Lessons of unfreedom: "People live in a kind of limbo, where rules are both rigid and arbitrary"

In this interview the role of dissidents and the civil society in exile is discussed. Life under the current regime is compared with life during the Soviet-period: there are similiarities and differences in the repressive apparatus and the methods and strategies for resistance.

by **Elisa Marin** and **Oliver Skye**

This is an interview with an anonymous Russian researcher recorded in the winter of 2023, in response to events taking place in the Russian Federation.

Life under the Soviet and current regimes

INTERVIEWERS (I): **You have experienced both the Soviet Union and Putin's regime. Are there any similarities?**

RESPONDER (R): Yes, I'm almost 70 years old. Well, the current regime did not begin in 2014, of course. It began, in my opinion, with the adoption of the doctrine of information security in 2001. This can be considered the end of the liberal period in the history of Russia, the so-called Yeltsin period. After 2001, things only got worse. Many people remember the takeover of the NTV channel[1] and the ban on the program *Puppets*.[2] This is when censorship was gradually introduced. And this is where we are today. Does it look to you like the Soviet Union? If you look from abroad, many things might seem similar such as censorship and repression. However, pointing to repression and censorship alone does not explain whether the Soviet regime and Putin's regime today are genuinely comparable. I would say that the differences are stronger!

In the Soviet Union, there was a clear demarcation line between what could and could not be said. In the official discourse – that is, in the newspaper, at a meeting or at a rally – you couldn't say much. In private life, you could say whatever you liked and as long as it did not become public, you could stay under the radar. This situation, marked by a tacit understanding of what was permitted and prohibited, and where and when, emerged in the 1950s in the kitchens of the intelligentsia and persisted into the 1980s, until Yuri Andropov's tightening of the regime. This tacit understanding became part of everyday life: people might complain about the authorities on public transport or,

PHOTO: OLEG NIKISHIN/NEWSMAKERS

Life size puppets of Russian political leaders on the set of a popular satirical television show called "Kukly" (Puppets). "Kukly" was a TV show which mocked Russian political scene on the Independent Channel NTV. The programme was banned in 2002.

especially, while standing in queues. At the same time, they were acutely aware of the boundaries: what could be said and where, and what could not.

Today, the situation is different: there are no unwritten rules people can follow to stay safe when speaking out. Moreover, the boundaries between the public and the private sphere became blurred. Instead, people live in a kind of limbo, where rules are both rigid and arbitrary. This is why under Putin's regime, many have stopped trying to orient themselves: insecurity is constant, and fear is spreading.

The Soviet government demanded public displays of unity and loyalty to the Party. How people actually lived in private mattered far less. They could steal or lie, and many did, so long as they did not make a public spectacle of it. Above all, especially abroad, they were not to say anything that was forbidden. Dissidents were therefore unwelcome and were persecuted, because they tried to bring real problems into the open. They wanted to speak about them publicly. That, more than anything else, was what the regime found dangerous.

I: Who exactly were these dissidents?

R: If, as the Soviet phrase *inakomyslyashchie* suggests, "half the country thought differently," *dissidents* were those who also acted differently (*inakodeistvuyushchie*). They were the people who insisted that the authorities follow their own laws. And, to some extent, legality did exist, especially compared with today. Even in cases labeled "crimes against the state" (for example, distributing so-called anti-Soviet literature), it was sometimes possible to be cleared of the charges. Today, by contrast, it is hard to hope for a fair trial at all.

A joke from the Stalin era captures the logic: a new prisoner is asked: "How much did you get?" – "Five years." – "For what?" – "For nothing!" – "No, they give ten *for nothing*!" The situation in Russia today can feel even more

The interactive exhibition "Erica Takes Four Copies" opened 2022, at the Anna Akhmatova Museum in Fountain House. The main object is manuscripts, or rather, printed copies – *samizdat*.

Russian *samizdat*: photo negatives of unofficial literature.

