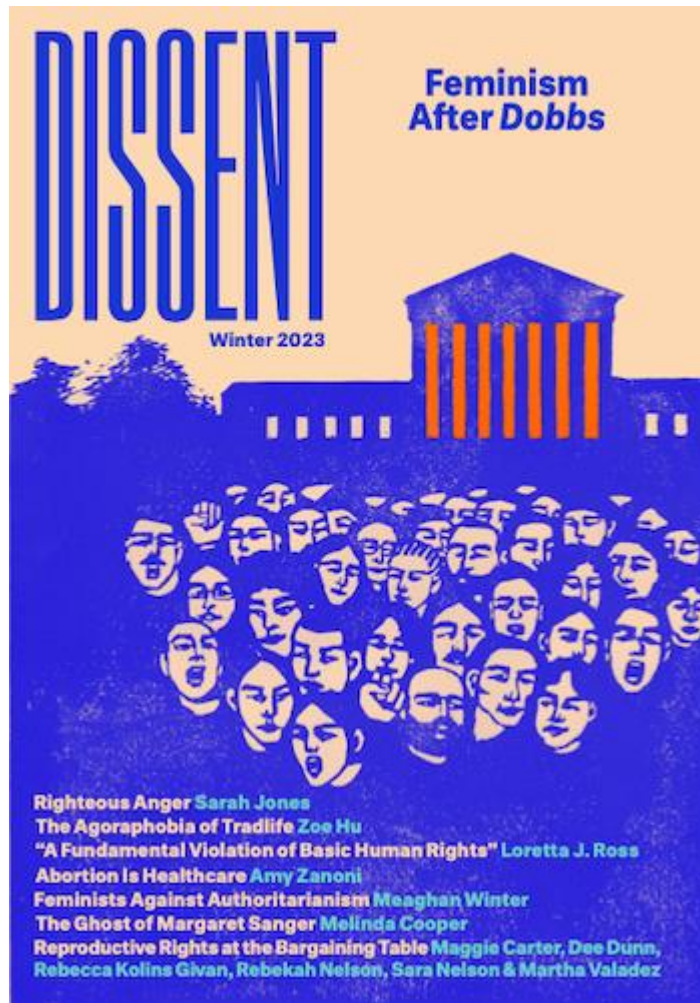


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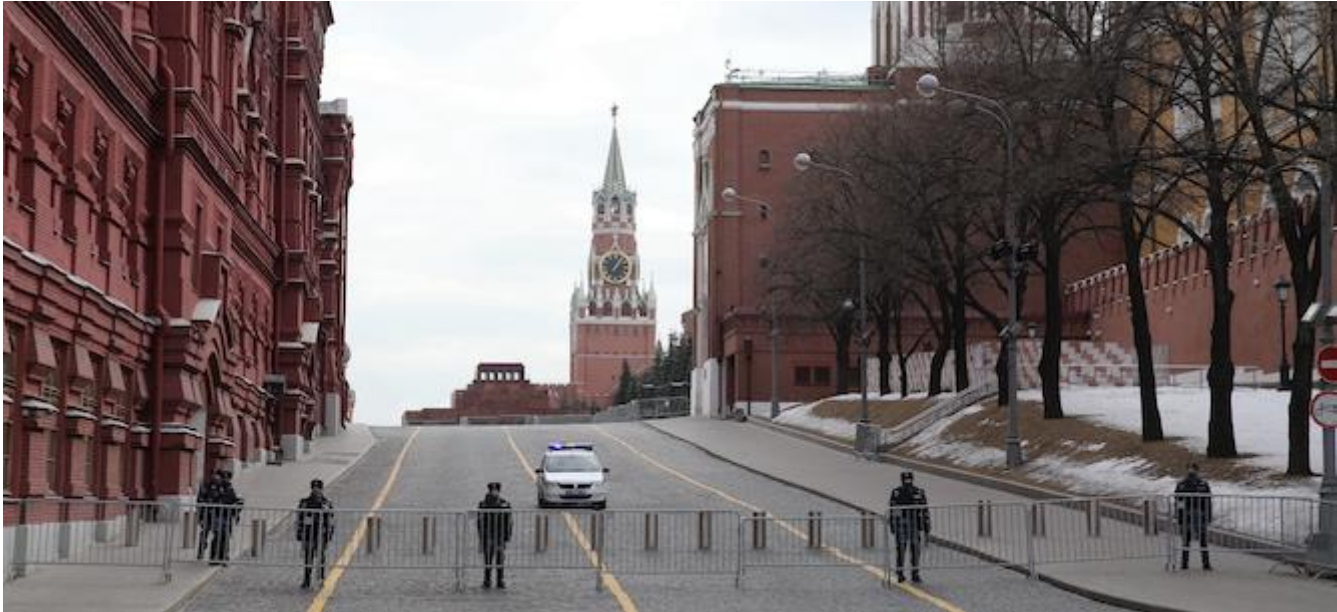
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A War With No End in Sight

