

Resisting war and repression in Putin's Russia

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Russian activists have called for [international days of protest](#) on January 19 through 24, 2023 against Putin's imperialist war in Ukraine and political repression in Russia. Thousands of Russian progressives, socialists, anarchists, and feminists have been arrested, hundreds jailed with long sentences, and untold numbers are under surveillance for their opposition to the regime. Tempest member Ashley Smith interviews Russian socialist Ivan Ovsyannikov about imperialist war, resistance to it, and political repression.

Ashley Smith: Russian activists have called for international days of action from January 19 through 24, 2023 to demand the release of political prisoners jailed by Putin's regime. Who are some of the prisoners and why have they been incarcerated?

Ivan Ovsyannikov: There is more political repression today than I can remember. [According to the human rights project OVD-info](#), over 20,000 people were detained at protests last year (eight times more than in 2020). Four hundred anti-war activists [face](#) criminal charges; 120 of them are in prison or under house arrest. Therefore, when we mention some of the names of political prisoners, this is not an exhaustive list, but only selected examples, chosen largely at random.

Those that the Russian Socialist Movement (RSM) mentioned in its [call for solidarity](#) represent a section of the left-wing community, which (like Russian civil society as a whole) is being systematically destroyed by the authorities. Arrested in April, Kirill Ukraintsev is a well-known leftist video blogger and leader of the Kurier trade union, which defends the interests of one of the most precarious groups of workers – delivery workers.

The formal reason for his arrest was his participation in peaceful protests of workers prohibited by the authorities. The real reason is the attempts (fortunately, so far unsuccessful) to break the resistance of the couriers and send a signal to the trade union movement that strikes during the war are unacceptable.

Democratic socialist Mikhail Lobanov is probably the best-known opposition politician still in Russia. In 2021, Lobanov—a mathematician and trade union activist—rose to prominence with a landslide victory in Moscow's Duma elections (which was stolen by scandalous vote-rigging). Last year, Lobanov organized an electoral platform called Nomination, which supported anti-war urban activists during municipal elections in the capital.

Since then, Lobanov was arrested several times over his position, the last time shortly before the new year. During his time in jail, he was beaten. A few days ago, Lobanov was released, but we fear for his fate. In the Russian context, these arrests send a clear signal—"leave the country, or you will go to jail for a long time."

Alexandra Skochilenko is a St. Petersburg artist and feminist who was arrested in the spring for replacing price tags in shops with anti-war leaflets. Now she faces a long prison term for "spreading

false information about the army.” Skochilenko is a symbol of peaceful protest, which in today’s Russia has become almost as dangerous as militant actions, such as arson of military registration and enlistment offices.

The defendants in the so-called “Tyumen case” are several anarchists accused by the authorities of preparing terrorist attacks. According to investigators, the young people were going to blow up military registration and enlistment offices, police stations, and railroad tracks that transport weapons to Ukraine. There is no real evidence of this, except for testimony [obtained under torture](#). The Tyumen case is just one example of government acts of repression against young anarchists in different cities of the country in recent years (e.g., [the Network case](#), the [case of the Kan teenagers](#), and many others).

We have chosen to highlight these cases in part because far less is known about left-wing Russian political prisoners in the world than figures such as Alexei Navalny (whom we, of course, also demand be released). Among other things, we hope that information about this repression will compel leftists abroad to take a firmer stand against Putin’s regime and its war in Ukraine.

AS: You yourself recently fled the country to avoid political persecution. What are the conditions like for political dissent? How have people managed to continue organizing in these conditions?

IO: I would like to say that the protest movement in Russia is growing despite all the repression, but, unfortunately, this is not the case. Before the war, protesting was already extremely risky, but activists could feel relatively safe as long as they didn’t break the unspoken rules (which were constantly tightened). Today you can be arrested or fired for any, even veiled, criticism of the war or other manifestation of disloyalty.

Sometimes there is no real reason for this. For example, many St. Petersburg feminists (in particular, my wife, Valeria) were detained for several days on suspicion of “telephone terrorism.” This charge was completely invented by the police to isolate potential protesters on the eve of important anniversaries for the regime. For example, Valeria was arrested a couple of days before Putin’s birthday.

Even with non-political protests (for example, in defense of city squares or labor rights), today most are in the form of appeals to the authorities, because it has become impossible to go out into the streets—no matter the issue or slogan. Any act of dissent will be crushed.

However, the resistance continues, although we have not seen street rallies in recent months. Anti-war activists run Telegram channels, distribute leaflets, make graffiti, and help political prisoners. Some trade unionists continue to organize and even carry out collective action. For example, in December, the Kurier trade union staged an impressive inter-regional strike. Individual daredevils set fire to military registration and enlistment offices. Over the past year, there were [about a hundred](#) such cases.

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AS: Putin’s imperialist invasion of Ukraine has failed badly. To salvage the situation he has shuffled generals, launched state terrorist attacks on civilian targets in Ukraine, and attempted to consolidate his hold on eastern and southeastern Ukraine. There are indications that he will launch an offensive, possibly from Belorussia, in another attempt to take the country. What is Putin’s

strategy now?