PHOTO: NKRITA / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

shocking: today you can get twenty years "for nothing". In that sense, it is harder for dissidents today. As Boris Slutsky wrote in his well-known poem, "we all walk under God" (meaning that no one is safe from such misfortune – *editor's note*). Today no one, even a loyal citizen, can be sure what might trigger prosecution. Someone might say the wrong thing in the wrong setting, or simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and that can already be enough. This is the condition under which people are forced to act.

Samizdat, underground and methods of resistance in the USSR

I: How did the dissidents act? What were the risks?

R: First of all, there was a huge underground world. It's no accident that my generation is sometimes called "the generation of janitors and watchmen." People left officially prestigious jobs such as engineers, scientists, researchers, and took the type of work typical of dissidents: writing texts. Many wrote poetry and prose. They published almanacs and underground *samizdat* journals. Of course, it was a form of struggle. But this underground world was so large that it was possible, in a sense, to live inside it without "drawing attention" from the state. What did the dissidents do there? The first thing that stands out is that a new culture was developing. There were underground exhibitions; philosophical, linguistic, and architectural seminars, not at universities, but in private apartments, where entry was by password. There were also many Marxist circles that tried to practice what they considered "genuine" Marxism. I think the KGB knew a great deal about all of this. But if it didn't become public, it was sometimes tolerated until, suddenly, it wasn't, and people were arrested. Politically, this mostly concerned *samizdat*.

Beyond the well-known protests, like the 1968 demonstrations in Red Square,[3] there were leaflets and underground literature in general. Especially important was the relatively regular publication of the *Chronicle of Current Events*.[4] It informed people about repressions, strikes, and other events. Often only ten copies were produced, typed on thin paper. There was a saying then about the typewriter: "Erika takes four copies"[5] (meaning the *Erika* typewriter could produce several copies at once – *editor's note*). There was no Internet at the time.

I: Typewriters often had distinctive typefaces and/or serial numbers. Is it correct that it allowed authorities to identify the machine from a typed document?

R: Yes, absolutely. And I say this ironically. Before a weekend or holiday, all the typewriters at the institute would be sealed. A "trial font" [a reference typing sample – *editor's note*] was taken from each machine and kept in the so-called First Department [the office responsible for security and secrecy – *editor's note*]. That way [if a suspicious document appeared – *editor's note*] it was easy to determine which typewriter had produced it. So of course, typing on official typewriters was very risky, but some people managed to get their own machines. During house searches, the authorities would immediately take a sample and check whether it matched any of the typed materials they

were investigating. In general, distributing anything was difficult and dangerous, and people used all kinds of ingenious methods, some of them almost unbelievable. People were so inventive! New restrictions were quickly worked around, because for every new rule there were always plenty of people who could think up some technical trick to get around it.

I: So it was basically the same technological struggle, just in analog form. Today, of course, it's all digital.

R: Yes, of course!

Denunciations, recruitment, and the repressive apparatus in the USSR and in current Russia

I: How did Soviet dissidents deal with the risk of denunciations, that is to being reported to the authorities? And how did they vet or screen people so that only trusted participants were present at apartment gatherings where literature was shared or distributed?

R: There are estimates suggesting that, under Stalin, the USSR saw as many as four million denunciations. Something similar happened in the Third Reich. In one German book I read about denunciations and the author noted that the Gestapo was relatively small in terms of staff. It didn't need to be larger: ordinary people supplied the denunciations themselves.

And we see echoes of this today. On the metro, someone glances at a neighbor's phone, notices a Ukrainian flag, and reports it immediately. The person is detained, and a case is quickly fabricated. I know a teacher who was asked by students what she thought about the current situation, and she answered honestly. When she returned to the staff room, the police were already waiting for her. The students had recorded the conversation and sent it to the police. Teachers inform on students; students inform on teachers…

In the late Soviet Union, denunciations did not function all that effectively. The KGB collected them and often simply kept them on file in case someone needed to be prosecuted in the future. It was also officially stated that anonymous denunciations would not be considered.

