

“Do Russians Want War?”: Exploring the Landscape of Anti-War Resistance in Russia

Irina Meyer-Olimpieva,
Research Professor, GW



One of the most painful surprises in the Russia-Ukraine War is what seems to be a wide support the military aggression has received from the Russian population. According to a Levada Center survey, in March 2022, more than [50% of the population](#) definitively supported the actions of Russian troops in Ukraine, and this number has since slightly fluctuated up and down. Another shocking surprise has been the lack of any large-scale anti-war protests. The first wave of protests swept through Russian cities immediately following February 24. They were well-attended, but not massive, and were quickly suppressed by security forces. A second wave of protests followed the announcement of the partial mobilization on September 21. However, these protests look rather unconvincing given the overall size of the Russian population. But there is more to see here than the lack of classic protests. In this paper I explore the many faces of protests in Russia, including the importance of silent protests and symbolic actions that citizens take to resist an increasingly authoritarian environment.

Why No Mass Anti-War Protests in Russia?

Organized protests as a democratic tool for channeling civil discontent is scarcely possible in today's Russia for a number of reasons.

- Civil-society and political opposition organizations that have been called on to lead such protests have been crushed and opposition leaders are in prison or in exile.
- The situation is aggravated by the lack of successful, organized mass protest experience in post-Soviet Russia. Recent [mass demonstrations](#) against raising the retirement age, as well as the [long-haul trucker protest](#) that swept across the nation in 2016-2017, proved fruitless. The lack of faith in the effectiveness of protesting has been reinforced by the experience of neighboring countries, in particular Belarus, where the massive protests of 2020 against presidential election fraud ended in a brutal crackdown on protesters, but did not spur political change.
- Since the outbreak of the full-scale war, repressive measures against participating in unsanctioned demonstrations have become much more stringent. New laws concerning propaganda and defaming the Russian army criminalize even the use of the word "war," let alone open protest. Security forces have been given carte blanche to use physical violence against demonstrators, which only reinforces doubts about participating in the protests, especially among women.
- The cleansing of the media and elimination of any free press capable of relaying information about the protests to a wider audience diminishes the visibility of street protests. When considering whether or not to participate in demonstrations, people realize that despite the high risk associated with taking to the streets, their appeals against the war will likely go unheard.

In the absence of democratic institutions capable of responding to public protests and a free press to cover them, the open protest format loses all meaning as a Weberian "means-end rational action". The image of anti-war street protest in Russia becomes a single picketer expressing their own system of values, significant primarily for the person protesting.

Refusing to take to the streets, however, is not tantamount to approval of the war. Street protests are not the only way of expressing opposition to military hostilities.

The Many Forms of Open Protest

Publicly taking an anti-war stance

Immediately following the start of the war, many well-known cultural figures openly spoke out against Russia's military aggression in Ukraine. Among them were popular TV presenters Maxim Galkin and Ivan Urgant, singers Yuri Shevchuk, Valery Meladze, Manizha, Alla Pugacheva, famous writers and theater personalities Boris Akunin, Liya Akhedzhakova, [Oleg Basilashvili](#)—the list goes on. All of them have been punished in one way or another for their anti-war stance. They have been deprived of titles and awards (Galkin), fired from their jobs and subjected to persecution despite many years of merits and an excellent professional reputation (Akhedzhakova), their performances have been [canceled](#) (Urgant), their names have been crossed out from posters (Akunin). Many were forced to emigrate.

Although the names of these celebrities who disagree with the war are on everyone's lips, there are many less well-known, ordinary figures in science and pop-culture who have been fired for openly expressing anti-war statements in various formats, including in social media posts. The independent publication *Paper* has launched a [project](#) on its website telling their stories.

Professional anti-war solidarity.

Members of many [professional groups](#) have signed open anti-war letters: doctors (6,200 signatures), IT specialists (14,500), teachers (4,000), students, scientists (in a statement made by young scientists, ethnographers and anthropologists, economists, etc.), representatives of charitable foundations (more than 500), architects, animators, comedians, game developers and others. Professional anti-war solidarity often arises as a response to the pro-military position of organizations and the official position of professional associations (take the open letter written by scientists as an alternative opinion to the Russian Union of Rectors' statement in support of the war).

