

Russia: Why did she go back?

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The story of Nadezhda Rossinskaya exposes the sheer variety of experiences surrounding the war in Ukraine. Having set out to help Ukrainians fleeing to Russia from her home in Belgorod, she was eventually arrested by the Russian authorities suspicious of her actions.

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, thousands of Russian citizens have assisted Ukrainians fleeing Russian occupation – for Russia. They find Ukrainians housing, provide basic supplies, connect them with relatives, or help them leave the country. Some of these volunteers are independent from the authorities, silent or quietly against Russia's "special military operation"; others support the war and the Putin regime, taking on the humanitarian burden as part of their patriotic duty. The lines, though, are not always clear.

One of them, a 28-year-old woman called Nadezhda Rossinskaya, helped Ukrainians under or fleeing occupation from her hometown of Belgorod, now a frontline town an hour or two away from Kharkiv – two cities where people used to make friends and do business across the Russian-Ukrainian border. She claims to have helped at least 25,000 people via her volunteer initiative, "Army of Beauties". Today, she is facing between three to six years in prison after returning to Russia of her own will in January 2024.

According to people who knew her, it started simply. In March 2022, Rossinskaya, a professional photographer, was contacted by a former client from the Kharkiv region who asked if she could put up her mother and dog for the night in Belgorod after fleeing the Russian invasion to the Russian side. In the end, 14 people came that night, a friend of Geisler's, Angela*, told me. They had spent the previous two weeks hiding from Russian fire in basements.

The requests started to snowball, and a few months later, Rossinskaya – who took up the name "Nadin Geisler" for her public persona – started her own volunteer initiative to try and address the humanitarian crisis in occupied Kharkiv region. To many, she became known just as "Nadin". You can still find requests for her help (and her phone number) in the dozens of Telegram chats for volunteers from 2022. Indeed, though she had no previous experience with volunteering or politics, a professional contact of hers told me, Geisler ended up delivering humanitarian aid to some of the most difficult places "beyond the ribbon" – the local slang for the Russian-Ukrainian border. You cannot get that kind of access without at least some contact with the Russian military, they said.

When asked how she managed it, she said, according to Angela, that it was simply that "no one had tried" to take aid across the border. "I shouted, I screamed, I started acting hysterically, and [Russian officials at the border] thought to hell with this crazy woman, and gave in," she recalls Geisler saying.

Still, despite her deft navigation of Russian-occupied Ukraine, over winter 2022 Geisler found herself under surveillance in Belgorod: a car followed her around the city, by that point already under regular attack by Ukrainian forces. She reported someone firing a gun outside her volunteer hub on several occasions – but local police refused to investigate. The FSB interrogated a Ukrainian

woman who tried to donate to Geisler's efforts, claiming she was on a "list of extremists" for supposedly funding the Ukrainian armed forces. Another group of activists later received a "signal" that the Russian security services were interested in her, and she decided to leave the country, although had no formal charges against her. She took a train out of Russia through Belarus, and went on to join the thousands of other Russians newly based in Georgia.

"The whole time I knew that it [emigration] would happen," Geisler later [said](#). "It's good that I'm not a Cargo 200 [military slang for a corpse] somewhere in the Kharkiv region."

In exile, Army of Beauties stopped operating, but Geisler continued to help Ukrainians in Russia – only now from a distance. She began helping people leave Russia via the only open land crossing with Ukraine, at Kolotilovka in Belgorod region. While Ukraine considers Kolotilovka to be an official humanitarian corridor, Russia has not given it any status. As a result, there is no infrastructure – no tents, heaters or anywhere to take shelter – and there have been delays in crossing. There, Ukrainians, often elderly or infirm, have to go through an FSB check before crossing a two-kilometre stretch called the "grey zone" before reaching the other side. The crossing can be "hell" for vulnerable people, a local contact told me.

In these circumstances, a local anti-war volunteer, Alexander Demidenko, began hosting people at his house. Over 1,000 people stayed at his home (he slept in the sauna), and he would ferry Ukrainians to Kolotilovka, where he would sort out the refusals and delays that inevitably arose. "He can get the FSB to talk to him. They understand he's right," a fellow volunteer recalled. But in November 2023, Demidenko was abducted at the checkpoint, tortured and then arrested on weapons charges. A few weeks earlier, he had helped expose allegations of corruption at Kolotilovka via local media. He had claimed officials had been demanding money for fast-tracking people through the queues. It was the first major arrest of a volunteer in Russia; many others simply had to leave. Indeed, the environment itself in Belgorod was tense, Geisler's legal advisor Alexei Prianishnikov said, noting that the FSB "see every Ukrainian civilian [in Russia] – in particular those whom [Geisler] helped – as a threat".

The professional contact, Yuri Borovskikh, told me that he and Geisler had discussed Demidenko's arrest ("we were surprised that he went back to Belgorod – he was already a suspect in a criminal investigation"). However, Geisler's relative lack of "negative experience" with Russian law enforcement meant that while she "understood the risks", she "underestimated how real they were", Borovskikh said. Plus, he added, "no one in her circle had been touched [by the security services]". His efforts to dissuade her from returning to Russia did not work.

Indeed, Geisler was defiant of the risks posed by the FSB's interest. "Prove that I am sponsoring the Ukrainian army. Prove that when I evacuated someone, I knew that their relatives were at the front," she said in a 2023 interview. "I'm just a volunteer. I just help anyone without knowing who they are. I always said that we 'are helping a brotherly nation', we did not cross any lines."

Emigration itself was "no sugar" for Geisler, Borovskikh said – a comment her friend Angela agreed with. "Before she went back she felt homeless, alone and not needed by anyone. Add to that the constant lack of money," Angela recalled. Apparently, she had planned to rent a small house near Kolotilovka, and help Ukrainian refugees cross back over the border. In parallel, she had also been working to get access for Russian volunteers to the "grey zone" – the two-kilometre stretch of no man's land at Kolotilovka – to help with the crossing itself.

Despite the fact that she did not need to, Geisler returned to Belgorod in mid-January 2024. On February 1st she was arrested by the FSB. The charge: calling for actions against the Russian state – allegedly via calling for donations to Ukraine's Azov battalion. She denies the charge, claiming that

she did not control the Instagram page under her name where the donation call was allegedly made last August. Instead, Geisler said in court that she supported the “special military operation”, President Vladimir Putin, and had also helped Russian military units in occupied Ukraine – a fact a prominent Russian MP could confirm, she claimed. Her supporters say you cannot believe what someone detained by the FSB says.

In the days before her arrest, Geisler had been battling Russian border guards at Kolotilovka to get a dog owner, originally from Melitopol, and [her 46 pedigree poodles](#) out of Russia. In her final post on Instagram, she detailed all the steps she took to arrange the crossing: visiting the FSB border service, only to find out that no official documents are necessary – because there is no official humanitarian corridor – only to be then informed at the checkpoint that she did not have the right documents. “After all, what if these poodles are for demining?” the border guards asked her.

“We’ll keep working,” she said matter-of-factly on Instagram, as if what she was doing had not crossed any lines.

Names have been changed to protect identities.

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