I worked at a research institute, and we had informers there, probably quite a few. In academic circles, it was believed that every fourth or fifth person was an informer, as a massive recruitment campaign was underway. At that time, the repressive machine struck rarely and selectively, targeting individuals only when they had truly crossed all the "red lines," as the saying goes – when they "no longer knew the limits." So people calmly told dangerous jokes, knowing there were informers around. In today's Russia, that is clearly not advisable.

"And we see echoes of this today. On the metro, someone glances at a neighbor's phone, notices a Ukrainian flag, and reports it immediately. The person is detained, and a case is quickly fabricated."

I: So when someone takes information from the private sphere into the public one, they are effectively crossing that very line and it becomes an open threat?

R: Yes, of course. But even then, the sentences were not that harsh. I received a suspended sentence for distributing "anti-Soviet" literature. Today, however, I have not heard of suspended sentences being given. Instead, people receive real prison terms: eight to ten years, sometimes even twenty.

I: That's obvious intimidation.

R: Yes, of course. At least the Soviet Union tried to appear somewhat respectable.

I: How were people recruited by security services?

R: Recruitment worked very well. They usually targeted people who had some kind of "sin" – for example, telling political jokes. They have attempted to recruit me too. I was summoned to the "First Department." There was no point playing games with them. At best, it would end in a draw. Recruitment involves both threats ("We know a lot about you") and incentives ("We'll help you; you'll receive certain benefits"). They told me: "You speak German? Excellent. We'll place you in the USSR-FRG Society. You will report to us on who says what". I should have told them to get lost immediately; instead, I did so on the third day, realizing that the longer it went on, the worse it would become. So the correct approach was: "Sorry, this isn't for me". There were no consequences for that. At least in the Soviet Union, refusal did not lead to repression. Even better was to make the recruitment attempt widely known as there was a good chance they would quickly back off.

Today the same recruitment patterns are used. At the institute where I now work, I know of at least four people who have been approached. The main thing is not to give in to fear, but to refuse categorically. Better still, to open

the door and say loudly: "Don't you dare try to recruit me. Who do you think I am?" Nothing will happen. They will simply add a note to your file: "Refused recruitment." Of course, if you are arrested later, that note may also be used.

I: In everyday life, did people simply assume that there were informers in every organization? Was that just taken for granted?

R: I can only speak about what I personally saw and the environment I was part of. At the institute, it was known that several people were informers. One of them did not even deny it. He was quite demonstrative about it and was at one point the party secretary. People laughed at him. They even told him political jokes directly. He was a rather small, resentful person even though he held a Candidate of Sciences degree. In the end, people got used to it. They accepted that there was always a certain risk, but no one took it too seriously unless someone began acting openly in dissent, for example by reproducing and distributing materials.

Political jokes and parallel society

I: By the way, what role did political jokes play for people in the USSR?

R: First of all, people laughed. I think nothing is harder for a regime than being laughed at, when it is no longer taken seriously. Everyone assumed Soviet power would last forever, and somehow one had to compensate for the life that had been imposed on us. Political humour reached extraordinary heights. Collections of political jokes were published in samizdat. The same was true in Eastern Europe.

In the USSR, there was a cultural underground, but there was no "parallel society," like the one that emerged in Poland. During the period of martial law under Wojciech Jaruzelski,[6] people have created a parallel public sphere with its own institutions, newspapers, financial structures, even consumer goods. All under the slogan: "No contacts with the state." I was in Poland at the time and was astonished by the scale of it. A friend of mine, a well-known journalist at *Gazeta Wyborcza*, gave me a large collection of samizdat material. Unlike in the USSR, where such texts were produced on primitive equipment, these were printed in excellent printing houses.

"I think nothing is harder for a regime than being laughed at, when it is no longer taken seriously."