More Russians have died in Ukraine than in all wars the country has fought since 1945 combined. But escalating repression and a culture of helpless disengagement have kept support for the war high.



Russian police barricade the Red Square in front of the Kremlin on March 13, 2022, when hundreds were detained during an antiwar rally. (Getty Images)

When I told fellow Russia specialists that I was writing a piece on how Russian state–society relations had changed since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, I was invariably met with the same response: everything has changed, and everything remains the same.

Indeed, everything *has* changed. Russia has unleashed senseless destruction and genocidal violence on Ukraine in an attempt to reoccupy the former colony, and the domestic shockwaves have been profound. In the first year of the war, Russians incurred an estimated 60,000 to 70,000 deaths, likely more than in all Russian and Soviet wars since 1945 combined. The need for bodies at the front led to a “partial mobilization” that led to recruitment at prisons and the conscription of 300,000 men. The country is under the most restrictive economic sanctions regime in history. An estimated 1 million Russians have left the country. The invasion was followed by an onslaught of new repressive laws, enforcement mechanisms, educational policies, censorship, and propaganda. After a final sweep of civil society and the political opposition, these tools are now being directed toward private individuals. Russians are experiencing a level of state intrusion into private life not seen since the Soviet Union.

This creeping totalitarianism represents the next phase of the Vladimir Putin regime—part of an evolutionary process hallmarked by continuity, not abrupt turning

points. Over twenty-three years, Putin has sharpened the tools of state violence, kept the elite loyal, and propagated a nationalism founded in resentment and colonial nostalgia, both Soviet and imperial. But just as important, he has presided over a culture of helpless disengagement from political life. It is this culture, and not just repression, that allowed the invasion to occur, the war to continue, and Putin to remain in power.

Putin has staked his legacy on victory in Ukraine, making this an existential conflict for both sides. He will not back down as long as he remains in power—likely, as long as he lives—but if external support for Ukraine persists, victory will be elusive. As a result, many predict the war will become one of the many “frozen conflicts” in the post-Soviet world, like the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. In a frozen conflict, active combat ends without a treaty to resolve territorial control, creating conditions in which fighting can recur at any time. This scenario would leave areas of Ukraine highly militarized, contested, and unstable. In other words, the end of this conflict is nowhere near in sight. By the same token, the wartime changes to Russian society and politics will not be reversed any time soon.

A New Era of Old Repression

The scale of the invasion of Ukraine came as a surprise to most of the Russian government, including those responsible for law and order, but work to suppress domestic opposition began at once. Roughly 15,000 antiwar protesters were rounded up and detained, sometimes with the help of facial recognition technology, and reports of police violence abounded. Aggressive policing is a relatively standard response to anti-government protest movements in Russia, and generally keeps them at a manageable size rather than eradicating them. In this case, however, it was accompanied by a flood of repressive legal changes introduced by obsequious lawmakers seeking to win political favor. Drawing comparisons to a broken printer that cannot stop spitting out documents, the Duma passed a record-breaking 653 laws in 2022. Some, like a ban on state workers using foreign words that have Russian analogues, facilitated the repression of lawmakers themselves. Other, more sinister measures build on legal scaffolding that has been erected over the last decade.

In early March—just days after the invasion—new laws came into effect that prohibit “discrediting” the military and distributing false information about it (known as the

“law on fakes”). It was now illegal to refer to Russia’s actions in Ukraine as a war or to criticize the military, with penalties of up to fifteen years in prison. These laws eliminated the possibility of war reporting and protest, and made even private conversation on the subject risky. The law on discrediting the military has since been expanded to cover any state body operating abroad, including mercenaries and private military companies (PMCs); it is now illegal, for example, to criticize PMC Wagner’s use of a sledgehammer to execute deserters. The foundation of these laws lies in the 2014 Law Against the Rehabilitation of Nazism, passed after anti-Russia, pro-European protests swept Ukraine and prompted fears of contagion in Russia. That law, which included a prohibition on spreading false information about Russia’s activities during the Second World War, provides the basis for the current ban on displaying symbols of Ukraine (which is, according to Putin, a Nazi state).

