

Russia: The War and Loyalist Protest

Wednesday 17 April 2024, by [FINIAREL' Alexander](#) (Date first published: 27 March 2024).

How do the attitudes of people most loyal to the Russian regime change? Why do loyalists constantly engage in conflict with the authorities? Political scientist Alexander Finiarel' discusses the social contract in a warring Russia

Following the declaration of [partial mobilization](#) in Russia on September 21, 2022, many speakers (both opposition and pro-government figures) began discussing the change in the social contract between people and the state. Previously, the interaction between the authorities and society in the country was based on an unspoken pact of non-participation in each other's affairs, sometimes referred to as an "authoritarian contract". Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the government provided citizens with governance that was minimally competent and refrained from interfering in the affairs of the people. In return, society was expected to abstain from political involvement. Various forms of non-political protests, including those related to economics, ecology, and so forth, were permitted, while the government severely repressed protests claiming actual participation in the political process, governance of the country, and influence on political decisions. A similar model of interaction between the state and society can be observed in North Korea and China, where capitalist reforms also took place in the 1990s, but a continuous line of authoritarian rule has been maintained.

Partial mobilization has disrupted the implicit social contract between ruling elites and citizens, demanding citizens to participate in the government's political venture. Consequently, the contract had to undergo changes following the new offer that citizens received from the state. Ekaterina Schulmann [suggests](#) that this revised contract for citizens and elites was the offer of more money in return for loyalty and participation in the war. How fair is this assumption? To what extent does it reflect the processes that characterize the relations between Russian society and the state?

The fact is that the behavior of the authorities, represented by representatives of the security agencies and the main spokesmen of the regime, indicates that the previous contract is still in force. The main mythologeme of this war is that it is not a war, but a "special military operation" fought by special people. It is true that some of them did not voluntarily choose to participate in it, but such are only 1% of the mobilization resource, as government-paid bloggers [claimed](#). The government is still trying to show that the majority of citizens are not concerned with the war, meaning that they should stay out of politics.

Demobilization of War Correspondents

To the outrage of active supporters of the war, the state has continued to prefer passive loyalty to active participation. Volunteers supporting the Russian military face [bureaucratic obstacles](#) when providing their units with vehicles, [card blocking](#) by Sberbank, and [inspections](#) by the prosecutor's office. Although they fully support the war, the information they provide (often necessary to encourage people to give money to the front) contradicts Defense Ministry statements, thereby discrediting the Russian army.

War correspondents, as well as the anti-war public, have experienced [censorship](#) and [pressure](#) because they criticized military leadership for the way the war is being conducted. Igor Strelkov, who, in his own words, started the war in Donbas, [received](#) a four-year prison sentence for expressing such criticism. After this sentence, war correspondents try not to criticize Vladimir Putin's actions while being more cautious dealing with the problems of the Russian army. Nevertheless, Telegram channels affiliated with the chief propagandist Vladimir Solovyov [attack](#) the war correspondents engaged in fundraising for the front, because those who tell Russian citizens about the situation on the fronts — in Solovyov's [own words](#), drag "Russian society into a CIPsO agenda" and therefore "they should simply be destroyed." Hence, the war correspondents expect purges in their ranks soon. Military correspondent Andrei "Murz" Morozov was recently [harassed](#) by Solovyov's network for revealing the losses that were the price of the capture of Avdeevka and committed suicide.

On the one hand, such politics is astonishing, especially considering the challenging circumstances where mobilized individuals find themselves compelled to equip themselves with the assistance of their own families. On the other hand, protest groups grew out of chat rooms where female relatives of mobilized people coordinated to purchase necessary equipment for the front aiming to increase the chances of survival of their loved ones. As the example of the organized [rebellion of PMC Wagner](#) has shown, almost any initiative activity, not entirely and not directly controlled by the state, sooner or later comes into conflict with it. It is reasonable to assume that it is profitable for the authorities to continue, as far as possible, to maintain citizens in a demobilized, atomized and depoliticized state.

War correspondents attracted a significant audience during the first months of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine. They made it because they allegedly translated "trench truth", countering official false reports of the Ministry of Defense and thereby consolidated support for the invasion. However, the enthusiasm of this public, often referred to as "[turbopatriots](#)," led them rather quickly to criticize the military leadership and personally Putin and Shoigu. In their opinion, they did and are not doing enough to win. The state demonstrated its inability to mobilize the necessary number of enthusiasts to sustain the war effort on the front.

Thus, despite the Ministry of Defense's victorious [claims](#) of about half a million volunteers, governors and war commissars constantly complain that they are not able to succeed in fulfilling the recruitment plan. According to the current estimates, the plan is less than half completed — mainly because of the [double counting](#) of those who are already at war. Therefore, the authorities had to rely on forced mobilization, and the "trench truth" rather demotivated people to go to war, making forced conscription more difficult.