I: How was that possible? Where was the state looking?

R: Apparently, there comes a critical mass when everything can no longer be controlled. It is only individuals that can be picked off one by one. I remember an interview in the 1990s with a police chief in Kaliningrad. He was asked, "What if a thousand people come out to protest?" "We'll detain them," he said. "And if it's a hundred thousand?" "Then we'll stand and watch." "And if it's a million?" "Then we'll join the protest." By that point in Poland, no one was afraid anymore.

It seems to me that this kind of "parallel society" might have been viable in the early Putin years. Today, given the current level of repression, I'm not sure how feasible it is. But I believe one must not cooperate with a criminal state, because in doing so, you become complicit. And this is not only a moral argument. I would say that any state grant is potentially toxic: especially if someone is determined to find a violation, they almost always can. In that sense, non-cooperation with the state also means not taking any money from it.

I: Some activists argue that what matters is how you spend the money, not where it comes from. State funds are taxpayers' money; the state has no other source of income. They can be used for good causes, even anti-war ones, if not openly.

R: I would remind them that the money is toxic. I am not a purist. I might even close my eyes to the fact that accepting it is, in effect, supporting the state. But you will suffer for it if not today, then later. And besides, it leaves a stain, even if no public declarations of loyalty are required. We see how some of our colleagues have gone all the way. For example, the head of VCIOM, Valery Fyodorov, receives substantial state funding and says whatever the state requires. I do not believe he is a fool or that he truly believes in what he says. But in effect, he has sold himself to the devil.

At the same time, from an academic point of view, he does some useful things such as supporting the publication of worthwhile books, for instance. Yet he publicly attacks opposition-minded citizens, passionately supports the existing authorities, and helps them manipulate public opinion through mass polling. After so many actions, he becomes someone people refuse to shake hands with. "But there is a Judge – a stern and terrible Judge. He waits [...]".[7] However, the reckoning may come not from history, but from the very regime he now serves.

PHOTO: GRANI.RU

A memorial protest action on Red Square in Moscow on August 25, 2013, with the banner "For your freedom and ours." The action was held in memory of the 1968 protest.

Doublethink and contemporary challenges in Russia

I: How does today's situation in Russia differ from that of the Soviet Union, when people said one thing publicly, but believed another privately? It seems that people are once again being pushed toward doublethink. However, today many people describe a strong inner resistance and a refusal to make ethical compromises. What do you think about this?

R: Doublethink existed in the Soviet Union. Today, that model no longer quite describes what is happening. Back then, doublethink meant that you knew the boundary and the rules on both sides of life: the official public life and private life. For the state, as in any disciplinary system, what mattered was outward conformity. You could think whatever you wanted, but you were expected to keep those thoughts to yourself and behave as required. Your thoughts were of no interest to anyone!

Today, such doublethink does not exist as there is no clear demarcation line [between the public and the private – *editor's note*]! I have the impression that today's state wants [not only the correct behavior, but – *editor's note*] conformity of thought as well. What we once mocked – "The Introduction of Uniformity of Thought in Russia" by Kozma Prutkov – increasingly looks like a description of reality: people are being, and often quite effectively, made to think in the ready-made formulas of official ideology.

"You could think whatever you wanted, but you were expected to keep those thoughts to yourself and behave as required."

In that sense, those who refuse to comply are being pushed out of the country: either through direct threats or through the creation of an atmosphere so stifling that they choose to leave. And when Dmitry Peskov says that 90% will vote for Vladimir Putin, I assume that perhaps 90% will indeed vote for him, thereby legitimizing his continued rule. But those who might have opposed this either by acting differently, proposing alternatives, or speaking out, are no longer here. They are all elsewhere.

