

THE VIOLENT STATE

Fear and protest in Russia

by **Elena Palenova**

Russian feminist activist Nika Vodwood left the country in 2021. She says that she herself was very scared to even talk about leaving Russia and was terrified when journalists asked her to comment on it. She feared criminal cases against feminists in Russia and wanted to “leave the police state”.

“Someone reported me to the police, and I was taken to the police station for a conversation. Also, a member of the presidential human rights council included me in his presentation as a representative of a so-called ‘special detachment attacking family values,’” she says.

On September 20, 2022, the pro-Russian administrations of the occupied regions of Ukraine initiated referendums on joining the Russian Federation. On September 21, Vladimir Putin announced the start of “partial mobilization.” Putin’s decree did not establish any criteria for mobilization.¹ The number of people who were to be taken into the army is classified. The

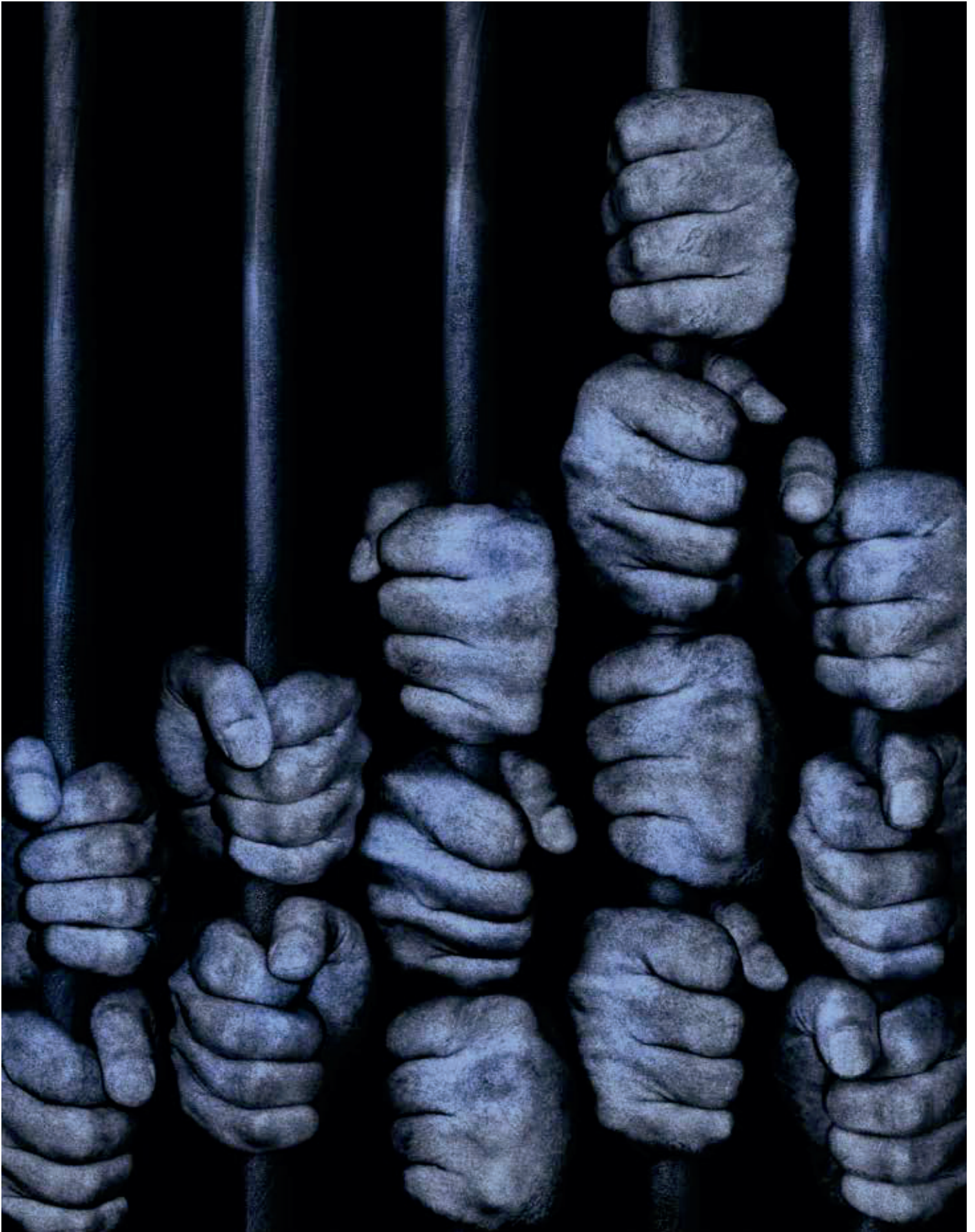
mobilization turned out to be impartial; men from 18 to about 65 years old were taken, regardless of their military experience and their relationship to the war.