One illustrative example is the trade union Uchitel' (Teacher), considered an "alternative" or "free" Russian trade union that actively protects the rights of its members. After the outbreak of the war, the leaders of the union could not reach a consensus regarding the publication of an openly anti-war statement. At the same time, individual members of the board drafted an open letter against the war, which was eventually signed by more than 4,000 teachers—far more than the number of union members.

There are also cases of people taking openly anti-war stances in the religious sphere. Although the official position of the Russian Orthodox Church, headed by Patriarch Kirill, is actively pro-war, individual clergy members have signed an open [appeal](#) calling for an end to the war (293 signatures).

For some time after the war began, practically the only public space for openly expressing protest was during [protest concerts](#). Unsurprisingly, these could not stay off the radar of law enforcement agencies for long. According to independent media sources, heads of concert venues received a [blacklist](#) of undesirable musicians and musical groups, which included about 30 popular performers and groups that authorities advised against allowing to perform in Russia. In addition to being deprived of concert venues, protest musicians are also being stigmatized and classified as “foreign agents.” Along with stage veteran Andrey Makarevich (*Mashina vremeni*), the list includes popular modern rappers Oxxxymiron, FACE, Morgenshtern, Noize MC, and most recently, Boris Grebenshchikov.

Protests in the Information Sphere

A significant amount of the opposition expressed in the media comes from well-known independent sources such as Echo of Moscow, TV Rain, Novaya gazeta, Meduza, Mediazona, Doxa and others, which, despite the stigma of being “foreign agents,” continue to broadcast to the Russian audience. Some have been forced to move abroad, but many have managed to continue broadcasting from Russia.

In addition to these popular independent media sources, after the start of the war, new media projects began to spring up in the information sphere. Take, for example, the socio-political publication [Verstka](#), which appeared “as a quick response to the destruction of the Russian media” (the publication currently has 67,000 subscribers on Telegram), as well as Holod Magazine. There are also political media projects, such as the anti-war telegram channel [Siren](#), the Anti-Corruption Foundation’s YouTube channel [Popular Politics](#), and many others.

Since the outbreak of the war, the surviving independent media and online discussion platforms are now redirecting their attention to issues related to the war. For example, the independent publication [Paper](#), which is primarily aimed at its St. Petersburg audience and was founded before the start of the war, now regularly covers military and anti-war resistance stories. Another example is the [Political](#) Space discussion platform, created in 2018 as a network of independent youth-led projects, or the independent media source [Holod](#), created in 2019, which, with the outbreak of the war, refocused on covering anti-war resistance.

Another type of protest media is publications that are less visible, but still very popular among their target audience, such as the student newspaper [Groza](#), which has been recognized as a foreign agent. Like many student initiatives, *Groza* began as a magazine about student life in the city of Kazan and as an alternative to “official” student magazines. With the beginning of the war, the focus of the publication began shifting more and more to cover problems associated with the war and the consequences for students. In addition to Kazan, the newspaper is now published in Novosibirsk and Yekaterinburg.

Like any other war, the information war has seen acts of sabotage. On March 14, 2022, the world media spread information about the TV journalist Marina Ovsyannikova, who appeared live on the program *Vremya* aired on Channel One with a poster reading “You are being lied to!”. Since the start of the war, information has periodically circulated about

journalists who left central TV channels and began revealing the mechanisms behind the pro-Kremlin media.

Covert Resistance

In addition to open protest, the anti-war landscape includes numerous demonstrations of covert resistance, which are less visible, but clearly dominate the anti-war space in terms of the variety of formats and the number of participants.

The guerrilla movement

Immediately after war broke out, independent media reported on radical guerrilla demonstrations aimed at damaging the Russian military machine. The most famous among them was the railroad resistance, which creates obstacles for trains carrying military equipment to the Ukrainian front.

According to the Russian politician in exile [Ilya Ponomarev](#), who cites data from the [National Republican Army](#) and [Rospartizan](#), there have been at least five guerrilla networks operating in Russia since the beginning of the war, which are represented mainly by young people holding ultra-left and ultra-right views. According to one such group of [anarchists](#), since the beginning of the war, they have carried out about 800 successful protests on the railways. According to another guerrilla network, [Stop the Wagons](#), during the first six months of the war, railway resistance demonstrations covered 85% of the territory of Russia, with more than 50 organized guerrilla groups conducting over 300 acts of sabotage.