I remember a Soviet joke that played on a famous line from the classic novel *How the Steel Was Tempered* by Nikolai Ostrovsky: "The most precious thing a person has is life. It is given to him only once, and he must live it THERE".[8]

So they are all already THERE – in Germany or in other countries – and, alas, more often than not they end up playing the role of the "piqué-vested gentlemen"[9] being poorly informed about what is actually happening in Russia, yet publicly passing judgment on the situation. And the more of these "piqué-vested gentlemen" there are, the better it is for the regime in Russia. After all, they are no longer in Russia.

Those who remain in Russia understand a great deal and are capable of acting. So from the authorities' point of view, it is better to get rid of them. That is why the authorities not only intimidate everyone else, but also push out those who act differently. And if someone does not take the hint, they are given long prison sentences. Not necessarily "for nothing", [on the contrary – *editor's note*] they are often imprisoned "for something." I would stress that the focus should not be on the victims, but on the heroes, on those who act or speak out publicly, risking their own freedom. Such people are pushed out of the country. There [abroad – *editor's note*], they can say whatever they want, especially since their words may not even reach audiences inside Russia. We know that there is a rapid crackdown on the free internet, with even the threat of a complete shutdown.

The tightening of the regime and disciplinary practices in the USSR and modern Russia

I: You mentioned that the regime tightened under Yuri Andropov's leadership (1982–1984). What happened during that period?

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R: During Andropov's rule new strategies emerged for combating not only dissent in action, but dissent in thought as well. These strategies involved new disciplinary measures and a systematic purge of the dissent circles. Until then, it had been a relatively calm period for dissidents, with arrests carried out selectively and case by case. In 1982–83, when Andropov came to power many were imprisoned at once, including several prominent figures.

It was during this period that the *Chronicle of Current Events* was finally shut down. New disciplinary measures were also introduced for the population as a whole. If you were supposed to be at work, then you had to be at work. If you were caught in a shop or at the baths during working hours, there were fines, dismissal from your job, and so on. Special patrols went around looking for violators of labor discipline.

I: Why did the regime need this at the time? Was it simply a disciplinary measure for its own sake?

R: No, of course, it was not! The economy was in serious trouble. No one was really investing themselves in their work. I was formally employed at an institute where no one worked, or almost no one. The majority spent their time telling jokes in the smoking room, myself included. It operated in the service of the state. And it felt morally degrading to do what the state required – to validate state policy by showing that "the people" were in favor of it.

I would even say that no one needed or cared about what people wrote in their reports. No one ever read them. Yet enormous amounts of paper were wasted on them. I recall how I slipped a one-ruble note onto about the thirtieth page of our team's report before it was sent to the institute archive. A month later I went back to check, and the ruble was still there! I wanted to know whether anyone needed any of this at all. It was meaningless work.

Strategies of resistance and the role of dissidents in history and the present

I: How should those who remain in Russia and disagree with the regime's policies act today? On the one hand, it seems there are more opportunities, thanks to the digital media. On the other hand, even a screenshot from your account can land you in prison for five, ten, or fifteen years. What strategies can be effective? How can one act without ending up behind bars?

R: It seems to me that much of what is happening now is intimidation. Today it is far easier to circumvent restrictions and avoid repression than it was in Soviet times. Back then there were no mobile phones, only landlines. What could you do? During a conversation you might muffle the receiver, cover it with pillows. Or turn on the tap so that the running water would create noise and make eavesdropping more difficult.

We suspected that every socket might have been bugged. There were even jokes about it: "Comrade Major enjoyed your joke." And, of course, all correspondence was risky. There was no digital communication, no computers at all, so one had to speak in euphemisms. But it was not only about euphemisms; we learned to read between the lines. And it became a real art for journalists, and above all for essayists and political commentators, to write in such

a way that everyone would read between the lines. There were truly outstanding people in this respect; we all knew them by name. We always read them in newspapers that were slightly more liberal than the others. It was a pleasure! And since good newspapers were scarce, people passed those texts from hand to hand.

