

The resistance movement is being built on a scorched field. Conversation with DOXA, oppositional Russian media

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“Commons” spoke to three editors of [DOXA](#). The initiative was founded six years ago as an activist student media. Besides the topics relating to educational justice, the collective focused on fighting propaganda and repression. Of course, such activism did not escape the regime’s attention, and four members of the editorial team were put under house arrest. But after February 24 the war became DOXA’s main topic. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, this progressive Russian media has taken a consistent position of supporting Ukrainian resistance, and it keeps looking for ways to oppose the war without complaining about repressions.

We, as many Ukrainians, have amassed some questions for activists from Russia. And we decided to ask people who support us, and who share anti-Putin and anti-imperialist positions because there is no possibility of a dialogue with those who still have doubts. We’re glad this conversation happened, though we disagree with our colleagues on many issues.

We spoke to Armen Aramian, the outlet’s founder and editor; the editor of an e-mail newsletter and the journal’s managing editor who can’t speak publicly using their name, same as the majority of DOXA’s collective. Opinions and arguments voiced represent the views of those three members, not the position of the entire collective.

Tell us about your media’s work since February 24.

In the first month of the invasion, we focused on the email newsletter. It became something of a combat leaflet containing all information about the resistance methods. We kept going despite the risks of criminal prosecution. More and more people were subscribing to the newsletter. The whole idea behind it was to make people doomscroll less. In it, we offered ways to resist so people would not be merely informed about what was happening but could understand what might be done right now both in Russia and abroad so that people kept resisting the war everywhere.

Those in Ukraine who know about DOXA read you on Instagram or Telegram. You were probably noticed in 2021 when the [criminal case](#) was opened against you. And what is the newsletter format?

Newsletter as a format appeared during the first days of the invasion. Armen was still under house arrest in Moscow at the time. First mass protests were held in Russia, and quickly crushed. Websites were blocked constantly, in bulk. Our website was also blocked over the invasion’s first days because we made a guide about how to talk to relatives, and how to confront propaganda.

The [counterpropaganda manual](#) that got 200k views in 8 hours.

After our website was blocked, we started telling people how to use VPN. We started distributing our articles in PDF format. We were looking for ways and were contemplating what to do in the worst-case scenario – if the internet in Russia gets completely shut down or all social media are blocked.

There was another problem. People worried badly about what was going on, they wanted to do something but instead they were killing themselves emotionally by being unable to log out of social media. Many thought that emotional empathy is itself an action. But in reality, they were just sitting, worrying and worrying, and emotionally exhausting other people as well.

We realized they probably won't block email. That's why we've settled with this format: on the one hand, it's a digest, meaning that we did this emotional work for you, we've been worrying all day to gather all important information for you, don't spend the whole day on social media. At the same time, we tell you what you really can do – and all that is put together in one place.

The question that worries every Ukrainian - why do Russians support the war? In Ukraine, we often hear the answer to this question from the right: Russians support this war because they are orcs. This dehumanizing explanation is understandable but the problem is that's a huge oversimplification. Research, for example, by [PSLab](#), shows that support for the war is often passive - people say they are not into politics. And that's even worse than if Russians weren't humans, but they are humans who don't care. How did that political indifference even become possible, and how do you work with it?

Russian regime is very powerful and authoritarian. It drags on since the 1990s and the beginning of free-market reforms. Back then, political institutions were designed in a way that prevented people from influencing them. We saw over the last twenty years how any sparks of resistance, both on local and national level, were very efficiently suppressed as soon as they gained any strength.

But there are two sides to it. On the one side, Russian regime is very strong indeed, it has a lot of power and resources. It enjoyed great economic support from the West. Sure, there were some symbolic gestures: oh, Russian civil society is very important for us, let us give you a grant. Nevertheless, [the West] kept selling weapons and technologies for control to the regime. It was also very important that after the annexation of Crimea there were no decisive countermeasures both in and out of the country which would show Russian authorities that they can't do things like that. Putin got away with all his military gambles because Western countries were essentially turning a blind eye on them.