Strictures on “foreign agents”—a designation for organizations and persons engaged in political activity under foreign influence—intensified in June. Standards for “political activity” and “foreign influence” were broadened to the point that any group could be designated a foreign agent, and the list of restricted activities, like organizing public events, grew longer. These changes are amendments to a 2012 law passed after the emergence of For Fair Elections, the first mass anti-Putin movement. The list of foreign agents and undesirable organizations has steadily grown in the years since. Alexey Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation was declared a foreign agent in 2019, then banned as an extremist organization and dismantled in 2021, while Navalny was shipped off to prison following an assassination attempt. The same year, one of Russia’s oldest and most esteemed human rights groups, Memorial, was listed as a foreign agent and then disbanded in the country—before going on to share the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize.

In 2016, a package of laws increased punishments for extremism and terrorism, required telecom companies to store data on Russian soil and provide state access to all communications including encryption keys, and restricted religious freedom. Seventy-five additions were recently made to the list of banned extremist materials, including images associated with Navalny. The definition of treason was also broadened, and penalties were intensified. Eleven new cases of treason have been initiated since the invasion. In addition, last year saw the greatest expansion of the Russian criminal code—which governs consequences for violations of the law—since 2012. A new national facial recognition database was expanded, securing Russia’s position as a world leader in this dangerous technology.

Finally, December 2022 saw an extension of the ban on promoting “LGBTQ propaganda”—disseminating information about “non-traditional sexual relations,” sex/gender change, and pedophilia—to any segment of society. The original law, passed in 2013 to establish Russia as a traditionalist bulwark against Western hedonism, had only concerned material available to minors.

Mopping up the Opposition

Just as these repressive tactics do not represent a new direction for political persecution in Russia, neither do most of their targets. The last year has seen the culmination of a decade of increasing pressure on those with the capacity to reach and coordinate the public—a final sweep of troublemakers, rather than a fresh crackdown. Though many members of the political opposition were already in exile, prison, or under house arrest when the war began, those who remained in the country, such as Ilya Yashin and Vladimir Kara-Murza, did so knowing what likely lay ahead. Both were arrested last year for violating the law on fakes. Yashin was sentenced to eight and a half years in prison. Kara-Murza—who has already survived two assassination attempts—had his charges amended to high treason and was recently given a twenty-five-year sentence for speaking out against the war. In March, the homes of Memorial’s former leaders were raided and cases were opened against them for discrediting and rehabilitating Nazism.

Long in jeopardy, the independent media has now been all but eradicated. *Novaya Gazeta*, a newspaper whose editor Dmitry Muratov shared the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize, ceased publication in March 2022, then had its license revoked by censors. The storied radio station Ekho Moskvyy (Echo of Moscow) and TV station Dozhd’ (Rain) also shut down. What media remains does so by complying with wartime censorship. International NGOs including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Transparency International have ended operations in Russia, and in 2022 at least twenty-two organizations were classified as “undesirable,” which functionally forces them to cease operations or move abroad. Opposition political parties have been hamstrung for so long that they don’t merit mention in this ten-year timeline.

Broadening the Reach of Repression

The elimination of these long-standing regime opponents has ushered in an era where repression targets “regular people,” to prevent resistance from arising from new sources. Individuals who are not meaningfully engaged in politics or activism have been targeted in larger numbers than ever before, particularly for violating the laws on fakes and discrediting the military. By late November 2022, there were 5,519 administrative cases of discrediting the military, generating over 85 million rubles in fines. Protest is clearly forbidden: individuals have even been charged for holding up a piece of paper with asterisks replacing the letters “No to War.” Casual public discourse is also not safe: liking an antiwar post on social media—let alone writing one—can land you in hot water. Violations can even occur in private correspondence: a conscientious objector was finned for the content of a letter to the draft board. Lawyers defending clients prosecuted on these charges have themselves been fined for using the words “war” or “invasion” in court. OVD-Info, an NGO that works against political persecution, documented “more than 21,000 arrests and at least 370 defendants in criminal cases for anti-war statements and speeches” in 2022.