And this was one way to get around those strict rules: the ability to write and read between the lines. I think many still use this today, but the art is not as developed as it once was. There was a period of freedom when people wrote and read what they wanted and considered it normal. Today, of course, the question is the degree of risk: what will happen if I write openly?

I believe the old dissident slogan – "Do what you must, and let what may be"[10] – is right. However, one has to think carefully about how to act in order to continue one's work: helping the poor, the sick, the children; or protecting the environment, all of which have become more dangerous, since such efforts may create problems for those in power. One can go out into the square and shout: "Give us freedom!", and then end up in prison. But what is the point?! You only show that such heroes exist. People who otherwise might have done something more useful, instead end up behind bars.

We understand that the regime will collapse. I hardly know anyone who believes it will last forever, like we once believed the Soviet system would.

I: It seems to me that the authorities themselves do not think so, and that this is precisely why the repression is so harsh. In the Soviet Union, those in power were convinced it would last forever, so they did not feel particularly threatened. They don't feel sure of anything.

"The regime will not collapse because of a revolution from below, it is more likely to collapse from above."

R: Russian propagandists contemptuously label those who are waiting out the current situation "waiters" (*zhduny*). I believe waiting is sometimes necessary, but it should be active waiting: continuing to act, even when your efforts seem unnecessary today, because they may be essential in the "beautiful tomorrow."

I: So we don't have to put our whole lives on hold just to fight the regime?

R: The regime will not collapse because of a revolution from below, it is more likely to collapse from above. I do not mean to suggest that scholars can predict such things or that they should; that would be foolish, or at least unscientific. But all signs today suggest it will be the most possible scenario. Given that active people have been pushed out of the country and that there are few who openly act in dissent, the situation is what it is.

Today we may be skeptical of the theory of "small deeds," but if this is what you know how to do – then do it, keep going. It will be useful later. It will matter. Do something for the society that will emerge after the regime collapses, especially, when so few people are thinking about what comes next. That is why we all need to think about what we will do after the regime's collapse and what work will prove valuable, even if it seems pointless today.

I can imagine some people saying that we should be doing something today to improve people's lives. For example, Soviet scholars tried to "improve" life in the country: they would go to those in power and say, "You know, the situation is rather harsh. Let's allow a bit more freedom, but we'll set firm boundaries for these new freedoms so that socialism remains eternal. Everyone will be satisfied." In doing so, they prolonged the regime. In that sense, any work done for the regime, in my view, is wrong. But working for people is legitimate. That's what one should be doing.

At the same time, one should be afraid. And of course one must take care of one's own safety. There is already a substantial historical experience of how to avoid repression and persecution. It is worth studying again. Reading books such as *How to Behave During a KGB Interrogation*?, *How to Be a Witness: How to Conduct Yourself During a Search*, or *How to Survive in a Soviet Prison*.[11] I am now recalling Soviet samizdat literature. It is still relevant today! It's even being republished officially, for example, by one of our especially "leftist" publishing houses.

I: Do you think the dissident movement played any role in the collapse of the Soviet regime?

R: Yes, I believe it played an enormous role. There were probably only a few thousand active dissenters trying to do something. But if we're talking about bringing down the regime through practical actions – then certainly not. What they did was to destroy the symbolic boundary that had been considered sacred, in other words, that tacit understanding between citizens and the state: In private, you can do what you want, but in public, you're expected to pretend you support it.

If liberals, in effect, strengthened the Soviet regime by making it more humane by merely trying to push the boundary outward and win slightly greater freedoms, then the dissidents simply tore it apart. They demanded that the real problems of society be discussed publicly. I'm not even talking about political issues, when they would say:

"You claim to have a democratic system? Then let's have genuine elections!" Or they put forward political demands: remove the Party's leadership over the state; introduce a multiparty system; let the Party stop dictating to the state what it must do. And so on.

I: In the end, wasn't that exactly what the USSR's transformation under Mikhail Gorbachev looked like, at least at first, before any fundamental change to the regime?