The other side is failure of the whole political anti-putin movement in Russia. And there are many dimensions to this. Firstly, the leftist part of the movement split, influenced by Putin's propaganda about "people's uprising" in Donbas. Many believed those narratives. Secondly, over the last decade opposition was led by liberal politicians, with Navalny as the most prominent figure. They stood for peaceful protests. And they/we lost. Why?

We've got a lot of disappointment. The Russian opposition didn't have a strong anti-war consensus, no consensus in support of Ukraine. Partly, that was due to the overwhelming state censorship. Because in Russia, even before the [full-scale] war, if you said something in support of Ukraine, especially something against the annexation of Crimea, that was an instant criminal case.

Many people who got politicized during the protest wave of 2011-12, mostly urban middle-class, got disillusioned in politics afterwards. They couldn't see any political life scenarios in which they could systematically participate.

After the Bolotnaya [square protests of 2012], anti-Putin movement kept deescalating. It was trying to stay within the oppressive limits set by the regime. If we aren't allowed to make unsanctioned protests, we'll get permits. New restrictions concerning elections? We'll still participate in elections, even with the restrictions. That position was pretty weak. Many leaders of the anti-Putin movement believed that radicalism is bad. The Russian opposition systematically persuaded people that you shouldn't do anything against the law, defined by the Russian state.

It was the same during rallies. If someone gets detained at a rally, you can't fight to liberate them because then you'll get detained too. Only provocateurs urge to fight back, only provocateurs call for some more radical actions. We need to act within the defined limits, and even thus we'll be able to win. When people come to rally for the first time, they still intuitively believe that if somebody gets illegally arrested, you probably should defend that person. But in Russia, we were for many years taught that no, you shouldn't. That you have to stay within legal limits. On one side, there's this crazy mighty repressive machine: security forces, tens of thousands of criminal cases, political prisoners and so on. On the other side, the leaders of protests accepted those limitations and taught people that they shouldn't give in to "provocations". Everybody goes home after the rally. And nobody occupies squares. In retrospect, it's clear that this didn't work. We need to remember that, otherwise we'll just fall into the same trap again.

And what's going on with repressions against media?

There's a lot of arguments about whether Roskomnadzor's blockings work or not (*in the summer of 2022, Roskomnadzor added Commons journal to the list of sites banned in Russia because of our stance on the war - ed.*). We can see they work really well because they continue excluding people. When we get blocked, you need to learn how to turn on VPN, and only part of the audience will do that. And the circle just keeps getting smaller, restrictions prevent information from getting out of the bubble in which we exist.

Media in Russia can't get to the wider audiences. To some extent, the [Feminist anti-war resistance](#) currently tries to reach those audiences. They came up with the leaflets that look like [postcards](#). Like "Happy spring day" in which they encrypt anti-war poems. And those leaflets spread well.

And what about more radical, guerilla forms of resistance? Does that happen? Can we assume it ever becoming a mass movement?

We interact with activists who stayed in Russia and keep engaging in, first of all, human rights activism. There's an initiative "[Solidarity zone](#)", their main objective is helping arrested for arsons or other forms of resistance that the terrorist state calls extremist. When arsons started in the first days of the war, it seemed like they were done by very well-prepared people who know how to set fire, record the process and not get caught. By the end of March, there were about four or five arson instances, and it became known that four of those people have been repressed and imprisoned already. And nobody knows their names, whether they have lawyers. It became clear that Russian security forces manage to catch them because the video surveillance system, first set up in Moscow and then in other regions of Russia, functions well enough to recognize people.

