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ANALYSIS

"No Wobble": Silent Protest in Contemporary Russia

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Abstract
Contemporary Russian society does not visibly oppose the invasion of Ukraine. There are no barricades or protesters in the streets; even the military mobilization has not triggered an open clash between the public and the authorities. Despite several waves of active emigration from Russia, the majority—if surveys by sociologists at the Russian Levada Center are to be believed—remain silent. But does this silence mean consent and support for the war? In this paper, we examine the various forms of protest in which Russians are engaging, with a focus on the less visible, "silent" (and therefore in need of closer examination) forms of resistance to the regime. These are small acts of dissent that have generally been individual, spontaneous, and unarmed and that have taken place in spaces of everyday socialization. They may be no more than words or symbols, yet they are not insignificant, as they demonstrate disagreement with the powers that be.

Contemporary Russian society does not visibly oppose the invasion of Ukraine. No mass demonstrations are visible; ordinary citizens do not seem to be resisting despite the fact that since September 2022 it has been possible that they will be conscripted into the army, where they will have to become killers and quite possibly be killed themselves. If opinion surveys by sociologists at the Russian Levada Center are to be believed, only just over half of the population follows developments in Ukraine closely. Can the passivity of the population be explained solely by fear of a dictatorial regime and years of repression against all who disagree? And does the silence of the majority mean that Russian society supports the war?

The Suppression of Protests in Russia and Its Legal Framework

It is well-known that in today's Russia, protest is not only forbidden by law, but also dangerous to one's personal safety and even one's life. The Russian Administrative Code bans all gatherings in public places without the express permission of the local authorities. The definitions of a public place and of an assembly are left deliberately vague: an assembly could be a meeting of two people at a bus stop. Getting permission to organize an opposition rally has always been a challenge, but since 2018, it has been practically impossible. Thus, over the past ten years or so, protest against any decision on the part of the authorities was carried out in the form of solitary pickets, for which no special approval was required. But since the outbreak of the war, even a solitary picket can be punished with up to 15 years' imprisonment under the so-called "fake news" article. Adopted in March 2022, Article 207.3 of the Criminal Code, "Public dissemination of knowingly false information about the use of the armed forces of the Russian Federation, the exercise of their powers by state bodies of the Russian Federation", provides for a penalty of up to 15 years' imprisonment.

Although Russian protests are more peaceful than local discos, they are suppressed with particularly demonstrative brutality by a specially created unit, OMON, which has been part of the "Rosgvardia" (National Guard of the Russian Federation) since the latter was established in 2016. During political protests, people have had their arms and legs broken, been dragged along the ground by their hair into police cars, etc. In police stations themselves, they often face bullying and even torture. And over the last decade, the gap between the violence of the special forces and the emphatic non-violence of protests has only widened. The moment one person holding a banner arrives at a peaceful protest, he is surrounded by five or more heavily armed police officers; it would be strange for a protester to expect to win by force.

On February 24, 2022, when a lot of people were trying to protest against the beginning of the war, one of the authors of this text saw little schoolgirls in Moscow shouting in the faces of such forces, who were dressed in bulletproof suits and helmets that made them look more like astronauts than people: "We are protesting against the war so that you will not be sent to Ukraine." This peaceful protest could have succeeded if there had been any hope of the police and troops going over to the side of the protesters. According to Mischa Gabowitsch, a researcher of protest in Russia, there was no such hope. Since the large-scale 2011 protests against parliamentary election fraud, which took place in more than 100 Russian cities, the authorities have actively worked to distance society from paramilitary forces. He wrote (Gabowtisch 2012, 74): "Thus, the protesters are confronted with a system in which

the security forces are recruited from the most violent sections of society, are mostly strangers to the protesters, and are tied to the political regime primarily through material reward."

Thus, Russian protest in recent decades has been solitary and peaceful—it has been individual citizens' speech. There is no opposition political leader in Russia who remains free; there is no independent press and there are no independent political parties. There is no independent court, and the parliament almost directly executes the orders of the executive. Foreign social media have also been banned since the war began: Facebook and Instagram have been declared "extremist organizations" in Russia, and a "private" opinion expressed online can be punished by up to 9 years in prison, a term recently received by former municipal deputy Yashin for posting a video about mass killings by Russian soldiers in Bucha on YouTube.

