

DOXA: Russians against dictatorship, inequalities and injustice

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Four DOXA magazine journalists spent a year under house arrest because of a video urging young Russians not to be afraid of peaceful protesting. Now another author of the online magazine faces seven years in prison for a post on Vkontakte.

One day in late April, Maria Menshikova was simply scrolling the news, when she learned that she was ‘justifying terrorism’.

The information was **first reported** by the pro-government Russian Baza Telegram channel. After that, more Russian media explained that signs of “justifying terrorism” **were detected** in a post posted by the DOXA portal on July 9, 2022.

The post included a picture in which a hooded figure throws a Molotov cocktail at a *voenkomat*, or military commissariat, building. The detention centers, where people suspected of such acts are held, were also indicated. Suspects, not convicted, and therefore also innocent under Russian law.

Providing addresses, DOXA encouraged people to write letters to them. The editors also suggested subscribing to an anti-war newsletter, which they started publishing after Russia’s full-scale attack on Ukraine.

‘Justification of terrorism’, according to the Russian law, is punished by prison term, a maximum of seven years, or by a fine.

Menshikova can sleep relatively soundly only because she had moved to Germany long before the invasion. She is a doctoral student at the Ruhr University in Bochum.

She knows that she would not visit anytime soon her family she left behind in Moscow.

The monumental edifice of Moscow University is known to everyone in Russia and to anyone interested in the history of the USSR. Studying within these Stalin-time walls, Maria began working with the editorial board of the student magazine DOXA. It was based at another equally prestigious university: Moscow’s Higher School of Economics, or VShE. “Vyshka” has long been educating not only specialists in the capitalist economy. It is a full-fledged university with many departments, modern buildings, and, until recently, a reputation for being the most liberal space in Russian higher education.

How much that reputation was worth, DOXA editors found out very painfully.

The magazine, Maria recalls, had a strong start: it published texts about the worst classes offered to “Vyshka” students. It was immediately recognised, although some of the audience was dismayed: how can such criticism be made? Over time, the magazine began to take an interest in other universities, wrote about how difficult it is for not-particularly-rich students to combine study and

work, and raised alarms about the insufficient number of places in dormitories. But the young journalists dreamed of something more.

- We want to show reality from the point of view of those who are not in power, whose voice is not heard. We are against all discrimination, whether based on gender, age, sexual orientation, background, we defend the rights of working people
- the editor tells me.

In 2019, they had no doubts about how to behave when the authorities dispersed protests ahead of the city Duma elections.

- The Moscow Duma elections became a political event only because a group of independent activists decided to run in them, Menshikova recalls. - They said: support us and we will get in and try to have an impact on reality. Up to that point, the City Duma had no special significance.

No matter how insignificant the local parliament actually was, the independents did not get a chance to be elected. The Central Election Commission rejected their candidacies, claiming it had found forged signatures on the lists of support. Tens of thousands of Moscow residents who intended to vote for the opposition took to the streets. Thousands of protesters were detained and later learned that they had been ordered to pay a hefty fine for participating in an illegal assembly. There were cases of brutal beatings.

Many of those who marched in protest and were subsequently taken into custody were students.

Riot police have detained dozens in central Moscow. Officers began clearing an area near the Russian presidential administration in the hours after a sanctioned protest, held to demand that officials allow independent candidates on the ballot in an upcoming municipal election. pic.twitter.com/ian0ZrJV1w

— Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (@RFERL) [August 10, 2019](#)

- We opened a hotline and a bot on Telegram that collected reports of detentions. Anyone could write: they detained me, they are bringing me here and here. Something similar is still being done by the OVD-Info portal - Menshikova tells me.
- Then we arranged crowdfunding, so that students would have something to pay the fine with. Fines for participation in assemblies increased a lot after the previous wave of protests, in 2011, they could reach the value of an entire month's salary. In the case of students - the value of around 10 scholarships. If you don't pay, you'll be given another fine, for having failed to pay. And then they'll take away your passport, prevent you from traveling abroad.

DOXA collected more than 300 thousand rubles to support the protesting students.

Then, in December 2019, it was stripped of its status as a student magazine. The Interfax portal posted a justification: the newspaper's publications damaged the reputation of the Higher School of Economics.

No longer a student newspaper, DOXA could no longer organize events at the university. It also lost its modest annual subsidy of 10,000 rubles, which went to pay for the website.

But the team did not give up.

“Do not be afraid and do not stand aside. You have the right to protest in any peaceful form.”

These words were spoken in a short video made by four DOXA editors in early 2021. Natalia Tyshkevich, Armen Aramian, Vladimir Metelkin and Alla Gutnikova addressed the students and pupils not to allow themselves to be intimidated. They said that if their hearts and convictions dictated so, they should come to protests in defense of Alexei Navalny, even if principals and lecturers threaten to expel them from school.

The Russian constitution still allows peaceful protests. Not a single word spoken in the video called for breaking the law.

However, Russian “justice” has its ways. Several months after the video was published (and after it was, on Roskomnadzor’s orders, removed, Maria adds with regret), police entered the homes of the four journalists and the editorial office.