While liberal newspapers or radical bloggers have come under fire for their content before, Russians at large have not been subject to this kind of censorship in decades. While anyone under forty is too young to remember life before glasnost—Mikhail Gorbachev’s 1986 policy that permitted critical discussion of the government—many have resumed the Soviet custom of “kitchen conversations,” in which discussions of sensitive political and cultural content are reserved for the privacy and safety of one’s apartment.

The Next Generation

More than ever before, children have become the focus of this political order (a full report on the violation of children’s rights since the invasion is available here). Previously, children had been invoked to justify the constriction of adults’ rights: the original anti-LGBTQ law and internet censorship laws, for instance, were framed as efforts to protect children. The war has now made classrooms a battleground of indoctrination, as the regime works to ensure the ideological compliance of the next generation of authoritarian subjects.

Russian schools—like schools everywhere—have always promoted a patriotic version of history. Since the invasion, this curriculum has reached new heights. Following the invasion, special lessons were held to explain to schoolchildren that Russia had been forced by NATO to start a war in defense of peace. By September 2022, patriotic courses designed by the Kremlin were required at every educational level. Children as young as seven learn about the suffering of Russian-speakers in Ukraine, fraudulent histories of the occupied territories, and tales of war heroism. At the university level, there are plans to introduce compulsory courses in Russian ideology overseen by Sergei Kiriyenko, Putin’s point man in the occupied Ukrainian territories and the coordinator of the fraudulent referenda there. Once-elite universities are allegedly pursuing research agendas dictated by the Kremlin on topics like “patriarchal values and institutional practices that protect and preserve traditional, spiritual and moral values” and “risks to Russia’s economy posed by the West’s global climate agenda.”

It is in the regime’s interest that children grow into acquiescent, nationalistic adults. Today’s high school boys could very well find themselves fighting in Ukraine under Russia’s compulsory military service. This curriculum prepares them for that role. In some cases, it’s not just ideology: children have been shown gruesome battlefield footage, and “cadet clubs” where students learn marching drills and practice assembling AK-47s have become more common in recent years. Indoctrinated children also serve as useful monitors for the compliance of adults. Teachers who have resisted or tried gently to correct the narrative have been reported on by their students and fired. The fact that teachers are required to implement these modules has made thousands complicit in the fascistic culture shift. (Though even this is not quite new: the regime has long used the national network of state-employed teachers to execute election fraud.) The consequences of dissenting can be severe. Recently, a student’s antiwar drawing led to the discovery of online antiwar posts by her father, a single parent. He was beaten, fined, placed under house arrest, and given a two-year prison sentence, while the girl was placed in a state shelter then sent to live with her estranged mother. Following international attention, authorities recently ended their efforts to deprive the father of his right to parental custody.

The Revival of Snitching

In this chilling atmosphere, the Soviet practice of denunciation has returned. Russians have reported their neighbors, coworkers, passersby, and even family members for

expressing antiwar sentiments, initiating hundreds of administrative and criminal cases. In Krasnodar, a couple dining at a restaurant were detained and fined for hooliganism and discrediting the military after another patron overheard them discussing the war. A Moscow resident was arrested on the metro when another passenger saw antiwar content on his phone and reported him. In Zvenigorod, a parent alerted the authorities to antiwar comments made by their third-grader's classmate. Husbands have denounced wives, and mothers have turned in draft-dodging sons. In Krasnogorsk, a man even denounced himself for drunken antiwar graffiti. To make snitching as painless as possible, regional governments, political parties, and even celebrities are collecting denunciations via DM, text message, or bot chat.

Some denouncers act out of fear and anxiety caused by the regime's alarming rhetoric about Russia's enemies. Others do it to demonstrate loyalty, or to use the state to resolve an interpersonal conflict. They are the public manifestation of private disagreements over the war that have divided families and sundered relationships. This trend weakens the social fabric, transforming community members, relatives, and strangers into potential threats or enemies.

A Culture of Complicity

With repression so intense and the state inserting itself into private life, it is tempting to see Russians as the tormented captives of the Putin regime, longing to resist their oppressor, but pinioned by fear and the threat of violence. What else would explain the lack of resistance to the regime's many wrongs?