At the end of September, the main news was the annexation of the occupied Ukrainian territories to Russia and the mass exodus of Russian men abroad. In total, at least 200,000 people left the country during the first week of mobilization.² They left and did not come out to protest. For this, many resented them.³

I WONDER IF the protest situation in Russia today needs to be explained to people that were not born in Russia.

Nika Vodwood emphasizes that it is not important to explain any of this to Ukrainians.⁴

“There is no need for statements like: ‘We are actually doing something, I’m good, don’t hate me’. Ukrainians should not be expected to know the whole context, to sympathize, empathize, understand us,” she says.



She claims that people who are subjected to the incredible level of inhuman violence that Ukrainians are experiencing today may begin to empathize and understand their abusers only in the context of Stockholm syndrome, only if for the sake of self-preservation. She compares the situation to patriarchy. Men should not tell women: “We also suffer from patriarchy” since they are an oppressor group, and any suffering of the oppressors is incommensurable with the suffering of the victims.

But is it necessary to explain the protest situation at all, if not to Ukrainians, then to the world? Is it still important to understand what fear of the state is and how the senselessness of protests works?

“It’s weird to talk about ‘fear’ while living under a peaceful sky and falling asleep not to the sound of bombs but to soothing mantras on headphones. However, our fear, the fear of the Russians, should not be underestimated either,” says 20-year-old Evgeny Ruchkin (name changed), who is studying journalism at a Russian university. He was almost expelled from the university for participating in protests. His story is below.

RUSSIA HAS A LONG HISTORY of state-run systematic violence that continues to this day.⁵ For Russians who want to live a normal life in peace, it meant that people have had to stay as far away from the state as possible, for generations, says Olga Andreeva (name changed), a business analyst and writer who left Russia in 2019. “State and people exist independently of each other and try to keep it that way,” she says.

“For example, when some shit happens, no one calls the police, because the situation usually gets worse. Crimes are not reported, because going through hell with the police is more difficult than just recovering from what has happened,” points out Andreeva.

Russian people categorically do not want to be in the state’s field of view. “When you go to a protest, you intentionally attract the attention of a random unpredictable jerk who may not react in any way or may stick a dumbbell up your ass. You don’t know what will happen; you don’t know if something will happen to you or your family and friends,” says Andreeva.

Defenseless before the state

According to the human rights media project “OVD-Info”, in the eight months since the war started there have been only 18 days when no one was detained for their anti-war position.⁶ Detainees are exposed to all sorts of threats and punishments. Women detained at anti-war protests in March were threatened with rape and beaten up.⁷ The poet detained for anti-war poetry was raped by dumbbell.⁸ According to another human rights project, Committee Against Torture, 77% of complainants of torture are denied the request for criminal investigation; the 23% of complaints when cases are initiated are cases that ended in death.⁹

“Russians are absolutely defenseless before the state. Protest-ing is literally putting your life at risk. The police can do whatever they want with you, and you have no one to complain to,” says Anna Titova, a data journalist studying data science at one of Russia’s online universities. “The last real legal way to deal

with it was complaining to the European Court of Human Rights. But after the start of the war, Russia was excluded from the Court so there are no more ways to protect yourself except for silence or emigration”.

THE MODERN RUSSIAN state is built on random and unpredictable institutionalized violence, on fear and pain. Therefore, one of the most common reactions to the power abuse from the Russian government is to ignore the state and try to build your own little life. Those who leave also often talk about personal and professional values.

