

# Russia: the time for protest has gone, it's time for resistance

Friday 20 January 2023, by [ARAMYAN Armen](#) (Date first published: 17 January 2023).

**For many years the Russian opposition propagandised a particular manner of protest: clean, peaceful protest of the urban class, not dirtied with violence or even any pretension to violence. I was politicised at that time. I am 25, and I first went to a street demonstration when I was 17, in the second year of study at university. And I learned the lessons conscientiously: when somebody urges people to free a demonstrator who is being detained - that's a provocation. If someone proposes to stay put on a square and not leave, or to occupy a government building - that's a provocateur, and that person should be paid no heed.**

We are better than them, because we do not use violence, and they do. Let everyone see us and our principles as unarmed, peaceful protesters, who are beaten by cosmonauts in full combat gear. Then they will understand what is going on. Why go on a demonstration? To express our opinion, to show that we are here. And if there are enough of us, that will produce *a split in the elite*.

**Evidently, this strategy didn't work.** Whether it worked at one time is probably not so important now. I am convinced, by my own life experience, that it has failed. A year and a half ago, I recorded an inoffensive video to support student protests - and for that got a year's house arrest. [*Reported [here](#), SP.*] And in that year, the Russian authorities succeeded in destroying the remains of the electoral system, and invading Ukraine. No peaceful protest could stop them.

During that time, as the anti-Putin opposition de-escalated protests and adapted to new prohibitions - you need to give advance notice about a demo? OK. You need to set up metal detectors on site? Very good - the authorities, by contrast, escalated the conflict with society. They pursued ever-more-contrived legal cases - for actions ranging from throwing a plastic cup at a cop, to liking stuff or joking on twitter.

We have been retreating tactically for a long time, and finally wound up on the edge of a precipice - in a situation where not to protest would be immoral, but where, at the same time, the most inoffensive action could result in the most serious sanctions. The neurosis in which a large part of Russian society now finds itself - all those arguments about who is more ethically immaculate: those who have left, those who have stayed, those who have half-left or one-quarter-stayed; who has the moral right to speak about something and who doesn't - all this is a result of living in a paradox.

For the first few weeks after the invasion, this logic of conflict - that the opposition de-escalates and the state escalates - reached its limits. Peaceful protests came to an end. Resistance didn't stop: several hundred people, at a minimum, set fire to military recruitment offices or dismantled railways on which the Russian army was sending arms, and soldiers, to the front.

And when this started to happen, a big part of the opposition had nothing to say. Our editorial group was one of the first to try to report on these actions, despite the shortage of information. We were

even able to speak to some of the railway partisans in Russia. But much of the independent media and opposition politicians were silent.

The silence ended on 4 October, when [Alexei] Navalny's team [announced](#) that it would again open branches across the whole country, and support different methods of protest, including setting fire to recruitment centres. A month before that, in an [interview](#) with Ilya Azara [of [Novaya Gazeta](#), SP], Leonid Volkov [a [leading member](#) of Navalny's team, SP] answered a question about radical actions in this way:

I am ready to congratulate everyone who goes to set fire to a recruitment office or derail a train. But I don't understand where these people have come from, where to find them, or whether it's possible to organise them.

Evidently, in the course of a month, something changed. In October, the branches began to collect forms from potential supporters, and on 23 December a [platform](#) was set up on the dark web, which could only be accessed via a TOR browser. Navalny's team stated that the platform will not retain any details of its supporters. [In an [interview](#) with *Doxa*, Navalny's team clarified that the branches would be clandestine on-line "networks", SP.]

For some mysterious reason, news of the reopening of the branches, and of the setting-up of the platform, went practically unnoticed in the Russian media. In October, we were apparently the only (!) publication, that [talked](#) with members of the Navalny team about the reopening of the branches. Organised antiwar resistance did not make it to the top of the news agenda.

It seems to me that, notwithstanding the mass of questions that political activists want to ask Navalny's team about this, organised resistance is the only way left to us, out of the war and out of Putinism.

I have had many discussions with antiwar activists and journalists lately, about how they assess their work, nearly a year after the start of full-scale war. The majority of them (of us) are burned out: they don't see any point in what we are doing. I think part of the problem is that a big part of our activity concerns not resistance, but help and treatment of the symptoms - evacuation and support for refugees. **Our activities don't bring the end of the war nearer, they just alleviate its consequences.**

You can count the initiatives focused on resistance on the fingers of two hands. And alas, they are not very effective. A comrade of mine, with whom at the start we put together guides about how to talk to your family members about the war, joked, bitterly:

The Russian army killed another hundred people, while we thought about how to change the minds of one-and-a-half grandmas.

To get out of this dead end, we must together think of the future that we can achieve by our collective efforts. It's time to reject fatalism: stop waiting for everything to be decided on the field of battle and putting all our hopes in the Ukrainian armed forces (although much will of course be decided there); stop relying on the prospect that Putin will die soon, that the elite will split and that out of this split shoots of democracy will somehow magically grow. We will not take back for ourselves freedom and the right to shape our own future, unless we ourselves take power away from this elite. **The only way that we can do this, under conditions of military dictatorship, is organised resistance.**

Such resistance must be based on cooperation between those who have remained in Russia and

those who have left. And also those who continue to come and go (and there are many of them). Such resistance can not be coordinated by some allegedly authoritative organisation. It has to be built, by developing cooperation with other antiwar initiatives – especially the feminists and decolonising initiatives, that is, with organisations that have done a huge amount of activity since the all-out invasion and who bring together many thousands of committed supporters.

Most important of all, resistance must expand the boundaries of what we understand by non-violent protest and the permissibility of political violence. **We can not allow the dictatorship to impose a language that describes setting fire to a military recruitment office, with no human victims, as “terrorism” and “extremism”.**

Political struggle has always required a wide range of instruments, and if we want to defeat a dictatorship we have to learn how to use them; we need to understand clearly what each of them is good for. For many years we have paid no attention to methods of resistance that, although they are not violent, require much more decisiveness and organisation. It is to these methods that we need now to return.

There is no other way of building democracy in Russia (any democracy – liberal or socialist) without a grass roots resistance movement that can win widespread support. If the majority of opposition politicians in the pre-war period hoped that democracy could fall into their laps as a gift from the elite (as a so-called gesture of goodwill), then this year it has become completely clear: we will never have any power, if we can not ourselves take it in to our own hands.

Ulrika Meinhof [*a leader of the Red Army Faction in Germany, 1970-72, SP*] once quoted the words of a Black Panther activist [*probably Fred Hampton, SP*], spoken at a conference in February 1968 against the war in Vietnam:

Protest is when I say I don't like this. Resistance is when I put an end to what I don't like. Protest is when I say I refuse to go along with this anymore. Resistance is when I make sure everybody else stops going along too.

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**P.S.**

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