Another manifestation of the radical anti-war demonstrations were the [arson attacks](#) on the military enlistment offices that began immediately after February 24th and became more frequent after the partial mobilization was announced.

“Silent Protests”

For all the intensity of the guerrilla demonstrations, the number of participants was not nearly as large compared to the less visible, covert protests of the grassroots resistance, which is more often called the “silent resistance.” The term is borrowed from the anthropologist James Scott¹ to describe grassroots resistance in non-democratic societies. In contrast to open protest, silent resistance represents the evasion and avoidance of government-imposed rules, the covert sabotage of new legislation, and a variety of indirect ways of expressing disagreement with government policies.

Without purporting to be an exhaustive review, we will try to present the diverse spectrum of manifestations of the “silent anti-war protest” in Russia.

¹ James C. Scott (1985) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Yale University Press

Antipropaganda

Antipropaganda “guerrilla warfare” is the mission of international project [Antipropaganda](#), whose members post real information about the military operations and losses on popular Russian social media sites (VKontakte and Odnoklassniki).

Other examples include “[Roslistovka: The Good Machine of Truth](#),” which distributes leaflets to Russian mailboxes, and the Feminist Anti-War Resistance’s project “[Media Partisans: Metro Against War](#),” which passes out leaflets in the subway.

[Protest Russia](#) (an information channel for citizens with a keen sense of justice) and the [Black February](#) information project, which tells the stories of Russians convicted on anti-war charges, are just a few examples of the numerous anti-war information channels that continue to pop up like mushrooms on Telegram, uniting hundreds, thousands, and sometimes tens of thousands of like-minded subscribers.

The bright example of anti-propaganda protest is the case of Sasha Skochilenko, widely reported on by independent media sources, who was convicted for replacing price tags in supermarkets with stylized anti-war leaflets containing real statistics about the war. Another example of the use of price tags to spread anti-war information is the “pre-war prices” campaign, where price tags indicated the pre-war cost of a product, thereby demonstrating the economic consequences of the war for ordinary Russians.

Anti-propaganda campaigns also take the form of sabotage and willful ignorance of new propagandistic changes in the sphere of education. School teachers are [refusing](#) to conduct mandatory lessons in the new course “Conversations on important issues,” aimed at telling children the “truth” about the special operation. Teachers are replacing recommended lesson topics with stories about the war in Iraq and Syria, and other international conflicts, suggesting that “based on this information, [students will] draw their own conclusions about Russia’s role in the special military operation.” Teachers are creating chat groups and mailing lists on social networks, where they exchange potential topics and materials for these lessons.²

Ambitious parents are protesting against the militarization of grade-school education. Chat groups on [VKontakte](#) are calling to repeal the decision to return patriotic military training lessons to the school curriculum. They are echoed by the [Alliance of Teachers](#) Union and the women's community Soft Power, which called for a boycott of the “Conversations on important issues”. In response to the war propaganda in grade schools and preschools, Soft Power activists launched an alternative [program](#) for children, where they record Tales for Peace, which actually do teach children about important issues.

² from an interview with a member of the *Uchitel* trade union

Art Protests

While the physical territory of Russian cities is essentially off-limits for mass protests, it continues to function as a platform for various kinds of guerrilla art demonstrations.

Starting in the very first days of the war, numerous anti-war symbols and messages have cropped up in many cities. Scratched in, pasted on, and applied with stencils, they're found everywhere—on houses, on poles, on the backs of buses, including many full-scale, professionally executed graffiti.

The undisputed leaders of these art protests are the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR) and the “Vesna” Youth Democratic Movement. Deprived of the opportunity to organize open protests, activists use their creativity to create anti-war art pieces and to organize flash mobs. One of the FAR's most famous art demonstrations is the [installation](#) of 930 cross memorials in city courtyards with information about the dead Ukrainians as a reminder that people in Mariupol had to bury their dead in courtyards.

Artists who do not have the opportunity to publicly display their work inspired by the war are organizing private anti-war [art exhibitions](#) in their apartments for their own social circles. Information about these shows is informally circulated among friends and like-minded people. Despite the physical fragility of these art objects, they continue to live on virtually as photos of them spread across social media.