“If I survive as a journalist, I can tell the truth about what is happening in Russia and in other countries,” says Anton Karliner, photojournalist and former chairman of the journalists’ union which was closed for anti-war statements. He fled to



Kazakhstan with his wife and newborn daughter after the announcement of mobilization.

"I did everything I could; I was an activist, I protested, I suffered for it, and left because I realized that I could not stand it anymore," says Vladimir Katynev (name changed), who left for Serbia in the first week after the start of the war. "We see how people have been imprisoned for decades, and violence has been used against them, including my friends. You live with it in Russia every day. On the one hand, it's scary; on the other, you just want to spit in their faces. My friends are protesting and committing different radical acts; I will not give details in order to ensure their safety."

"I was at the protests, saw that it was useless, and left the country," says Valentina Grigoryeva (name changed), who left Russia in 2017 without finishing her medical studies in Moscow.

"In Europe, you can go on strike and get a pay rise. In Russia, you can go on strike and get beatings, rapes, and arrests," she says.

"It's a very nasty feeling that what you're doing is useless. You rationally understand everything about the delayed effect of protests, but at the protest all your instincts are yelling at you that you urgently need to run and save your little life and not to be beaten," says Kira Kotova (name changed), former university lecturer.

"I am very afraid of any crowd. But I also carry guilt for Putin's continuing rule," adds Kotova. "I guess we all, literally everyone, should go to jail in some 2014 for the sake of a happy future."

Why now, not before?

In the current history of Russia, there were the First and Second Chechen wars, the Russo-Georgian five-day war, wars in Donbas, in Syria, the Moscow theater hostage crisis, and the Beslan school siege, as war journalist Elena Kostyuchenko lists dryly.¹⁰ She notes that thousands of people with disabilities live in places that are basically concentration camps. There is harassment of religious groups and the LGBT community, tortures and killings in police stations and prisons.

"We have an eternal president, a cult of personality, a church that has merged with the state, political terror, state propaganda," she writes. "You did not know that we have fascism? The world says it didn't know. The monster grew up and began to eat so much that the whole world noticed."

WHEN WAR WAS DECLARED, the horror at what was happening was immense, but it was no surprise. However, when the military started knocking on doors to take men to war, it became almost impossible to ignore the reality.

"People did not leave before the war and even before the mobilization, because it was still possible to live in an illusion of normal life," says journalist Viktor Sukristikov (name changed).

"My husband and I did not leave when the war started, although we discussed it a thousand times. Russia is our homeland, our whole life is here, our job, our parents," says Anna Tito-

va. "But when the mobilization was announced, we packed up and left in a couple of days. The idea of dying for the government that you hate and going to war where you destroy other people's lives was just too much."

The war mobilization was the "too much" point for many.

War's womanly face

One of the latest examples of the mass protests in Russia was "women's marches" on September 24. The idea of "Woman in Black" protests was that women dressed in black would "go out for a walk" along the same route in many Russian cities.¹¹

"I was on Nevsky Prospect in St. Petersburg on a women's march. Now on protests you need to be ready for anything,

including being beaten by the police and going to jail," says Kira Kotova. "I was walking through Palace Square and my legs were shaking. My husband was with me and I was scared for him, because he could be arrested and mobilized."

I was seven years old when Vladimir Putin came to power. My brother was two years old, and he is now at risk of

being mobilized. Feeling like the government and the country has always been like this is reinforced by the general perception of the age hierarchy in Russia. The hierarchies occur as the patriarchal structure of society plays its role in the protest behavior, creating a state of learned helplessness.

"**IN RUSSIA**, older means smarter, and this is the only possible state of affairs," says Svetolik Bersenev (name changed), a PhD researcher studying applied physics in St. Petersburg. "The voting population are mostly people over 40 who watch TV every day and receive constant propaganda. I can tell by my own parents, who sincerely support the war. People who refuse to listen to the non-propagandized version of events are the compliant majority that are indifferent or supportive of government action."