Hidden Acts of Dissent Instead of Political Protest on the Streets

In such dictatorial frameworks as today's Russia, in which an open act of dissent involves very high risk, the subversive potential of small, everyday vernacular practices is greater than under democratic regimes. These everyday acts of dissent are less visible and can take the form of rumors or gossip, as well as songs, jokes, insults, and blasphemies with political content. Such forms of protest have been termed "weapons of the weak" by the anthropologist James Scott (Scott 1985). To a greater extent than jokes, blasphemies and insults fulfill a critical function and constitute a kind of barometer for the political state of mind of the community. The Russian regime is concerned about these everyday expressions of hostility, which it has sought out and punished rigorously—just as happened under other dictatorships, such as that of Stalin.

Since these "everyday forms of resistance" were theorized by James C. Scott, they have been given different names, including "non-violent," "unarmed," "peaceful," and "passive," depending on the aspects emphasized at any given time. Many studies have already revealed the ability of "ordinary people"—even those who lived under the inter-war European dictatorships or Stalinism—to appropriate the conditions of their existence and the power structures and to resist them. Alf Lüdtke, who studied this phenomenon under National Socialism, called this way of evading the daily routines imposed by the authorities *Eigen-sinn*, often (imperfectly) translated as "self-willed" action or "stubborn willfulness." Eigensinn gives people more room for maneuver, as they can (temporarily) evade the expectations or impositions of those in power despite the authorities' efforts to control all areas of life (Lüdtke 2015).

When public speech is accompanied by such consequences for life and health as we see in contemporary Russia, the desire to speak out is greatly reduced. But since the outbreak of the war we have seen another way of speaking out—what Umberto Eco calls "semiological guerrilla warfare." These "semiological partisans" write direct anti-war messages on fences and walls, and leave coded messages demanding "no war" on social networks and in other public spaces. In other words, they disrupt the authorities' signal. Coded language, rather than direct dissent, has become the new "weapon of the weak."

In addition to rare acts of direct defiance—solitary pickets with anti-war posters—the most common forms of proletarianism have been graffiti with coded anti-war slogans (see Picture 2) and avoidance of the authorities' demands. This arbitrary behavior is anonymous and often completely invisible to the outside eye: even wearing underwear in the color of the Ukrainian flag is an individual political protest.

Such individual actions are rarely reported in the Western media except in Russian. Such actions are not considered political protest, but, as the BBC Russian Service titled Aleksandra Skochylenko's story, "The Little Act of a Normal Person." To see them as political protest requires broadening our conception of "politics," extending it beyond political parties and political institutions and linking it to the myriad microsocial interactions that take place in people's everyday lives.

Cases of Anti-War "Silent" Protest in Russia

With the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, what can be called soft or silent resistance has come to dominate social media and the streets in Russia. It seems that astonishing ingenuity and creativity are being expressed by far more people than before the war. The authorities have forbidden calling the war a "war" under threat of prosecution under the fake news article of the administrative and criminal codes. Thus has resulted in creative substitutions that are as clear to everyone as the word "war," including the substitution of words with dots, such as three dots plus five dots (… ⁚⁚.) to mean *Net voine*—"No to War." Such creative substitutions have not subsided since February, but only taken on new forms after being deciphered by the punitive authorities.

Vobla, a fish known in English as the Caspian roach (Wobble), was one such substitution. At one point, a young woman in Tyumen wrote "Net v***e" and managed to prove in court that she had meant "Net voble" (No vobla) because she did not like that fish. "Vobla instead of war" became a very popular meme on social media. Perhaps as a result, the case was reviewed: in December 2022 the court decided to charge the woman with discrediting the Russian army. Soon, images of fish appeared everywhere in the streets, becoming the

most popular hidden symbol of Russian anti-war protest (see Picture 1).