IO: I am not a military expert. In addition, after February 24, the rationality of Putin and his entourage, their ability to think strategically, is not very apparent. Nevertheless, I am sure that in the coming months we will see another escalation of hostilities, a new series of attacks against civilians, and a new wave of mobilizations in Russia.

Putin cannot turn back. A military defeat would almost certainly mean the collapse of his regime. Ukraine will never agree to the seizure of its territories, and (if Western countries supply it with enough weapons) it has every chance to win them back. Therefore, there is little hope of any retreat or concessions by Putin, which would be preconditions for any negotiated settlement.

AS: Putin recently mobilized hundreds of thousands to bolster his occupying forces in Ukraine. What impact did that mobilization have on people and political consciousness? Will he mobilize more people either to maintain the occupation or launch a new offensive? What impact would another mobilization have on people's attitudes toward the war?

IO: As I said, a new wave of mobilization will almost certainly come. As for public sentiments, it is difficult to speak about them with certainty. Polls, especially those that ask people directly about their attitudes toward the war, are misleading. As a rule, Russians are afraid to talk to researchers about "the special military operation" or Putin. The vast majority refuse to communicate with interviewers, others avoid politically sensitive topics, and still, others lie. After the announcement of mobilization, many young men simply did not pick up the phone from an unfamiliar number.

According to polling companies independent of the state, [about 30 percent of](#) Russians can be classified as opponents of the war, and about 50 percent as supporters. However, it is not entirely clear what these figures mean. Many who supported the war, yearn for an early peace on any terms. Many of those who are anti-war have given up and stopped doing anything.

I believe that after February, Russian society is in shock, confusion, depression, and depoliticization (which the Putin regime has supported for decades). These conditions hinder self-organization even more effectively than fear of reprisals.

Society's response to mobilization was all sorts of forms of individual sabotage. Hundreds of thousands of people fled the country in October-November, most to neighboring countries such as Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Turkey that did not require visas for entry. Many of those who do not have this opportunity hide in the countryside and have left their home address to live with friends or acquaintances.

Those who have been mobilized quite often rebel, demanding better material support or sufficient training periods. Although these protests are not anti-war, they are likely to undermine army discipline and, under certain conditions, can turn into something more. It is difficult to say anything definite about the number of deserters and "refuseniks," since only a small part of such cases gets into the media. However, there are many such stories.

Does all this testify to the growth of political consciousness? Honestly, it is difficult to say.

AS: What are economic and political conditions like for people in Russia today? Are these conditions changing people's consciousness about the war? How solid is Putin's popular base?

IO: Conditions are bad for increasing numbers of people. Inflation, a shortage of certain imported goods, the exit of many Western companies, and the general decline in the Russian economy due to sanctions have had an enormous impact. It is especially difficult for the families of those mobilized.

They have lost their loved ones and breadwinners. However, the mobilization and mass exodus of specialists somewhat relieved the situation in the labor market. Jobs have increased, especially in the military industry.

I do not believe that a worsening economic situation will lead to an uprising on its own. Russians adapt well to crises. The “hungry [19]90s,” when the population survived at the expense of handicrafts and summer cottages, demonstrated this.

However, with the combination of defeats at the front, an increase in the death toll, and splits at the top of the regime and among oligarchs, a revolutionary situation could develop. That is exactly what happened in the 1980s, when the unpopular war in Afghanistan, economic problems, and Gorbachev’s belated reforms led to the collapse of the USSR.

AS: What are the prospects for the resistance against Putin in Russia as well as in Belarus?

IO: I think, as has happened more than once in Russian history, military defeat will be a catalyst for change. If it happens, the process can develop according to Lenin’s classic formula: the ruling class cannot rule in the old way, and the working classes cannot live in the old way. The splits and conflicts among the elites will be combined with the rise of the protest movement and, probably, separatist actions in the national republics. I am sure that Lukashenko’s regime will fall on the same day when power in Russia is shaken.

AS: What positions should the international Left adopt on Russia’s imperialist war, NATO, and Ukraine?

The international Left must realize that Putin’s victory would be a victory for far-right political forces and regimes around the world. Contrary to the opinion of those “pacifists” who oppose military assistance to Ukraine, giving in to the aggressor would lead to the normalization of territorial seizures and new wars of aggression around the world.

IO: NATO, of course, is evil. But it should be remembered that in this case, Putin’s Russia, not NATO, is the aggressor. The international Left must realize that Putin’s victory would be a victory for far-right political forces and regimes around the world. Contrary to the opinion of those “pacifists” who oppose military assistance to Ukraine, giving in to the aggressor would lead to the normalization of territorial seizures and new wars of aggression around the world.

In addition, Putin’s victory would mean the perpetuation of slavery for the peoples of Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, and other post-Soviet countries in the orbit of Russian imperialism. It would also preserve the barbaric model of oligarchic capitalism based on record social inequality, corruption, and hydrocarbon trade that we have in Russia.

In analyzing the situation, the Left must draw on the tradition of anti-fascist solidarity in the fight against tyranny. This means uncompromising support for Ukraine, as well as the Belarusian and Russian liberation movements.

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