchy, and requests for permission – even when not legally necessary – position the researcher as respectful and non-threatening. Such gestures can ease access and reduce the likelihood of administrative obstacles, framing the research as a neutral or even beneficial presence for local authorities.

However, transparency must be balanced carefully. Over-disclosure can raise suspicion or endanger both the researcher and local interlocutors (Scheper-Hughes, 1995). To manage this risk, it is important to consistently present a clear, simple, and rehearsed explanation of one's identity and research goals – something akin to calmly saying, “I have nothing to hide.” This steady narrative helps maintain composure and project confidence, even when subtle social cues or questions suggest mistrust. Interestingly, in moments when the local social environment becomes difficult to read – when mimicry, questions, or tone feel ambiguous – the researcher's status as a foreigner can paradoxically shield them from certain vulnerabilities, creating a cautious space of relative safety.

Still, transparency in these contexts is always incomplete and controlled. It requires ongoing, informed discretion to protect everyone involved. For example, sharing personal political opinions – especially about sensitive topics – or details about the views and actions of colleagues must be carefully avoided. Such restraint extends to everyday conversations, where questions about private political attitudes can be risky to discuss openly. The researcher must continuously negotiate what can be said, how, and to whom.

After all, transparency here is not about naive openness or total secrecy. It is an ethical and practical balancing act, a constant negotiation shaped by local norms, power relations, and the researcher's evolving ethical responsibilities.

Conclusions

Predictions that field research in Russia would come to an end have proven premature. However, this should not downplay the very real and serious risks faced, particularly by research participants. My experiences, alongside those of other scholars working in similar contexts, represent specific cases rather than universal blueprints. Each field situation demands its own ethical reckoning and context-sensitive strategies.

In times of geopolitical crisis and heightened fear, it is crucial to revisit and reaffirm the ethical foundations that guide our work. These foundations center on building long-term trust, remaining attuned to shifting local dynamics, and embracing the deeply relational nature of risk and responsibility.

Under sensitive conditions, this co-creativity becomes even more crucial, as researchers rely on field partners to gain access but also navigate risks, define what can responsibly be pursued, and keep the work ethically and practically viable. Yet such reliance also highlights uneven power relations. In some situations, field partners may hold greater leverage than the researcher—for instance, the circulation of a rumor can jeopardize field presence. At the same time, collaboration can expose interlocutors to risks, reminding us that power in the field is shifting and situational rather than one-directional.

In a research climate increasingly characterised by demands for rapid, and decontextualized knowledge production, we must remember that ethnographic fieldwork is far more than data gathering. It means embracing ambiguity and uncertainty, recognizing when withdrawal is necessary, and equally when staying – despite the risks – is ethically justified. Ultimately, navigating these complexities is a continuous process, demanding flexibility, transparency, and a profound respect for the people and places at the heart of our research.

References

- Cambou, D., & Heininen, L. (2018). The Barents Region, a society with shared security concerns in the Arctic. In K. Hossain & D. Cambou (Eds.), *Society, Environment and Human Security in the Arctic Barents Region* (pp. 19–34). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351171243>
- Dudeck, S. (2014). *Der Tag des Rentierzüchters: Repräsentation indigener Lebensstile zwischen Taigawohnplatz und Erdölstadt in Westsibirien*. Verlag der Kulturstiftung Sibirien.
- Gray, P., Vakhtin, N., & Schweitzer, P. (2003). Who owns Siberian ethnography? A critical assessment of a re-internationalized field. *Sibirica*, 3(2), 194–216.
- Karaseva, A. (2024). Against “methodological soloism”: An account of vertiginous ethnography in Kolyma in 2022. *A Fractured North: Facing Dilemmas*, 1, 39.
- Kasten, E., Mamontova, N., Oparin, D., Solovyeva, V., Zdor, L., & Zdor, M. (2025). Co-producing knowledge about western museum collections: An avenue for Siberian communities’ engagement. In E. Kasten, I. Krupnik, & G. Fondahl (Eds.), *A Fractured North* (Vol. 3, pp. 179–202). Verlag der Kulturstiftung Sibirien. <https://dh-north.org/publikationen/a-fractured-north-maintaining-connections/de>
- Kryazhkov, V. A. (2013). Development of Russian legislation on Northern Indigenous Peoples. *Arctic Review*, 4(2), 2. <https://arcticreview.no/index.php/arctic/article/view/46>
- Manen, M. van. (2016). *Researching Lived Experience, Second Edition: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. Routledge.
- Morris, J. (2023). Political ethnography and Russian studies in a time of conflict. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 39(1–2), 92–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2151275>
- Morris, J. (2024). The Ethical Imperatives Deriving from War: Decolonization Begins at Home. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 25(1), 143–154.
- Morris, J. (2025). *Everyday Politics in Russia: From Resentment to Resistance*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Scheper-Hughes, N. (1995). The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology. *Current Anthropology*, 36(3), 409–440. <https://doi.org/10.1086/204378>
- Sharma, A., & Gupta, A. (2009). *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Toivanen, R. (forthcoming). Between Anthropology and Indigenous Studies: Escaping the essentialization trap. In F. Stammer, T. Komu, N. Mazzullo & P. Vitebsky (Eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Arctic Anthropology*.