Protest behavior is severely influenced by a patriarchal upbringing, believes Russian journalist Olesya Gerasimenko, who left the country with her family after the war started. She explains that in Russia, only 10% of the efforts in a child's development are invested by the father, as in many countries in the world. "The unpleasant consequences of such a system are the depreciation of human life, increased aggression in society, and a positive attitude towards violence at home and at work," she comments.

The most active participants in the anti-war resistance in Russia now are women, Gerasimenko claims, specifically "mothers who know the value of human life and are not afraid of prison, which undoubtedly threatens them under the new Russian military laws, because they have gone through pregnancy, childbirth, the first sleepless years of a baby, the adolescence crisis".

"If the average Russian father knew how much time and effort was invested in raising, feeding and helping a child, he would

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resist sending him to the front more than Russian men do now. The price of a human life can only be understood by the involved parent,” she concludes.

Helping men leave the country became a form of protest for many women. “In the first week of mobilization boys were still trying to protest, but the detentions for them were super tough and they started to be taken to the army directly from the streets, so it became clear that it was better to help the boys leave the country,” says Kira Kotova.

Young and not protesting

Students and academic staff are generally considered to be protesters. However, the administrations of Russian universities are threatening expulsion and the sacking of staff who protest or endorse anti-war sentiment.¹²

“It is three times scary for the male students,” explains scientist Svetolik Bersenev. “Students are expelled from universities for participating in protests, and men who are not enrolled in studies are taken into the army, which is now a direct path to the war.”

In October, St Petersburg State University fired Denis Skopin, associate professor at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences.¹³ The reason was: “Committing an immoral act incompatible with the continuation of teaching work.” The immoral act was participating in a protest against mobilization.

“Some of the students, including mine, were almost expelled for protests during the spring. One of my first-year students protested twice and served ten days in prison,” says Kira Kotova, former university lecturer.

Kotova resigned at the end of the academic year. She made this decision after the publication of the support letter for Putin and military operations signed by St Petersburg University employees. “I did not want to be part of this letter, even indirectly,” she says.¹⁴

According to Kotova, the faculty asked people who openly express their disagreement with the war not to present themselves as university employees. Moreover, the first-year students were banned from publishing a school newspaper because it mentioned Bucha, without any explanation.¹⁵

“This limits the right to freedom of speech and thought, and also directly violates the law on education,” says Kotova. “Everything that is now classified by law as ‘discrediting’ the army automatically begins to be considered illegal and extremist. It turns out that a teacher who takes an article from – let’s say Meduza, the online newspaper writing a lot about the war – to the class automatically becomes a distributor of extremist materials.”

EVGENY RUCHKIN (name changed) is studying journalism at a Russian university. When Russian troops invaded Ukraine, he went to an anti-war protest in the city center, was detained after an hour of protesting and spent the night at the police station, where he and other detainees were threatened by the police. In

the morning, Yevgeny was released, but two weeks later a document was sent to the university about his detention. The university put him on the to-expel list.

“I decided that I had nothing to lose and went to protest again,” Ruchkin says. At the protest, he was arrested and held by the police for seven days. The document about his detention was received by his grandmother.

“It’s hard to ignore the fear of being jailed, getting killed quietly, or your family being hurt,” he says. “I love my grandma and I couldn’t put her in danger. I was scared for her.”

Maria Krylova (name changed), journalist and final-year bachelor student at St. Petersburg State University, protested for the first time in support of Alexei Navalny, Putin’s most vocal political opponent who is now in a Russian prison. She was there taking photos for *Novaya Gazeta*, an opposition newspaper. “Right in front of me my journalist colleague was tasered and dragged into a police car, where he fainted. It made a terrible impression on me. I was 20 years old when I saw how eight men in special

vests and helmets, with batons, shockers and guns, rushed at a journalist who came with journalist ID. This is how I got my fear of police and stopped going to protests.”

Students explain their inability to participate in protests or leave Russia by the need to finish their studies. “Young people are in the most brutal situation now. We are tied to Russia, we have no money, and we cannot go

abroad; we have no opportunity to study somewhere else and feel safe,” says Maria Krylova.

