

# Ukraine - Left without a voice, anti-war Russians pen open letters to Putin

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**No one is asking whether or not they want to go to war. Some Russians are speaking out all the same.**

MOSCOW — In ordinary times, not being able to influence your country's politics can feel frustrating.

When that country is on the brink of war, it can feel like torture.

"It is utterly horrible to find yourself helpless, a person on whom nothing depends," [said](#) Andrei Makarevich, a veteran Russian rock star.

His is one of the scores of names under an open letter titled, "If only there is no war," published [online](#) in late January.

Many of the more than 150 signatories are well-known in Russian intelligentsia circles : leading activists, artists and intellectuals who in recent years have formed a small but vocal minority against the Kremlin's increasingly repressive politics.

More surprising was another anti-war letter published shortly after. It was signed by Leonid Ivashov, a retired colonel general widely known as a saber-rattling nationalist with anti-Western views.

Then, on Sunday, another voice joined in — Yabloko, a small, liberal opposition party that has been sidelined from mainstream politics. As U.S. officials [warned](#) an all-out war could begin any day, the party said it would be gathering signatures against the war online and at its offices throughout the country. A day later, the [online petition](#) had some 4,000 names.

Taken together, the pleas are a bellwether of growing anti-war sentiment among Russians of different stripes at a time Western leaders call [decisive](#) for whether Putin will order his 100,000-plus troops circling Ukraine to invade.

"There appears to be a general sense that if there is a war, it will be neither short nor triumphant, and there will be many victims," said Andrei Kolesnikov, an analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center. "Even the most conservative layer of society does not seem to want a real war."

It is difficult to say who really enjoys Putin's confidence, but it is widely [assumed](#) that he takes his advice from a select group of hardline security officials known as the "*siloviki*," a term for strongmen from the military and security services.

Among the names most often peddled about are FSB head Alexander Bortnikov, national security

adviser Nikolai Patrushev and Sergei Naryshkin, the head of Russia's foreign intelligence service.

[Yearly fishing trips](#) in Siberia also indicate Putin enjoys a close relationship with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.

The rest of Russia's 140 million citizens have been designated to the spectator seats. When they disagree with the direction in which their country is marching, there is little they can do to make themselves heard.

In Putin's "managed democracy," opposition candidates are kept off the ballot — and even then, elections are still rigged. Rules on protesting are so strict that they are all but illegal. A one-man picket can result in a prison sentence ; so can a misplaced "like" or "share" online.

The one politician with the dare and reach to organize a large protest movement, Alexei Navalny, is in jail and facing new charges ; his supporters have gone underground or have fled the country. Civil society has been muzzled.

That leaves the task of gauging public opinion to the only remaining independent pollster, the Levada Center. But the pollster's work is hampered by the stigmatizing label of "foreign agent." Levada's polls suggest most Russians [think](#) NATO is to blame for the escalation in tensions, but are afraid of war.

For those wanting to make a public splash, and prepared to risk leaving the safety of anonymity, petitions are the go-to.

In the letter from the 150-plus intelligentsia figures, addressed to the "party of war," the signatories claimed to speak on behalf of "those in Russian society who reject war, and see as criminal the use of military threats and the deployment of a blackmailing style in foreign policy."

"You do not speak in the name of the Russian population — we do," it added. "For decades, the Russian people, who lost millions of lives in past wars, have lived by the saying : 'If only there were no war.' Have you forgotten this ?"

A day after that letter was published, late on January 31, an eyebrow-raising [post](#) appeared on the website of the All-Russian Officers' Assembly, a self-organized group of former officers famous for their revanchist, pro-Soviet views.

The last time its chairman, Ivashov, made headlines was when he [described](#) the coronavirus as being artificially manufactured in a U.S. laboratory as a geopolitical weapon.

Now, he accused Putin of conducting a "criminal policy of provoking a war" and called for his resignation.

Whereas the Soviet Union had fought only "inevitable (just) wars, when there was no other way out," Russia would now be entering military confrontation in order to distract from domestic concerns and the interests of a corrupt elite, the text read.

Ivashov did not respond to a request for comment. But Yevgeny Savostyanov, who said he had known Ivashov for 35 years, confessed he read the text with mounting incredulity.

"I just couldn't put it together in my head that this text was really signed by Ivashov in the name of the officers' assembly," he told POLITICO. "It's a remarkable shift in position."

As the former head of the Moscow region's FSB in the 1990s, Savostyanov himself bears the stamp of having once been a "*silovik*."

But in contrast to Ivashov, he shed his hawkish mantle, refashioning himself as a progressive democrat and serving as deputy head of the presidential administration under Boris Yeltsin.

In 2011, he even [spearheaded](#) an initiative to improve U.S.-Russian relations after Russia's war with Georgia caused a chill in bilateral ties.

But now he found himself in Ivashov's corner and publicly said so in a post on Facebook.

Explaining the move, he told POLITICO : "In my opinion, this is a moment in history when it is important to get over any personal or political antipathies. Now is the time when those against war should support each other. No one wants a war. No one."

He added : "When opposite sides converge, it speaks of widespread displeasure. Putin and the ruling class should be alarmed."

Ivashov, the colonel general, said in an interview with Russia's Echo Moskvyy radio station that 76 percent of the group's members had backed the letter but failed to specify a number.

The petition from the "supporters of peace" also lists several retired and reserve officers — the only military figures who can even contemplate speaking out in Russia, said Kolesnikov, the Carnegie Moscow Center analyst.

"For serving officers, a discussion is absolutely unthinkable," he said. So having retired officers speak out should be taken seriously, he added : "It is notable when the hawks play the role of peace doves."

Nonetheless, it is unlikely that the Kremlin will pay heed, Kolesnikov conceded : "In an authoritarian system, it is practically impossible for people to influence events. The Kremlin will pretend that it is not significant and that the number of people who support [such pleas] is very small."

The signatories of the open letter have few expectations of making a difference.

Asked by a Russian [interviewer](#) whether he thought the letter had reached its intended audience, Leonid Gozman, a former politician turned analyst, laughed : "No, of course not ! We didn't write it for them, we wrote it for ourselves, for normal people."

Gozman drew a parallel to 1968, when eight people gathered in Moscow's Red Square holding up banners denouncing the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Then, the demonstrators' acts of defiance ended in long sentences in far-flung labor camps or forced admission to psychiatric wards.

This time, the Russian authorities seem content with simply ignoring the letters. Pro-Kremlin media have either not covered their publication at all, or, as in Ivashov's case, discredited the author as either suffering from a [nervous](#) breakdown, or being a [useful idiot](#) for hostile forces.

For the signatories of the public petition, their action seems to have — above all else — served as a moment for some much-needed psychological release.

"The last of the human freedoms [is] to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances,"

said Gozman, quoting Viktor E. Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and philosopher. “We make use of this last freedom, it’s all we have.”

In a different interview, Makarevich, the musician, echoed that sentiment.

“Unfortunately there’s not much I can do, but at least I can speak out and that’s what I’ve done.”

But, he added, “I don’t expect anything to come of it.”

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• Politico. February 15, 2022 4:00 am :

<https://www.politico.eu/article/anti-war-russia-open-letter-to-president-vladimir-putin/>