

The Citizens Braving Putin's Chokehold on Dissent

Article by Ekaterina Oleinikova

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In the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, people in cities across Russia took to the streets to voice their opposition in spite of the risks involved, both in terms of violence at the hands of the authorities, and of punitive sentences out of all proportion, justified in the name of national security. Ekaterina Oleinikova is a board member of the association Russie-Libertés. Founded in 2012 and based in France, this association is committed to democracy, protecting the rule of law, and defending human rights and fundamental freedoms in Russia. We spoke to her about the state of Russian civil society and the resistance movements against the war and the Putin regime.

***Green European Journal:* How have the demonstrations against the invasion of Ukraine unfolded in Russia? Can you tell us about the profile of the participants and how they are organised?**

Ekaterina Oleinikova: According to the information we have, which is limited, these demonstrations have been largely spontaneous. All the requests to organise demonstrations were denied, so these are unauthorised demonstrations, and hence the people who participate in them are regularly arrested. There was no official appeal, even though some opposition figures such as Alexei Navalny called for people to protest.

We think this spontaneous movement concerns different strata of the population. Of course, some have opposed the Putin regime for years, but we believe there are also people who are simply opposed to the war. This goes far beyond opposition to the Putin regime. We do not have information on the number of people involved, but we do know the number of arrests. On 6 March, more than 5,000 people were arrested in a single day. By 20 March, over 15,000 people had been detained since the start of the invasion. This information is collected by the NGO OVD-info, which records this information and provides legal aid to those arrested. The arrests are very harsh. People are not resisting arrest, they are not violent, and in most cases they are not even holding any placards. Journalists with press badges have also been arrested. There is also police violence at the police stations. The state reacts with an extremely heavy hand and swift deterrence.

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Is this in keeping with how such mobilisations were handled before the invasion of Ukraine? Has repression increased, or is it pretty much more of the same?

Repression has intensified. Prior to the war, participation in an unauthorised demonstration would be sanctioned at first with an administrative penalty along with a fine and arrest for up to 15 days, potentially followed by a hard prison sentence in the event of recurrence.

In Russia, it is very difficult to obtain permission to hold a demonstration that aims, for example, to express opposition to the regime. In most cases, it is denied. So, people knew very well what they were risking when they went out to protest.

On 3 March, the public prosecutor announced that participation in a demonstration against the war was liable to be punishable as participation in the activities of an extremist organisation, resulting in a prison sentence. There is also the new law that came into force on 4 March “against fake news”. The law has three components: the first prohibits the dissemination of false information about the Russian army, which carries a penalty of up to 15 years’ imprisonment; the second concerns the prohibition of public opposition or condemnation of the war, through demonstrations, signs, and so on. The third concerns the calls for sanctions against Russia: there is a risk of fines and imprisonment for anyone openly supporting these. This new repressive apparatus was created to prevent access to an alternative perspective to what is being reported on the official media channels. Russians must have only one version of the war.

How can activists circumvent this media blackout to communicate with each other, disseminate their messages, and stay informed?

Today, many media stations have either suspended all activity temporarily, closed, or have gone off the air entirely. No media station based in Russia can cover the war because any narrative that would distance itself from the Kremlin’s version is likely to fall foul of the new law. The first independent radio station, the *Echo of Moscow* (*Эхо Москвы*), which had existed since 1990, went off the air in early March. *Novaïa Gazeta*, whose editor-in-chief was recently awarded the Nobel Prize, has ceased its operations until the end of the war. The channel *Dojd*, which was truly a major independent media that had existed since 2010, has suspended all its activities. Several hundred journalists have fled the country.

Although it is difficult to say who is behind them, there are still Telegram channels that share information such as demonstration announcements. It is not known how the people behind these accounts protect themselves or whether they are in Russia or abroad.

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For several years now, we have seen the Kremlin’s policy of imprisoning those who criticise the Putin regime or intimidating them into exile. How weakened is Russia’s civil society today as a result?

Today, the people in the streets are not necessarily historic opponents of the Putin regime. They are against the war because they do not want Russians or Ukrainians to die. Almost every Russian family has links with Ukraine and vice versa. For these people, it was

unimaginable that a full-blown war would break out. They are really outraged by what is happening.

Civil society is very weakened by the laws that have been passed in recent years. The law on foreign agents in particular has completely stifled several NGOs and several media outlets. Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) represented a major opposition to the Putin regime, counting many sympathisers. But it was declared an extremist organisation and dissolved. The team has been completely decimated, either in prison or in exile.

