

‘Our voices are louder if we stay’: Russian anti-war activists refuse to flee

Wednesday 30 March 2022, by [ROTH Andrew](#), [SAUER Piotr](#) (Date first published: 27 March 2022).

Thousands of people have left the country but a small group are determined to keep challenging Vladimir Putin despite the risks

Despite reaching one of the darkest moments in more than 40 years as a dissident and human rights activist, Oleg Orlov says that he has no plans to flee [Russia](#). “I made a decision a long time ago that I want to live and die in Russia, it’s my country,” Orlov told the Observer. “Even though it’s never been so bad.”

That’s saying something for Orlov, who can recall printing homemade anti-war posters in the late 1970s to protest against the Russian invasion of Afghanistan or in support of Poland’s Solidarność movement, and was an observer and negotiator during the bloody war in Chechnya in the 1990s.

He has been arrested three times for holding pickets since late February, when Russian troops launched an assault on [Ukraine](#). And he doesn’t rule out a prison term in his future.

“I understand the high likelihood of a criminal case against me and my colleagues,” he said. “But we have to do something ... even if it is just to go out with a picket and speak honestly about what is happening.”

Tens of thousands of Russians have [fled the country](#) since it invaded Ukraine, fearing a wave of government repression and a possible closure of Russia’s borders similar to what happened in the Soviet Union.

However, a devoted, diverse cadre of anti-war activists have stayed behind, continuing to protest, post online , fundraise and organise opposition to Vladimir Putin’s war against their neighbour.

“I made a decision that I’m not going. That was my decision,” said Ilya Yashin, 38, a veteran street and political activist who also serves as a municipal deputy in Moscow. “I understand all the risks. I understand what it could mean for me.

“But it seems to me that anti-war voices sound louder and more convincing if the person remains in Russia,” he said.

Yashin has continued to speak out against the war publicly, filming streams on his YouTube channel that reach 1.5 million viewers or more.

He estimated that 80% of his friends and colleagues, many in opposition politics or journalism, had left the country. “I think I have more friends in Georgia and in Vilnius now than in Moscow,” he said.

There was no judgment of those who had left, he said, while he looked on those who stayed with “great sympathy, great respect”. Through his activism, he also hoped to show that many Russians do

not support this war.

“What’s the point of doing politics in Russia if you’re not willing to protest against war at such a historic moment?” he said.

The danger to activists like Orlov and Yashin is real. The government has already opened nearly a dozen cases into alleged [“fakes” about the military](#), which can carry a sentence of up to 15 years, and has made more than 15,000 arrests of protesters.

“There are a lot of people asking for advice about whether to leave,” said Pavel Chikov, the head of Agora, a Russian human rights group based in Kazan, Tatarstan. “I tell all of them that if you’re thinking about leaving, you have to leave and watch the Titanic from the [rescue] boat, not on board.”

“If people are hesitating, they will blame themselves if they stay and can’t leave later,” he said.

Chikov compared the situation to that of the condition for activists inside Chile under Augusto Pinochet, or in Turkey after the recent failed coup attempt. “There’s no understanding of how far or how deep this can go,” he said.

In Yekaterinburg, Yevgeny Roizman has been a fixture in local politics for two decades. The former mayor and anti-narcotics activist is a rare official in the regions to express openly his support of the [opposition leader Alexei Navalny](#). A month after calling the war an act of “betrayal” by Russia against Ukraine, he continues to hold open-door consultations with local residents, a hallmark of his social activism in Russia’s fourth-largest city.

“I am almost 60, I lived my whole life in Russia, where the hell am I going to go?” Roizman said at the weekend.

“Many people see me as an example – they are staying because they see that I haven’t left,” he said. “My presence gives them the assurance that everything will be normal one day. And I know I am not alone in the country – there are still many normal people left.”

Roizman said he doesn’t judge the many who have fled but that he needs to be able to “look myself in the mirror”. “I now understand how the anti-fascists felt during the Third Reich,” he said. “But I can’t flee, it is unacceptable for me to do that.”

Others reasons for staying are diverse. Some worried about family members, and others were concerned that once they left they would probably never be able to come back.

Lucy Shtein, a municipal deputy and member of [Pussy Riot](#), said she felt she could be more effective as an activist outside Russia, but that she could not leave because she is awaiting sentencing for promoting a pro-Navalny protest.

“I always wanted to stay in Russia until the very end because I knew that once I leave I will not be able to return for a long time,” she said.

Dmitry Ivanov, a pro-democracy activist and computer science student who runs the “Protest at MGU” [Moscow State University] Telegram channel, also said he feared that if he leaves, “then there will be no way back”.

The IT student would probably be “welcomed abroad”, and said the police had “shown a lot of interest in me”. But he insisted that he had not done anything illegal, just “encourage others to go

out and protest peacefully”.

“That is allowed by law,” he said. “I don’t think I should be afraid or run away. This is my country.”

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