Avoiding the Draft

Avoiding the draft has become the most massive form and best illustration of the silent anti-war resistance, even if some of these émigrés may have been favorable to the war but against their own conscription. According to various [sources](#), more than 700,000 young people left Russia after September 21 in order to avoid taking part in hostilities against Ukraine.

Separate public initiatives to help young people avoid the draft appeared immediately after the start of the war, but once the partial mobilization was announced, assistance to potential recruits became widespread. Numerous groups, networks, and communities have emerged on Telegram and offline to provide recruits and conscripts with a variety of assistance, from legal advice to transportation abroad.

The demand for legal information on recruitment, mobilization and the rights of military personnel has increased rapidly. In addition to the OVD Info and Agora, which provide various types of professional legal assistance, many human rights initiatives have emerged that advise young people and their parents on the rights of conscripted soldiers. Examples include the [Conscientious Objectors Movement](#), which provides legal advice to conscripts who do not want to serve in the army or be sent to fight in Ukraine, or the [Call to Conscience](#), a coalition of lawyers and human rights activists advocating conscientious objection.

Assistance in avoiding the draft takes many forms, for example, assistance in obtaining fictitious medical certificates of incompetence or leaving the country. Groups of volunteers

are organizing transportation and providing assistance at border crossing points for those emigrating to Kazakhstan and the Caucasus.

Military conscripts are being sheltered for the duration of the draft by informal networks of mothers who send their sons to live with friends or remove them from the areas in which they are registered and take them to remote locations where they cannot be reached by summons from the military registration and enlistment offices. These women's groups are based solely on informal connections and are not tied to formal organizations.

There have also been incidents of individual sabotage conducted by people within the mobilization forces themselves. Those who serve the summons are sabotaging the process, claiming there was no one home (“I went up to the front entrance, stood outside the door, then left and said that no one was home”).³ Some business owners [are refusing](#) to hand draft summons over to their employees and sending young people on sick leave until the end of the draft.

Humanitarian Protest: Aid to Refugees as Anti-War Resistance

With no outlet through anti-war demonstrations or rallies, the anger and shock that many Russians experienced on February 24 has become a trigger for various forms of constructive grassroots activism, which, although they don't include direct calls to end the war, serve as a way to express protest against it.

The most visible and large-scale example of humanitarian resistance is the provision of aid to refugees from Ukraine. Interviews with [volunteers](#) from St. Petersburg and Moscow who are helping Ukrainian refugees leave Russia for Europe show that the opportunity to help Ukrainians has become their “salvation,” “an escape from the cognitive dead end,” “a resolution for the state of shock” in which they found themselves after the outbreak of the war. While humanitarian in form, aid to refugees often has a deep anti-war motivation.

Although well-known civil organizations, such as the one established by Dr. Lisa or the Civic Initiative (recognized as a foreign agent) continue to offer aid to refugees, numerous networks of volunteers have emerged and are growing at an unusually fast pace. For example, between April and July 2022, the number of members in a Telegram chat for helping refugees in St. Petersburg went from 100 people to more than 10,000. This explosive growth is typical for similar chat rooms in other Russian cities, such as Moscow. Today, communities of volunteers helping Ukrainians can be found in all areas with temporary accommodation centers for refugees, although, of course, we cannot claim that all volunteers are driven solely by anti-war sentiment.

³ from interview with a volunteer helping Ukrainian refugees

Providing Other Types of Assistance

Another form of opposition is assistance for those who have been repressed for expressing their anti-war stance. This includes providing both legal and financial aid for those arrested at protests. In addition to well-known human rights organizations such as OVD Info and Agora, which exist in large part due to charitable donations, various grassroots fundraising initiatives have been founded during the war, such as [RosShtraf](#), created to help pay fines for politically motivated legal charges, including expressing an anti-war stance and participating in protests, or [Antifond](#), created to support people who have suffered professionally for their anti-war position.