This idea is a comforting delusion. Putin is widely popular, as he has always been. He remains the most trusted figure in the country. That popularity is not an artifact of fraudulent polling data or respondents who are too scared to admit their true feelings about an autocrat. Before the war, no survey technique or analytical approach provided evidence of significant preference falsification in Russia. Most estimates of the inflation of Putin's approval fall in the 10 to 20 percent range, which would still mean over half of the population support him.

The war in Ukraine is also widely supported. Political scientist Kirill Rogov has identified three types of supporters: believers that Russia is in a fight for survival with the West, those who feel Russian-speakers in Eastern Ukraine must be protected, and conformists who would have preferred to avoid the war but are resigned to its reality.

Passive, non-ideological support is far easier than risking the consequences of resistance. While a significant number of Russians genuinely support the war, conformists are even more numerous. In survey research commissioned by the Kremlin and released in November 2022, 57 percent of respondents reported being tired of the war. Indeed, no account of what life is now like inside Russia fails to note the general sense that it's better to avoid thinking too hard about the war—and even better if you can pretend it's not happening at all. The value of this illusion is why the government raced to replace Coca-Cola, McDonalds, and Starbucks with homegrown knockoffs after sanctions began.／

Learned Helplessness

This prevailing sense of indifference and apathy is not simply the result of the escalation of repression. Rather, it arises from a culture of political disengagement, often described by Russians as “learned helplessness.” In this context, learned helplessness bears limited resemblance to its origins in psychology. As explained to me by Russian activists, it is a pervasive culture of personal ineffectualness—the belief that people cannot improve their situations. This culture is so ingrained that strategies for trying to generate change have been forgotten, and people correct or discipline others who attempt to do so. This can take the form of discouraging people from speaking up or even complaining, ignoring politics even at your own expense, or taking a pragmatic position on a war you might truly oppose—all because there is no hope of making a difference.

Because learned helplessness is self-reinforcing, it requires limited maintenance from the government. The Russian government is infested with corruption and provides few incentives for good performance. It addresses public feedback in arbitrary and diversionary ways, like inviting a few stakeholder activists to roundtable meetings then disregarding their input, or channeling individuals into mazelike bureaucratic processes. Unyielding government officials say, again and again, that what is asked of them is inexplicably impossible or forbidden. Everything militates toward the conclusion that no one can really change anything.

Low political engagement is a common problem in consolidated autocracies without legitimate elections. The few meager years of democracy in Russia's lengthy history of monarchy and autocracy provided little opportunity for most people to develop a

culture of political efficacy. The Putin regime has been highly skilled at manipulating and aggravating this sense of helplessness. Putin gambled that this culture, along with the application of repression as needed, would prevent the public from meaningfully opposing the war, and he was right. An added injection of fear—of repression, economic collapse, and the future in general—has Russians reporting more uncertainty and anxiety than ever. Conveniently for the Kremlin, these feelings have generally translated into lower engagement, less dissent, and more risk aversion.

It is telling that the Kremlin is not overly concerned with drumming up genuine support for the war, or even for Putin. Standard state-organized celebrations of Putin's birthday in October were scant. Since the war began, Putin has rarely appeared with genuine supporters. Rather, he has addressed the country flanked by actors posing as soldiers, held meetings with soldiers' mothers handpicked to parrot Kremlin talking points, and spoken to stadium-sized audiences that had been paid \$6 or forced by their jobs to attend. Apathy is prized above political engagement.

Information Overload

The war is unfolding in a tightly restricted information environment. Russians have been fed an astonishing amount of alarmist and nationalist rhetoric about imminent existential threats from the “collective West,” NATO, Nazis, internal enemies, and assorted other “scum” and “traitors.” This propaganda is nothing new; the war has simply turned up the volume. Russia's disinformation tactics have long relied on numerous competing, often implausible or impossible narratives to overwhelm and confuse their audience. Disengaging is much easier than sorting out whether human rights activists are truly Nazis, if Ukraine staged Russia's war crimes, or if Putin was actually rescuing the Ukrainian children the International Criminal Court has accused him of kidnapping.

These problems are more acute now that accurate war reporting is illegal, TV hosts are clamoring to outdo each other with nauseating displays of patriotism, and online censors have blocked over 4,315 domains since the invasion, including Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp (their parent company, Meta, was declared an extremist organization). In this uncertain environment, the children's film *Cheburashka*—starring a treasured monkey-eared creature from the 1960s and '70s—became the highest-grossing Russian film ever within two weeks of its release in January. People escaped into cozy Soviet nostalgia.