What is protest?

Nevertheless, people are still actively protesting, although the leaders of the protest were imprisoned and there is no one to lead the revolution.¹⁶ “The last time I participated in a protest was in January 2021 when opposition politician Alexei Navalny was sentenced,” says Elizabeth Sinekoneva (name changed), a feminist historian studying woodworking at the St. Petersburg college. “Shortly before this, I had adopted a dog from a shelter, so I left the protest soon because I didn’t want to risk detention. A few hours later, I watched online how people were beaten with batons and electric shockers at this same protest. This made a very strong impression on me, although I have quite extensive experience of going to protests.”

“Surely, there are places in this world where people are not afraid of the police and prison, but I believe that they are in the minority,” says Elizabeth. “The demand for protests that flooded the liberal media at the start of the war may have encouraged some people to protest, but it also created intense tension within formerly liberal communities due to the insensitivity and indifference of Western observers to both Russia’s global dispositions and the local political context.”

Sinekoneva points out that for the last 30–40 years, Russian human rights activists and those from the late Soviet era have

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been constantly writing and sending reports on the state of affairs in police stations, prisons, army, and penitentiary institutions to the UN and other international monitoring structures.

“The relevant question is how this information was taken into account at the top international political and economic levels that preceded this phase of this war,” she concludes.

Those who have ceased to actively participate in the protests choose indirect forms of protest.

“My way of protest became to help and coordinate assistance in social media to the boys who want to leave,” says Zoya Podkollina (name changed), a student at one of the Moscow universities.

“I volunteer for those who are in police detention,” says Maria Krylova. “The conditions there are often terrible: no food, water, phone charges, a person simply cannot go to the toilet, there are no hygiene pads for women with their periods. We pass it all on as volunteers.”

“I chose a form of ‘silent’ protest,” says Evgeny Ruchkin. “I place green ribbons around in the city, which symbolize peace and love, and began to write articles for opposition newspapers. I know that while I am free and while I am in Russia, I will be more useful. And I will do much more to stop the war than if I am dead, imprisoned or expelled.”

Privilege of leaving

There are still many men who do not want to fight and cannot leave. Those who are under direct threat of mobilization will not be able to leave.

Journalists of the “Important Stories” online media calculated that in 23 out of 26 regions from which the largest number of people are taken, incomes are even lower than the overall Russian level.¹⁷ In these regions, especially in small and medium-sized settlements, it is almost impossible to resist war and mobilization: people go to war because they have no other way out.

EMIGRATION IS A LUXURY for most Russians, points out journalist Anna Titova. She lists: in the first days of the mobilization, air ticket prices skyrocketed: the flight from Moscow to Yerevan cost €3,760, €2,030 to Tashkent, €1,200 to Baku. The monthly rent for an apartment in Tbilisi started from €800 in September,¹⁸ whereas the median salary in Russia is €630.¹⁹ “Leaving is a privilege now; my husband and I are now spending thousands of euros just to leave the country,” she says.

The situation is made worse because of the closed airspace and semi-closed borders. Many men at risk of mobilization who flee will be without income, and may not even have a passport or visa to successfully leave the country. It is a dangerous task in the time of mobilization to request a passport from the government. Some Baltic countries agreed to bar the entry of Russian citizens, “Travel to EU is a privilege, not a human right,” said the prime ministers of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Poland in a joint statement.²⁰

“I stay in Russia to be a witness to the changes that are happening with my society now,” says Elizabeth Sinekoneva.

“I myself stay because I understand how I will hide here, and I don’t know what to do abroad,” said musician Vadim Hublov (name changed), who has always been against violence and tried to live a peaceful creative life.

“Now, instead of protesting, it’s easier for me to break my own leg and get away from the meat grinder,” said Viktor Sukristikov.

The other example is 27-year-old Russian rapper Walkie who killed himself because of mobilization.²¹ Self-harm and setting military offices on fire with incendiary bombs look like the latest and ultimate form of protest in Russia in 2022.²² ✖

Elena Palenova is a Russian journalist now living in Sweden.

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