The reaction to Strelkov's sentence has also highlighted the inability of war correspondents to mobilize people — his trials gathered fewer protesters compared to ordinary trials against opponents of the war. The independent sociological research [indicates](#) the same issue: the war supporters are less ready to defend their perspective when faced with opposition in their environment. As in the case of the [Black Hundreds](#) movement in the early twentieth century, war supporters find themselves unable to defend their views and maintain the existence of their organizations with the support from the state and society.

According to some [experts](#), it was the repressions against war correspondents and Prigozhin that largely led to the erosion of the core of support for the war, as the 2023 surveys showed. Meanwhile, the camp of active supporters of the war has not grown this year, despite passive discontent with the war spreading among more Russians. Given that fact, the Kremlin's strategy to demobilize citizens described above, is not surprising.

However, destroying the channels of feedback that war correspondents provided – allegedly reporting on the real situation at the front — could potentially play against the Kremlin’s interests. Recent [studies](#) have shown that the primary causes of desertion are mundane issues, such as dissatisfaction with commanders or personal problems, rather than ideological disagreement with the war. In most cases, before deserting, soldiers address their problems to their superiors and desert only if their appeal goes unheeded and no solutions are found.

Mutinies in African countries, like Prigozhin’s uprising, also [stem from dissatisfaction with commanders](#). They serve as a bargaining tool in situations where the military leadership is unwilling to listen to the army and acknowledge the challenges confronted by soldiers. By closing off feedback channels, the state risks pushing the military into other ways of expressing disobedience. It might also give rise to a disinformation bubble wherein officials become consumers of the propaganda generated by the system they have established. Many [believe](#) that the invasion of Ukraine was precisely due to the creation of such a bubble, which led the Russian president himself to believe the myth that Ukrainians dreamed of joining Russia — a myth that had migrated from propaganda to intelligence reports. Without criticism from the war correspondents, there is a chance that the Russian command will once again believe its own lies and make mistakes that could lead to its defeat.

Mobilization of Conscripts’ Relatives

The arguments that the relatives of the mobilized used in their protests also indicate preserving the social contract that existed before the war and mobilization. They, too, were convinced that any breaking of this contract should be very limited and generously rewarded. They were promised that their relatives would go to war for only six months and would be there on the home front, not on the battle lines. After six months, they finally realized that none of these promises had been fulfilled and began gathering signatures to advocate for a limitation on the mobilization period and writing to deputies demanding the return of the mobilized. The relatives of the mobilized are particularly frustrated by the fact that former prisoners who join PMCs are still released after six months, as promised (though, apparently, they were no longer [released](#) by the beginning of 2024).

At the same time, the new social contract has never been justified — the compensation for service turned out to be less than expected. Those wishing to return their relatives from the war constantly face accusations that they get enough for their service, meaning that many citizens believed in the promise of the new social contract. However, if we take into account that the mobilized are on duty 24/7 without weekends, then in a normal work regime with the same hourly wage instead of 200 thousand rubles/month they would earn only about 44.5 thousand rubles/month. And this is taking into account the fact that they work overtime in extremely dangerous conditions. Certainly, this is a lot of money for many Russian families, but relatives of mobilized men often note that their relatives earned more in the civilian service. Moreover, according to their relatives, almost half of the payments are spent on their upkeep at the front: buying food, drones, uniforms, medicine, building materials, etc. The huge payments, in fact, have become a [way of shifting the responsibility](#) for the material support of the army to the soldiers themselves, rather than a generous reward for participation in the war.

On the one hand, Russian authorities aim to demobilize the majority of citizens by [portraying the mobilized service](#) as being in the rear, akin to a pioneer camp, with substantial financial rewards. On the other hand, they emphasize to the mobilized that this is a people’s war for the preservation of Russia, and therefore the soldiers should give their lives and all their resources. However, the mobilized and their families do not always agree with this interpretation. Many observe that the majority of the population is not actively engaged in the war but, to the best of their ability, is distancing itself from the conflict, continuing to lead a quiet, peaceful life. Those unfortunate law-

abiding citizens who responded to the homeland's call are met with skepticism. "We don't owe so much to the motherland to give back so much," women express in various posts and chat rooms.

Protesting female relatives are only willing to tolerate the "special military operation" if they too are removed from the consequences of war. Most of the existing groups are engaged in fighting for the rotation of mobilized people, demanding that they be replaced by someone else. In the fall of 2023, [they clung](#) to the Defense Minister Shoigu's [quote](#) about plans to "bring the number of contract servicemen, taking into account the replacement of mobilized citizens in troop groups and the recruitment of new formations, to 521 thousand by the end of the year". They interpreted his words as follows: if the army recruits 521 thousand volunteers, it will make it possible to release the mobilized. As a result, some called for raising the prestige of military service so that more volunteers would enroll in the army, while others demanded that migrants be sent to the army.