Ethnic Protests

Ethnic protests have emerged as the result of the mobilization of ethnic groups who oppose the ethnic discrimination that has intensified since the beginning of the war. Among the list of casualties is a [disproportionate number](#) of people drafted from North Ossetia, Buryatia, Tuva, Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chukotka. One particularly notable actor in these ethnic protests is the [Buryats Against War Foundation](#), which was created by a small international group of Buryats to express their disagreement with the war, but under the influence of grassroots initiatives, quickly turned into a public organization of experts helping conscripted Buryats fight for their rights. The anti-war movement is also very active in [Tuva](#), which is the leader among the Russian regions in number of deaths of Tuvans per 100,000. Following the announcement of the partial mobilization, mass anti-war rallies were held in the republics of the [North Caucasus](#).

Women's Protests

There are two main branches of women's protests—those led by feminists and those led by mothers. The Feminist Anti-War Resistance (FAR), a horizontal movement launched by activists on February 25, 2022, which loudly declared its position from the very first days of the war with art protests and other guerrilla activist projects, is perhaps the most visible player in the anti-war protest landscape today, as well as the one most covered by the media, thanks to its provocative art installations. Today the FAR community is said to unite 38,000 members throughout the country. They call on feminists around the world to unite against the war and regularly engage in various methods of protest.

A less visible, but clearly more massive part of women's resistance is made up of numerous social movements and associations of mothers, which deserve a separate category. Among them are:

- Women's human rights organizations that provide legal assistance to conscripts. Many existed long before the war, have many years of experience and have become more active following the outbreak of hostilities, especially after the announcement of the partial mobilization. Examples are the "[Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg](#)", the "[Committee of Soldiers' Mothers](#)," founded in 1989.

- Communities and movements that emerged with the outbreak of the war in order to unite efforts to protect children, visit the areas where hostilities are ongoing, collect information about the dead and missing, organize assistance to those drafted who do not want to participate in the war, organize protests, and spread truthful information about the war and number of casualties. "The Union of Mothers," a social movement led by mothers of conscripted soldiers in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, was created on February 24, 2022. The "[Council of Mothers and Wives](#)," an organization created in anticipation of Putin's meeting the mothers of servicemen, have demanded their own meeting with Putin.
- Political women's associations that emphasize the role of women in politics. An example is the women's political movement "[Soft Power](#)," founded by Yulia Galyamina two days before the start of the war, which promotes the ideas of "soft change, women's leadership and putting a female face on politics." So far, this is the only example of such an organization, but the political trend may continue to grow.
- Numerous informal local groups and associations of mothers who have united their efforts to protect their sons from the draft, shelter conscripts and help their sons flee.

The composition of these volunteer movements is always heavily dominated by women. This is also true of the communities of volunteers helping refugees, which became especially noticeable after September 21, 2022, when many male volunteers left the country.

Economic Protests

Economic protests may include a (covert) refusal to economically support the state and pro-military policies, a refusal to work in organizations that openly declare a pro-military position, or the use of legal leverage on organizations that actively support the special operation.

In interviews we conducted with business owners, many discussed closing their businesses due to their unwillingness to pay taxes to the state, which are likely to be used for military purposes. The same logic was cited as a motive for refusing to participate in the protests—a reluctance to pay fines that would certainly go to finance the war.

Another form of economic protest is voluntary dismissal from organizations that openly declared support for the war. The previously mentioned list of people fired for expressing an anti-war stance published by *Paper* contains many scientists and cultural figures who decided to quit their jobs in protest of the pro-war position held by the leaders of their organization.

Forms of economic sabotage similar to the "Italian strike"⁴ are being proposed by left-wing groups. The political group Socialist Alternative is implementing the [Anti-War Sick Leave](#) project, which encourages workers in key industry sectors to take sick leave en masse, or to sabotage work without violating established rules ("work badly, work slowly").

Another example of a protest involving legal economic activity is the "[City Without Z](#)" initiative. Participants are invited to collect reports of conduct violations committed by

⁴ "Italian strike" or "work-to rule" is a form of sabotage when workers perform their tasks in strict accordance to the rules but no better and as a result production stops or essentially slows down

organizations that hang posters with the letter Z (a Russian military symbol) on their buildings. These reports may include any violations observed in the company's operations, from environmental to labor laws. They subsequently write appeals and complaints to the relevant inspection agencies. After that, the company is subjected to many additional inspections and are generally fined.