Picture 1: Photos from our Database. Location: St. Petersburg, Soldat Korzun Street; Date: November 19, 2022

Some ways of speaking out seem relatively safe, but they are also actively persecuted by the authorities. For example, Aleksandra Skochylenko, who in March 2022 replaced price tags in a supermarket with information about casualties among the population in Mariupol, was arrested in April 2022 under the "fake news" article of the criminal code and is still in detention. This is an established method used by the authorities: postponing the trial, keeping her in custody, not letting her lawyer in, not giving her the necessary medication, etc. Her next trial is scheduled for January 20, 2023.

In addition to Skochylenko, by May 2022, 11 people had been detained for the same type of action: replacing shop price tags with protest leaflets against the war. We have been compiling a dataset of court cases in which people were detained for spreading "discreditation about the Russian Army"—in other words, anti-war messages. We know of over 4,300 administrative and 162 criminal cases of that kind.

Equally creative is a poster about a missing dog, with a photo of the dog and the usual bold and bright text, when in fact the leaflet is an appeal to come to a protest on March 6 at 3pm (see Picture 2). Artistic protest practices also find a place in anonymous artwork on walls and fences. For example, a picture with three and five ballerinas instead of the letters "no to war"—a reference to Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*—was picked up by an unknown person and actively circulated on social media (see Picture 3 overleaf). In the Soviet Union, the ballet *Swan Lake* was a symbol of the death of a Soviet leader: on days of mourning, it replaced all other programs on all television channels. During the 1991 attempted coup d'état, it was con-

Picture 2:
Missing Dog

Ran away when Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24. Its name is Future.

Your children won't have a Future if you don't speak out against war right now. Thousands of Ukrainian children have already had their Future taken away from them.

Speak out for the withdrawal of troops from Ukraine and/or come out to fight for the future.

March 6 at 15:00
Reward

Please take a photo and distribute this announcement.

March, St. Petersburg

Picture 3 : March, St. Petersburg
Three and Five Ballerinas in Place of the Letters "No to War."

stantly shown on TV instead of news. This is a reference understood by all those who lived in the Soviet Union and was also used in the 2020 protests in Belarus.

Every time the authorities start to pursue one of these creative modes of protest, another one pops up. Information about different ways of expressing opposition to the war is spread through Telegram channels and social media groups, which most internet users in Russia now access via VPNs. In this way, "silent" protest involves people who would not have thought of such ways of expressing themselves. For example, the aforementioned Aleksandra Skochylenko heard from a friend that she had read about replacing price tags in shops on the "Feminist Anti-War Resistance" Telegram channel and even downloaded a sample price tag—specially created by a designer—from there.

Among the advantages of symbolic shows of resistance as a form of expressing dissatisfaction is their greater potential for gaining sympathy among other members of the community, particularly as they do not involve physical violence (T'Hart 2007, 185). A good example of this is the use of Orwell's novel *1984* as a symbol of protest. People put a novel on the cash register in a café or on the window of their shop as a sign that "'our people' are here." In the city of Ivanovo in April 2022, a man was arrested while handing out copies of Orwell's novel to passersby. He received an administrative penalty, but the popularity of references to the novel on protest posters in the street or on social networks has not diminished: according to our database of anti-war protest, there are at least 18 court cases of people who have been punished for using Orwell signs. Indeed, this has grown to such an extent that even Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zakharova felt it necessary to state that Russia cannot be compared to Orwell's novel because he was not writing about Russia.

On Telegram channels, people actively share their ways of avoiding and not being complicit with the actions of the authorities, from finding legal ways not to send children to patriotism lessons—such as transferring them to homeschooling or not having them perform patriotic assignments on various pretexts—to various small and outwardly almost inconspicuous actions. For example, some people shared that they do not get on transport with military symbols (Z or V), write "Russia" with a small letter, or simply try not to go out in the street so as not to see all the agitation.

"Silent" protest refers to small acts of dissent that have generally been individual, spontaneous, and unarmed and that have taken place in spaces of everyday socialization. They may be no more than words or symbols, yet they are not insignificant, as they demonstrate disagreement with the powers that be.

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