R: Well, that's how it turned out to be. I assume that at the beginning Gorbachev simply wanted to let off steam and create a more favorable environment for the population, as liberals, including social researchers, had advised. But then the process got out of control, and Gorbachev was not prepared to resort to repression. In that sense, he deserves considerable credit for the fact that the USSR came to an end. Or, as Yurchak once wrote, "It was forever, until it was no more."[12]

I: If we think about what may come next, and about the role dissidents could play, does that mean it's important to develop and publicly articulate an alternative agenda, while still avoiding actions that could lead to prison?

R: Yes, I completely agree, especially if we're careful to avoid unnecessary risks. To be able to live with yourself, you have to approach this rationally. Sometimes my colleagues start to panic, like ordinary citizens caught in a difficult situation. They emigrate or fall into depression. I usually tell them: "Switch on the researcher, the one who doesn't divide the world into good and bad, and switch off the citizen. Observe. Talk to people. Study what's happening. Try to understand it." And the moment you turn even to autoethnography. When you begin studying yourself, the panic begins to subside. You become a social researcher and, for a time, stop being simply a citizen. Put practically: keep a diary. Write, but do it in a way that won't endanger you if you are detained and your materials are searched. Store it securely (for example, encrypted and backed up in a cloud), rather than keeping an easily readable record on your devices. I would encourage activists to do the same.

Civil society in exile and prospects for future change

I: It seems to me that a lot of bad things have happened because we have been trying for too long to be anything other than citizens: consumers, professionals, but not citizens. This whole situation has shown that when so many people stop being citizens, it becomes impossible to avoid the consequences.

R: Any civic initiative that isn't approved by the authorities faces risks. In fact, the danger extends beyond merely "unapproved" initiatives: even initiatives not created by the authorities themselves, unlike the various official "people's fronts", can be treated as suspect and therefore risky.

The active segment of civil society, pushed out of the country, is gradually losing the ability to do anything inside Russia. Most of them have begun working for themselves, for their own communities forming in exile, in places like Tbilisi, Berlin, Prague, and so on. They help new arrivals from Russia and have created organizations that matter within these new centers of emigration. But for Russia itself, this amounts to nothing. Moreover, those who remain in Russia and continue communicating with such relocated activists risk facing repercussions. The FSB monitors cross-border contacts. In my view, the prospects for civil society in Russia are currently close to zero. Society is being harshly weeded out. What remains, as in the Soviet Union, are public organizations and NGOs that cooperate with the state, or are even created by it (GONGOs), that is, those who demonstrate public loyalty.

I: A bleak picture.

R: Well, bleak, but not for long! Not for long. Let me say it again: there is still plenty to do. I understand that being a human rights defender in Russia today is extremely difficult or almost impossible. Even the lawyers who used to assist in human rights cases have been pushed out. But not everyone is involved in human rights work. Environmental activists are still trying to do something. Although the authorities have even labeled salmon protection activists as "foreign agents"! We are living in a world of absurdity. It seems absurd from our point of view; from the authorities' perspective, perhaps not. Everything is being systematically dismantled. And in that sense, I am genuinely curious how they will later justify why they did all this. It will be very interesting.

I: I suppose one can look to what happened after Nazi Germany (the Third Reich) and after the German Democratic Republic (GDR) for guidance.

R: Today, even comparing something to the Third Reich is a criminal offense. Just making the comparison, that alone can be prosecuted!

People often complain that ties are being severed. But I see civil society as something that is not national in character, it is global. All these borders should simply be disregarded. You don't need to see these borders in order to do something together. I'm speaking for myself as I don't see them. The Russian state, on the contrary, is trying to reinforce these borders, perhaps even to seal them off for civic activists who remain inside the country, in order to cut off the flow of fresh blood to the organism so that it withers away.