Compassionate protest

Finally, a relatively recent form of "silent protest" is the so-called folk memorials of flowers, candles, and toys set up at monuments associated with Ukraine. Anthropologist Aleksandra Arkhipova calls this form of resistance "flower protests" or "[compassionate protests](#)." According to her, more than 100 spontaneous folk memorials have cropped in 63 Russian cities at monuments associated with Ukraine after the destruction of a residential building in the Dnieper by a rocket on January 14, killing at least 46 people, including children. In Moscow, a spontaneous memorial arose at the monument to Lesya Ukrainka, and in St. Petersburg—at the monument to Taras Shevchenko.

Spontaneous memorials in and of themselves are not a new phenomenon in urban spaces. People bring flowers and children's toys, if children died, to places where tragedy occurred in order to express condolences and mourn the dead. However, in the context of a repressive regime, where there is no opportunity to express outrage openly, spontaneous memorials serve to express protest against the actions of the authorities (for example, the creation of a memorial at the site of the murder of the oppositional politician Boris Nemtsov). It is noteworthy that in those cities where there are no monuments in any way connected with Ukraine, flowers are brought to the monuments to the victims of political repression, or any other victims, thereby confirming the protest character of the memorials.

A new wave of "compassionate protests" swept through the cities of Russia on February 24, 2023, on the first anniversary of the start of the war. People across more than 20 Russian cities once again carried flowers and toys to monuments associated with Ukraine or political repression.

Distinctive Features of Russian Anti-War Resistance

The true scale of the anti-war resistance (the number of anti-war initiatives, the number of people who support them) has yet to be determined, but we can already articulate some important features of the Russian anti-war landscape.

1. Covert forms of resistance, such as sabotage, evasion, disobedience, avoidance, exchange of alternative information and other forms of indirect resistance, dominate the protest landscape, as opposed to direct demonstrations of protest.

2. The Russian anti-war protest movement does not have a systemic, organized character, but is represented by a multitude of decentralized initiatives that have a horizontal structure and largely rely on informal networks.

3. A significant number of anti-war initiatives are organized at the local level, focused on local communities (city-wide or regional), and therefore remain unseen from a federal or international perspective.

4. Following the outbreak of war, many new players appeared in the field of civic activism. As a rule, they do not take the shape of organizations, but operate in community networks, many of which reach impressive sizes and show impressive displays of self-organization (such as the networks providing aid to Ukrainian refugees mentioned above).

5. The Russian anti-war resistance would not have been possible without digital technologies and the internet. It is difficult to overestimate the role of the Telegram, which remains accessible in Russia and allows the opponents of the war to overcome isolation, and thereby gives the anti-war protest movement a collective character. This opportunity to communicate with like-minded people inspires protest solidarity and a sense of unity, as well as faith in one's own power and ability to influence the situation.

6. Although the protest landscape is clearly dominated by virtual spaces, it would be more correct to speak of the hybrid nature of the anti-war resistance. Digital space prolongs physical life and expands the audience of in-person protests. Photos of art pieces and folk memorials, as well as other forms of protest are instantly circulated through Telegram channels. Conversely, initiatives that arise in Telegram chats are later implemented in physical space.

7. The transnational nature of the protest is more evident than ever before. Activists who left the country continue to work abroad and maintain ties with those who remain in Russia. It is often difficult to determine the location of anti-war initiatives, since members are located on different sides of the border.

8. In light of the nearly complete lack of protest demonstrations held by the “systemic opposition” (Yabloko is the only party that has openly declared an anti-war stance, but they utilize only legal methods of protest—collecting signatures, holding sanctioned rallies—and therefore are practically invisible in the protest landscape), the political anti-war protest as a continuation of the fight against the Putin regime is represented by the Anti-Corruption Foundation, the “Vesna” Youth Democratic Movement, left-wing political groups calling for sabotage, and anarchists conducting radical guerrilla demonstrations.

9. Considering the full spectrum of Russian anti-war resistance, it can be said that the protest has a “feminine face.” The NGO and volunteer sector has always been characterized by a gender imbalance, but in the landscape of anti-war resistance, where hidden forms of protest dominate, and given the outflow of the male population following the announcement of the draft, women have become the main initiators and executors of anti-war movements.