Memorial is another organisation that has been shut down. Its purpose was to study the crimes of the Soviet era and to rehabilitate political prisoners, a mission that had nothing to do with political opposition to the Putin regime. It was truly a major NGO in Russia.

What are the primary areas of work of the association Russie-Libertés?

Prior to the recent events, we regularly held rallies in support of, and alongside, major demonstrations in Russia, such as protesting fraudulent elections. We also organise conferences, debates, and meetings on issues related to the rule of law and democracy in Russia. In partnership with other NGOs, we have also published a book on the situation of independent journalism in Russia, with portraits of journalists who describe their activities and their work.

Since the war, we have participated in rallies in solidarity with Ukraine. We have also made proposals to the French government and European authorities calling for the expansion of targeted sanctions against Putin. In particular, we call for the extension of targeted sanctions against Putin's circle and the immediate cessation of all purchases of Russian hydrocarbons, as well as the cessation of all commercial relations with the main natural gas exporting company Gazprom. We believe that we need to put pressure on Putin's accomplices rather than on Russian society, which is already suffering so much from this regime.

We are also calling for judicial investigations into those who support Putin in Europe, including elected officials and European companies operating in Russia. We ask that their alleged support for the Putin regime and the benefits they reap from it be brought to light. Finally, we have created a petition calling for an investigation to be opened into the crimes committed by the Putin regime in Ukraine since 2014. Recently, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court opened an investigation into the matter.

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What do you think is the responsibility of the European Union and the French Government to the Russian people? How could they better support the opposition movements to the war in Russia?

French and European leaders must do everything they can to support what remains of civil

society and democracy in Russia. People who have to leave the country due to threats of persecution or prosecution must also be given safe harbour in Europe.

French and European politicians make a very clear distinction between Putin's regime, which is responsible for the war, and the Russian people, who suffer immensely from it. For Russians who dare to go out to the streets today, despite all the risks, it is especially important for them to know that we see them abroad and that we salute their courage.

It is also essential to combat misinformation. A number of French Members of European Parliament were recently sanctioned for taking part in non-official missions to observe the Russian elections of last September.^[1] They were invited by the Russian government to return to Europe to report that the elections had been carried out properly, without any violation or fraud. This is unacceptable and dangerous because it creates disinformation, but also because Russians think these are official representatives of the European Parliament, when this is not the case.

Under the Law on Foreign Agents, has it become risky for foreign NGOs or governments, or even for ordinary people to provide support to the resistance? Could support from abroad do more harm than good?

Indeed, the consequence of Law on Foreign Agents is that those who are declared an agent of foreign countries have very strict reporting obligations. They must indicate on all their documents that they are foreign agents, and are subject to very regular and heavy audits, several times a year, by the authorities. The slightest failure to comply results in fines.

But this law had already been in existence for 10 years. It was first applied to NGOs that received funding from abroad, to intimidate them. Then in 2017, its application was extended to the media. As a result, the channels that are declared to be foreign agents lose all their advertising revenue and are subject to very heavy controls, with regular heavy fines. Many channels had to shut down because they were no longer economically viable.

This was one of the reasons why Memorial was shut down. They allegedly forgot to mention the word "foreign agent" and were shut down for systematic violation of the foreign agent statute. It is therefore a draconian law, which leads to disastrous consequences. Today, this law even applies to ordinary individuals.

All of Putin's repression has not succeeded in completely dismantling the resistance and opposition, but there is still a lack of political change: opponents face several obstacles. What are the prospects for building a political regime alternative to Putin's?

The repression of the opposition over the past few years has made an alternative proposal to the Putin regime very difficult. Propaganda also remains very powerful, with rhetoric rooted in ideas of a strong state, military power, the ideology of war, and opposition to the West. This rhetoric not only distracts from the absence of freedom and the rule of law, but also makes the country's poverty invisible.

I think the regime will realise that this war is a political error. Indeed, even if Russians support Putin's regime, they do not support the war. It is therefore possible that those who have been supporting the regime for many years may start to ask questions.

On the other hand, targeted sanctions can really affect those close to Putin, who have benefited from the regime and who are his foundation for conducting his policy. Through these sanctions, it is possible to create dissent within the ranks of this camp. Perhaps people will oppose Putin's policies because they will personally feel the consequences, and this may not be something they are willing to endure despite all the benefits they reap from the regime.

[1] These MEPs were Thierry Mariani, Hervé Juvin, Philippe Olivier, Jean-Lin Lacapelle and Virginie Joron, members of the National Rally. Other European parliamentarians who participated in this observation mission included Gunnar Beck, of the German AfD party, and Miroslav Radačovský, not registered.



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