For such protesting groups, the war obviously is part of the politics from which they were taught to stay away. Most of them still nurture the hope of reaching an agreement with the authorities, and are therefore afraid to attract public attention through public actions out of fear of punishment. The first protest groups indeed faced censorship and repression. The "[Council of Mothers and Wives](#)", created at the beginning of mobilization, was blocked by the social media platforms VKontakte and Dzen after its representatives started to go to protests. The loyalist nature of their protests and attempts to focus criticism not on the war as such, but on the way it is being conducted, did not help them. For example, after its head Olga Tsukanova [supported](#) Yevgeny Prigozhin's demands to provide the private military company Wagner with more ammunition, it was declared a foreign agent. Other groups that emerged in the spring, six months after mobilization, were also pretty soon blocked on Russian platforms. Their demands and appeals were simply ignored.

Broadening the Protest Base

The calls for the rotation and replacement of mobilized individuals with others will hardly find sympathies among citizens who seek to distance themselves from the war as far as possible. Even telephone surveys, despite all their limitations, [show](#) that the prospect of the second wave of mobilization evokes negative emotions among Russians. The majority of Russians agree with the demands of conscripts' relatives to return their loved one home, but only a minority favors rotation and new mobilization. The female relatives could find support in this demand only from the state, but the latter is not too interested in irritating citizens before the presidential election.

The most radical group among the relatives of the mobilized — "[The Way Home](#)" — sets trends among the relatives of the mobilized (for more information about the genesis of the movement of the relatives of the mobilized and the differences in the approaches of different factions, see [here](#) and [here](#)). The members of the group apparently believe that if they do not make their protest visible, the authorities will not react to it, and the pre-election period is the best time to draw attention to their problems. They were the first to suggest using stickers on cars, clothing badges and ribbons on Christmas trees to advocate for demobilization.

Interestingly, active female relatives of the mobilized have found a way to organize rallies without the approval of the authorities — a task that has become almost impossible to obtain since the beginning of the Covid-19. Each Saturday, [they gather](#) at the eternal flame in their cities wearing white scarves to lay flowers in honor of the war dead (it is hard not to think of the very similar actions of the [Women in Black](#) and the [Mothers of Plaza de Mayo](#)), and encourage those who are not indifferent to join them. This action makes it possible to do what the Russian government does not do — to mourn the dead soldiers and citizens and thus criticize the war by talking about the human costs associated with it, but without confronting the government and the narratives it offers.

Other groups condemn the rallies, mainly hoping to secure the return of relatives through appeals to officials and behind-the-scenes negotiations, avoiding any interaction with the relatives of the mobilized associated with The Way Home. Nevertheless, they too have begun to use badges and stickers, and now regularly lay flowers in honor of the war dead. They also continue to push for the demobilization of mobilized persons who have formal reasons for demobilization, such as, for example, being seriously wounded or reaching an upper age limit for military service.

However, it is important to emphasize again the loyalist nature of both groups' protest grievances, including at the level of rhetoric. The relatives of the mobilized constantly reproduce the claims of Russian propaganda, for example, [justifying](#) the war by its inevitability. As the war has directly affected their families, they use these claims against the state. They accuse the authorities of insufficient efforts to prevent this catastrophe, and speak of their loved ones and the soldiers on the other side of the barricades as victims of short-sighted politicians, referring to Russian, Ukrainian and Western politicians alike, but calling for Russian responsibility.

These appeals could sway representatives of other broad groups of the population loyal to the authorities to sympathize with the frustrated relatives. These individuals neither readily embrace anti-war criticism nor are willing to acknowledge Russia's wrongdoing, but they are also increasingly tired of the war. Throughout the war, this audience [expanded](#) by drawing from those who were once confident supporters of the war, while the number of steadfast opponents remained unchanged. At the same time, as the members of The Way Home [note](#), adopting an anti-war agenda allowed them to finally break out of the bubble they were in while they were fighting only to get their loved ones back.

The development of loyalist protest shows that the social contract in Russia is in an unstable, conflictual, and transitional state. On the one hand, the state prefers to preserve the old depoliticizing contract, suppressing any political activity not sanctioned by the authorities, even if it aligns with the general mainstream of state policy. On the other hand, the authorities have been compelled to resort to a limited mobilization of citizens, necessitating a different social contract that, however, lacks enforcement and consequently puts unwilling participants in conflict with the state. "We were screwed, and you'll be screwed" is the grim [warning](#) that the relatives of the mobilized leave to their fellow citizens.

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