In that sense, civil society is alive. But those who remain in Russia are in a far more difficult position. We need to think about how to do something together, to the extent that this is still possible. Even simply traveling somewhere for a seminar and exchanging experience can already be useful – to Yerevan, or Tbilisi, or Berlin. Though Berlin is already more complicated…

I: So it's not entirely pointless, after all, to organize joint events?

R: It creates a sense that we haven't been abandoned. Because you really can learn something there, establish new connections that may prove useful. All the organizations that still exist today but have lost access to funding inside Russia, and do not risk, or do not wish to take state grants (which, in my view, is the right decision) – still need to survive. And of course they find ways. Very different ways. The logistics of how such funding is obtained are extremely complicated.

I: We won't go into details.

R: No, of course not. Besides, everyone probably guesses how it works, but you still have to catch someone red-handed. You constantly have to think. Imagine you are living in the Third Reich during wartime. If someone invites you somewhere – just say: "thank you".

I: I think we can end on this optimistic note. ×

Elisa Marin and **Oliver Skye** are pseudonyms used for safety reasons by two researchers who regularly conduct fieldwork inside Russia.

references

1 The 1999-2003 transfer of NTV channel to Gazprom-Media led to changes in its editorial policy and staff. These events are also known as the "NTV Case" or the "Dispute of Business Entities".

2 A satirical TV program on NTV (1994–2002) that used puppet dolls to portray politicians and public figures.

3 This refers to the dissidents' protest on Red Square in Moscow on August 25, 1968, against the entry of Warsaw Pact troops into Czechoslovakia and the suppression of the Prague Spring. It remains one of the most striking examples of open civil protest in the late Soviet period.

4 *Chronicles of Current Events* was an illegal samizdat bulletin published in the USSR from 1968 to 1982. It became the main source of information on repressions, trials, dissident persecution, and human rights activity in the country.

5 "Erika Takes Four Copies" symbolizes the desire for freedom of speech and information in the face of censorship typical of the Soviet era. The typewriter "Erika" has become a symbol of samizdat and is immortalized in a poem *We're No Worse Than Horace* (Мы не хуже Горация) by Alexander Galich, written around 1966.

6 Refer to the events in Poland in 1981, when General Wojciech Jaruzelski imposed martial law. Its primary aim was to suppress the growing activity of the independent trade union Solidarity (Solidarność), led by Lech Wałęsa. Martial law was accompanied by mass arrests, the introduction of censorship, restrictions on civil liberties, a ban on public gatherings, and strict control over society.

7 A quote from a poem by Mikhail Lermontov – *The Death of a Poet* (1837).

8 The original quote from the novel by Nikolai Ostrovsky *How the Steel Was Tempered* is: "The most precious thing a person has is life. It is given to him once, and it must be lived in such a way that it is not excruciatingly painful for the years spent aimlessly[…]"

9 "Pique Vests" is an allusion to the characters in the novel *The Twelve Chairs* by Ilf and Petrov, who sit on a bench and endlessly talk about politics, economics and the fate of the world, while possessing neither real knowledge nor influence. The expression has since become a mildly derisive term for a self-assured dilettante – someone convinced of his exceptional insight and eager to play the role of a political expert.

10 The phrase "Do what you must, and come what may" (Latin: *Fac quod debes, fiat quod potest/fiat quod vis*) appeared in samizdat publications of the late 1960s and early 1970s, together with the *Chronicle of Current Events* and protest letters, and became a moral principle for dissidents. It expressed the idea of inner freedom, honesty, and responsibility to one's conscience, even in the face of pressure, fear, and the apparent hopelessness of changing the system. It was an ethical formula of resistance.

11 The works of Vladimir Albrecht – a Soviet writer, dissident, member of the human rights movement of the 1960s-1980s, and political prisoner (1983–1987) – are listed here. He was one of the founders of the human rights organization "Group-73," which assisted political prisoners and individuals persecuted for political reasons.

12 The phrase comes from Alexei Yurchak's book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (2005) and became a concise expression of the paradox of the late Soviet era.