Then arsons started happening more often. Some of those people's personal stories were published and it turned out they weren't only militant anarchists but often just ordinary people. We recently [published](#) on Twitter the story of Igor Paskar`. That person worked as a handyman for all his life. He got politicized in 2018, and was arrested for the first time in 2021, at the rally in Moscow. He had, I think, another two criminal charges for doing drugs in the early 2000s. Not the first person you think of when imagining a recruitment office arsonist. And what is Igor's story? When the war

started, he realized he's radically against it but never understood what he can do about it. He made a living by selling rare items on Amazon, but then his card was blocked due to the sanctions so he couldn't do that anymore. And he realized he must try to do something. He went to Krasnodar to find work, and in Krasnodar he threw a Molotov cocktail at large Z-banner. He failed, Molotov cocktail just got shattered, no one even saw the fire. But Igor went on and threw Molotov cocktail at the FSB building, painted his cheek the colors of Ukrainian flag and started shouting slogans. He did it consciously, didn't try to run away. He wanted his action to be demonstrative, to inspire other people. But nobody noticed him. A woman with a stroller was passing by, another man was passing by, but nobody even noted that. There's only one documented photo from the scene, with the FSB office's door burning. But nobody took pictures of Igor, nobody said anything about Igor.

What do official Russian media start doing next? They start spinning [stories] that he had a very unstable life of a marginal person. And in relation to every arson, Russian propagandists always say that was some pyromaniac or a drunkard. Now, situation improved. [Ivan Astashyn](#), human rights activist who's spent almost 10 years in prison for setting an FSB office on fire in 2009, wrote a newsletter after four students repeatedly set fire to the automatic equipment along the railways. They got detained. And independent Russian media started writing that they need support. But to this day no one but us publishes links to fundraisers [for them]. Nobody tries to find out how can they help those people. Everybody studies this abstract phenomenon, arsons of military offices, but almost no one is interested in personal stories. Only Belarusian "Mediazona" recently started publishing them. And Belarusian "Belsat" have [publications](#) like that too.

Should resistance like that be much bigger, or is it already big? We may not know the situation well enough because people can derail the trains but transport prosecutor's office will hide it, they don't want cases like that to go public. What potential does this way of resistance have? Judging by the fact that the ["Anarchist fighter" channel](#) grows, getting more and more subscribers, it's obvious that this form of resistance finds its allies. But it will keep drawing in very few people until we start supporting those people and speaking about them.

We understand about the railways that an action like that might be very effective even on an individual level. But as for military offices or other state buildings, how effective are [arsons] in terms of data destruction? Are those symbolic gestures or is there practical value in them?

We can only speculate about this. But those arsons happening now were symbolic first of all. They most often are carried out by people who want to show they are against the war but don't know how to do that, same as with Igor Paskar. But such actions definitely have practical value too because even in Moscow authorities work "paper-based". Draft notices are given out by hand. The system probably hasn't been properly digitized yet, otherwise how could those subject to mobilization leave the country? Destroying any documents in a military office might freeze its work for some time. So-called phone terrorism (calls with threats about mining) matters for this same reason - military office stops working for a day or two until emergency services "demine" it. That affects the mobilization pace too.

But usually, arson is not a symbolic gesture as much as one of despair. Those aren't people with radical political views, not anarchists or antifa though there are such people too, relatively competent guerilla arsonists. That was the case with 17-year-old [schoolgirl](#) who threw a Molotov cocktail at the military office. Those are people who've been following Navalny on social media, working-class, or teenagers. I think it's more radical form of what's going on in every part of Russia. The surest way to get the window of your car smashed is putting a "Z" sticker on it, parking a car - and someone will smash your window for sure. There are a lot of anti-war stickers in large cities. People want to show they exist and that they are against the war, in conditions where there aren't

other possible ways to resist.

It all could be more practical but that requires serious coordination. Guerilla activity should be systematic. Nobody in Russia is ready to take the coordination of such activities on themselves or knows how to do it. When arsons started, the media didn't cover them because such facts are difficult to verify. Liberal dudes – Navalny's team, for instance – Volkov said in an [interview](#): those people are heroes but we don't know how to coordinate their work. After a month, they said they would support ALL protest methods and that you should contact them with any initiatives.

Our mission is to shift the public discussion about resistance methods. People don't know what to think about radical methods of resistance because they've been long taught they shouldn't take risks, and that they should act within the existing [legal] framework. That framework is now shattered. Perhaps, "radical" action is sometimes safer than peaceful picket now. If you derail a train they might never find you, provided you prepare properly. Surveillance cameras simply don't cover the whole length of the railroad system. And if you make the most harmless of pickets, you'll get busted in three minutes.