A paragraph was used against the journalists, which had not long before been introduced into the Russian criminal code, and the charges were worded in such a way that Maria, explaining their meaning, has consternation written all over her face.

- It was about „encouraging, drawing minors into activities that pose a danger to them”. Why minors? Because the film was aimed at school students, and people under the age of 18 could be among them. The aforementioned “dangerous activities” are peaceful gatherings. They are dangerous because you can be beaten up there. The accusers just didn’t add by whom - the journalist says.

The court ruled that the young DOXA authors would be interested to influence witnesses and their testimonies, so they must be isolated.

- They were put on electronic bracelets like criminals. They were forbidden to leave the house “from 00:00 to 23:59.” They were also forbidden to use the Internet, which means they were actually prevented from both journalist work and from studying - recalls Maria.

Even at the time of the court hearing, not a single minor who went to the demonstration under the influence of the DOXA video was found.

DOXA editors publicized their colleagues’ case as best they could. They made videos on the theme of “do it in a minute” - the one minute between 11:59 p.m. and 00:00 a.m. that the court left for the defendants to do. The brave young people prosecuted on absurd charges also made headlines outside Russia.

When Russia openly invaded Ukraine, Aramian, Metelkin, Tyshkevich and Gutnikova were still under house arrest.

They heard their sentence in April 2022. Two years of correctional work.

This is another specifically post-Soviet construct that Maria has to explain to me. In a nutshell, the idea is that if the convict has a job, he has to give part of his paycheck to the state. The court also

prohibited all four journalists from managing electronic media in Russia for three years.

When the verdict comes down, DOXA's address has long been blocked in Russia. The medium, which published, among other things, a guide on how to argue convincingly against the war, has no right to exist. It continues to function on a foreign server, and does not accept donations from supporters with Russian credit cards. Donors could only get into trouble for this - if DOXA is declared an extremist organization, as [United Russia MP Valery Piskaryov would like](#), they would suddenly become active supporters of extremism.

Not only the portal server is located abroad. In August 2022, the four convicted editors reported that they had managed to get to Armenia first, and then to move to the West. They are in Europe, nothing is threatening them anymore.

- We have become a newspaper in exile - Maria sighs.

Although creating a newspaper like this is an additional challenge, the editors don't give up. They stay in touch with students in Russia. They gather information on which university students are forced to participate in patriotic flashmobs, where surveys are sent out asking "what do you think about special operations," and where military officers come to schools to praise the Russian army. A ranking of the most indoctrinated universities is to emerge from this. A strong candidate for a high place is the one where students were given materials to study "Ukrainian fascism."

- We received these materials from a reader. I was looking through them and came across graphic photos of dead bodies, inserted into the text without any trigger warning. For a long time I couldn't pull myself together - Maria recalls.

Maria is also unable to talk calmly about May 9. It happened that we were talking on the very day when the victory over Nazism should be celebrated. Only that, thanks to Putin, the celebration has turned into a festival of militarism and praising of Russia's unique historical role.

Children play with guns, adults are told to get it into their heads that they are representatives of a nation that has always won. Peace? A forgotten word.

One of Maria's grandfathers celebrated the real victory, the one of 1945, in Berlin. The journalist notes with bitterness in her voice that this 18-year-old Red Army soldier would never have guessed that for his granddaughter Germany would be a country where she could continue her education, express her views and remain free.

- Putin is telling people that since we Russians defeated the fascists, we will never become fascists. He claims we are always on the right side, incapable of waging an aggression war, of genocide. And what do we have in Moscow? A fascist dictatorship!

- concludes the journalist.

DOXA, in exile, documents all possible manifestations of resistance: from the "rail war", when guerrillas blow up the tracks on which military trains are transporting weapons to the front, to artistic and symbolic actions. But the magazine is interested in emancipation and freedom struggles worldwide.

- We are more interested in the news that Tunisia's president wages racist abuses at migrants than in reports that Putin met with Xi Jinping. That's what everyone is writing about," says Maria.

She wants to believe that she will return to Moscow - a democratic, free, open city, capital of a peaceful country which stopped occupying the neighbour's land. However, she would not try to assess how many Russians, how many students actually want the war to end and would have the courage to speak and act against the system.

The tools of sociology that allow us to study public opinion work well in free countries, she says. Not so in Russia, where a citizen talking to an interviewer assumes that (s)he has a representative of the state in front of him, censors him- or herself, and wonders what are the state's expectations.

And then Maria cites the words of sociologist Grigory Yudin, who argues that if Russians see even a shadow of a chance to change their country and stop the war, they will fight for it. She also reminds that Russia has its own historical traditions of fighting against dictatorship. Because Russia is not only Putin's "traditional values" and tsarist autocracy. Russia is also revolutions, made by brave men and women.

Each of these revolutions erupted even though the autocrats did not allow the free press to operate, intimidated the population, locked male and female activists in prison or forced them to emigrate.

Will history come full circle?

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