At the same time, it's not the case that Russians cannot access information. Putin and other politicians no longer deny the country is at war. Official rhetoric has evolved from a speedy "special military operation" to a long, hard war fought for Russia's existence. The same easy-to-use VPN technology that people have installed to check Instagram also grants access to the global press. YouTube is not blocked, nor is Telegram, where information circulates with relative freedom and channels are safe enough to provide a platform for horizontal organizing.

Russians have enough information to criticize the war—but their chief complaint is that Russia is not yet winning it. Ultra-nationalists, far-right bloggers, and all manner of war hawks have risen to prominence by lambasting the performance of the military and demanding total war. Data I've collected on appeals to the Presidential Administration—essentially, letters of complaint that Russians submit to Putin himself—indicates that from March to December 2022, 15,452 letters were received about Russia's participation in international conflicts and defense. The amount of correspondence increased when Russia stalled or lost ground in Ukraine but did not appear responsive to information that would call into question the war's moral grounding, like the discovery of mass graves of Ukrainians or torture chambers designed for children.

The war may have been easy enough to ignore when it was being conducted by professional military personnel, but in September 2022, that changed. The announcement of compulsory mobilization brought the fighting home for anyone with a relationship to a draft-age man. Though purportedly limited to reservists and those with combat experience, it seemed that anyone could be summoned regardless of health or exemption status. Terrifying stories circulated of men being snatched at metro stations or in hostels. Regions that are home to ethnic minorities, like Dagestan and Buryatia, were hit especially hard, raising alarm that the conscription might be used to wipe out Russia's smaller ethnic groups. Men went into hiding, avoiding their registered addresses to evade that frightening knock at the door that would give them twenty-four hours to report. Those mobilized were told to bring sleeping bags and feminine hygiene products to substitute for exhausted medical supplies. After a brief and insufficient training, these warm bodies served as cannon fodder at the front, sometimes outfitted only in body armor meant for paintballing, not battle.

Soldiers reported these conditions in calls home from their personal cell phones that command was unable to prevent. While the rest of the world learned about the poor

condition of Russia's military in the spring of 2022, Russians only realized this half a year later. From September to December, over 6,000 complaints were sent to Putin about military equipment, training, and leadership, and 39,000 more about mobilization and military service. If anything might prompt Russians to demand an end to the war, it is these factors—but that hasn't happened yet. Mobilization officially ended in October with a blitz of PR to mitigate the damage. If more call-ups occur, they are likely to be conducted in a much less visible way to avoid stirring up the widespread fear and outrage of the fall.

Though it may be comforting to think that Russians would turn against a regime that's become synonymous with criminality and violence if they could only access more facts, this is no more accurate than the belief that they are all Putin's unwilling hostages. Airdropping leaflets or blasting radio programs behind the Iron Curtain, after all, did not bring down the Soviet Union. Information has little effect when there is no sustained effort to analyze it, or when the desire to turn away from the truth is stronger than the urge to fight for change—and to suffer the potential costs.

Looking Ahead

The future for Russia looks so bleak that it makes Russia's recent past look even bleaker than many had realized. I have been observing and researching Russian politics for fifteen years, during which time I have watched the steady accumulation of limits on civil society, free expression, and independent political life. In the last year, these have crescendoed into a level of repression that was once only predicted by alarmists; circumspect realists had not noticed the path was slowly descending into hell.

It is difficult to predict what horrors await. With civil society, the free media, and the opposition dispatched, the instruments of repression have been turned on society as a whole. Putin's war, like the regime itself, relies not on support, but on the compliance of people who keep themselves in comfortable ignorance, who believe pragmatism is always justifiable, who have not stood up to authority for so long that they have forgotten how. Meanwhile, the broken printer at the Duma churns out new laws, and the elaborate machinery of repression penetrates ever deeper into Russians' private lives.

I am not speaking here of the brave Russians who have resisted in the last year, or in the years before that. Many of them saw this coming and did all they could to stop it. But we must recognize that the Putin regime is not the only thing these activists have been fighting against. It is the indifference, helplessness, and conformity of Russian political culture. The regime has nurtured that culture, but is not its only caretaker. Putin's health—which is robust, as far as we know—is currently the primary threat to his tenure, but this culture will almost certainly outlive him.

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