It's been a few months since the mobilization started. According to your feelings: when the war comes home, does it somehow affect the "not into politics" position? Ukrainians are very politicized now because [when] an air strike [hits] it makes political and everyday levels collapse together into one. We, as left activists and sociologists, also feel it on ourselves. And people in Ukraine who might've been Russian sympathizers before February 24, quickly realize which side are they on when they see with their own eyes how politics invade their lives with missiles. Is such shift happening in Russia? Do "claps" in Belgorod have an effect? Does the mobilization or news reports about deaths on the frontline?

Of course, we'd really want to know how many draft notices were actually sent out. And how many people were eventually mobilized. Initially, those data were classified. We have an ambivalent feeling. On the one hand, when mobilization just began everyone had a friend or a friend's friend who got mobilized. And many people didn't even have thoughts like: that's it, we're packing up and bringing him [the draftee] to the grandma's house. It seemed, many people weren't ready to fight even for their relatives.

On the other hand, there were people helping strangers who've received draft notices to get out and hide. There clearly were many people who've left right away, and that wasn't just proverbial IT guys but working-class people too.

Declared objectives of the war were changing constantly: first, it was the "denazification", then another one, now their official objective is "protecting Donbas" and territories already declared Russian. All those goals are "floating" and there's no single idea for which people must go to war. In this instance, propaganda didn't work.

Nevertheless, [authorities] were able to patch many holes on the frontline with new "meat", for many people came to military offices unforced.

With military offices, problem is similar as with political indifference - the lack of subjectivity. If you're told you have to go, a lot of people will really go. It also was the same with every election over the past decade. The list arrives at someone's workplace, and people are told: you have to go vote for that candidate and then you continue working, otherwise you'll have problems. Situation is absolutely the same with military offices. People are told they should come to the military office and they just go, thinking that something protects them from being drafted. But nothing protects them. Not reserve, nothing. You've come to the military office - you'll be sent to the war.

If you've built a huge thick shell, you still don't realize what is going on. There's some special operation going, but there's no war, we didn't attack anybody; and then they tell you that you need to come to the military office to sign some papers - alright, I'll go. Such inertia is the reverse side of depoliticization.

And even facing problems like that, people try to solve them individually. If my son gets drafted, I must do everything to prevent that. This problem isn't [perceived as] political but as a domestic one, the one you have to solve by yourself. Bribe someone, have a word with acquaintances in the [power] structures... Political indifference is when people forget that there are other ways to solve their problems apart from individual ones. People don't have neither political tools nor understanding of how they work, so they use only the individual tools they know.

There is a very important group which started politicizing after the mobilization started - mothers and wives of those mobilized. They unite in different regions, create chats, make appeals to regional governments asking to bring their husbands and sons back home. But even they stay within the pro-authorities rhetoric. They don't say "Putin, stop the war". They believe they just can appeal to governors acting within paternalist logic - we'll ask, and authorities will see that we are just mothers, just women, that we aren't a threat.

Since the beginning of the full-scale war, many Western leftists who support Ukrainian resistance also make statements in support of the Russian anti-war resistance which allegedly is already an established socio-political movement. On the one hand we, of course, support any initiatives to help Ukraine in any format. On the other, we think that anti-war movement is an illusion which Western leftists and liberals want to believe in. In your opinion, does such socio-political movement exist in Russia?

It's a very difficult question. We think such a movement exists and we see a lot of people investing their whole lives in it. Our editor spent a year under arrest, his family had to flee Russia because of the political pressure. A lot of people essentially became political refugees but at the same time they are the refugees from the aggressor country. Every time we talk about their problems we're being careful because it might take the spotlight off the Ukrainians who are being bombed. We realize those are not the same things.

One might say the movement is being built now, but it's being built on a scorched field. Lillian Cicerchia [wrote](#) about the re-actualization of the definition of class. Like, there's a deterministic notion in Marxist theory that capitalist conditions themselves predetermine the emergence and solidarity of the working class; and she argues that capitalism doesn't guarantee class solidarity to anyone. Solidarity of the working class and resistance are things that always happen "despite" and are pushed back by capitalism's victories. Neoliberalism destroyed unions, a lot of experience and practices which we try to restore now with great difficulties.

This article resonates when you think about why there is no strong anti-Putin resistance in Russia. Simply because we've lost. The resistance was destroyed, and all its experience was destroyed. People who join the resistance need practices which become embedded in their lives, they need ideology and ways to organize. All that accumulates in the form of movement. Over the last twenty years, anti-Putin opposition in Russia was run over by a bulldozer every time, and every time it had to start over from scratch. Every time new people, with no experience whatsoever, were creating a movement. We [editorial] are 23-25 years old. When Crimea was occupied, our oldest were 17. And we were getting into politics in an environment where there was nothing. We started building our thing from nothing. And when we hear the critique of opposition movements we feel hurt that it also hits people who over the last five - eight years have been trying to do something that you can't build from scratch.

It doesn't work like everybody tweets "Putin is a tyrant", and then we take to the streets and overthrow him. Movements need long time to build, they must learn new methods, they require resources, and they are very easily destroyed by an exceeding power. We started to realize it only after the start of the invasion. Some of us were into more or less liberal ideology themselves: peaceful protests, we just need to inform people and they'll do something.

Now we realize that there are neither organizations of resistance nor understanding how to build a strategy of resisting this war for the nearest year. What will we actually do to stop it? Creating a newsletter and telling "War is terrible, don't forget about it" is not enough. We won't ever forget that, but that won't change anything. Failure of the anti-Putin movement is a symptom of us simply lacking political experience and knowledge of how democratic movements might win and consolidate their victories in a long term in conditions of very strong authoritarian regimes.

If one draws comparisons to Iran, what they don't lack is everyday practice. Your mom tells you she didn't have a hijab. Real moms who remember that things were different. And thus the tradition continues even on the level of smallest groups, families. But that doesn't apply to the post-Soviet countries. In Ukraine, many things were different before February 24 too. We have a game: asking each other what is the weirdest thing we've learned, what new skill. Some had to figure out the body armor standards, others learned about certain medicines when there was lack of them, and somebody learned how to assemble an assault rifle. And every time there's more such knowledge. And every time it's not enough. You constantly learn some shit you never knew about before. What types of candles are there? Now, we know which candle burns the longest. In many ways, it's about bodily experience.

Yes, the Kurdish movement managed to make the resistance a part of everyday life too. It's a multi-generational experience of struggle. You could say too: Kurds, what did you achieve in Turkey? On the first glance, nothing. But actually there's experience that they successfully preserve and pass on, developing the movement both in Syria and Turkey. They inspire everyone all across the world, all across the Middle East.

On the contrary, Russian opposition movements that were led by liberal dudes and enjoyed the support of mainstream politicians, they don't have ideas of how to build a resistance movement. They know how to make pretty anti-corruption investigations, how to develop a youtube channel, but don't know how to resist.

Question to you as people working in the media field. The question is about Russian propaganda. Before February 24th we often saw Russian propaganda as something hilarious and funny, watching it instead of a stand-up comedy sometimes. But, as we can see now, it works nevertheless. The scariest thing is that propaganda turned out to be more effective than direct interpersonal connections. Sociologists, gathering in-depth interviews now, see clearly that almost every respondent has story of a conflict with relatives, friends or colleagues from Russia. It dramatically amplifies the effect of hate. The propaganda turned out to be more powerful than personal connections. How did that happen? How does it work and why is it so effective?

Why is propaganda underrated by liberal and, speaking more widely, anti-Putin part of society? Partly, due to the class arrogance: like, some grandmas, state employees, retirees watch something, they are "lowbrows" and so on. It's normalized in Russian liberal discourse which was built around urban middle-class. Because "only very stupid people with whom there's no point in working with" can trust TV. But propaganda doesn't give the audience a convincing and coherent worldview to believe in. Propaganda works as an ultimate frustrating content. Its purpose is to make people distrustful of anything: everybody lies, politics is a dirty thing, you shouldn't take interest in it. We

underestimated propaganda because we thought it was stupid bullshit which couldn't work because it was stupid bullshit, and that people couldn't fail to understand it was stupid bullshit.

But propaganda works on two levels, and it also affects those who don't trust it. Sociologist Maksim Alukov [claims](#) people don't believe what they're told by mass media - but in the end they don't believe anyone else either. There is a powerful propaganda stream, and everything else gets heavily censored. Before the invasion, the Russian propaganda's budget was hundreds of millions Euro, and it only increased since February, 24. And the total budget of all Russian opposition media might be, roughly speaking, 3 million Euro.

It means that there is a powerful information structure constantly showing people that everything's fucked, and dressing it in different wrappings too: for the liberal-leaning audiences, for urban population, for younger audiences. Here you have some super-apolitical popular artists, pop singers, rappers keep telling that politics suck too. Something for any taste. The state invested heavily in propaganda and work with popular culture, and that investment paid off.

Other question: why is propaganda stronger than personal connections. I don't have a good answer to that question. What do people interact with? Your whole reality [picture] is built on what you see on TV. You see screens with TV channels on the subway. Perhaps, you've got a TV set at home. There are state-owned media that work well on the internet. And you begin to think that if they tell you from every direction that the world works in a certain way, probably that's how it works. And when your Ukrainian relative is calling to tell you everything is not like that, you think: it couldn't be completely wrong. And some Russians start thinking their relatives were brainwashed by propaganda. Those worldviews are completely incompatible. But that is a very weak explanation and I don't have a better one.

It's important to add that propaganda changed during the invasion. Before the last elections, it was very difficult to imagine the Moscow mayor shouting: "To Putin, united Russia!" Before, propaganda has been creating a platform for political indifference. Now, they heavily load this platform with charged positions about the war, about the whole world being against Russia.

Also, you can't underestimate the consequences of information channels shutting down. Many of the financial sanctions that don't affect authorities much, closed the people off the access to proper VPN services. Free VPNs couldn't handle the load or were blocked, and people couldn't set up paid VPNs due to the sanctions. Western governments have control over a big part of the infrastructure that could challenge Putin's propaganda. But financial sanctions cut Russians off the accessible VPN services.

We found Swedish organization ready to give out free VPN access, and we gave out 30 thousand accounts, some for a year, some for six months. So, since the beginning of the invasion, we've been looking for ways to deliver reliable information about the war to the widest audiences possible. But in the end, tools like that were sabotaged by random measures of Western politicians and corporations, and that's just absurd. They didn't have a goal to interfere with independent media's work but they've created a lot of problems for us. All Russian independent media are in similar position right now.

But media aren't just news websites. People can spread information in private chats as well. Is there any informal exchange of information related to, for example, mobilization?

I think there's a lot of that going on, especially between mothers and wives of mobilized men. It would be great to speak with the Feminist anti-war resistance about it. They're lurking chats for relatives of mobilized trying to find mothers who're ready to do something, and try to help them

dragging men out of the frontline.

Indeed, all across the Russian cities mobilization was perceived as a threat, people were reporting about [drafting] patrols in chats. People started organizing in school and university chats, interacting, warning each other. But the rest of the time, nobody feels a threat and everybody hopes it won't affect them personally.

Many people in Russia who are against the war cooperate in getting people out of the country, in supporting refugees. One of our colleagues who now came to Berlin from Russia tries to get Ukrainian civilians, kidnapped by Russian military from the occupied territories, out of Russian prisons. They are very difficult to find but those human rights activists somehow manage to drag out few people.

Help seems like a sole possible action. If people saw there's some effective way to resist, they would join in. But anti-war sentiments mainly convert into: can I help someone? It proves there is some sort of an anti-war movement in Russia. It's just that movement doesn't have a shape tied with resistance now.

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