

# Darkness Settles Over Russia

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*One year after Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine and Europe have been shaken to their foundations. At the same time, Moscow's aggression is fuelling an increasingly totalitarian repression in Russia. The war is now robbing the country of any hope for the future, writes Charlotta Rodhe, analyst at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies.*

Three snapshots from the past year illustrate the change in Russia:

- At the Verkhniy Lars border crossing, Russian citizens queue for days to enter Georgia. Border crossings are not allowed on foot, which makes bicycles hard currency. Most of the people in the queue are men who want to avoid being drafted to fight against Ukraine. A temporary mobilisation office has been set up on the Russian side. Those crossing the border are some of the hundreds of thousands who have fled the country since the start of the full-scale invasion.
- The departure board at Moscow's main airport, Sheremetyevo, still shows departures to Delhi, Beijing and Istanbul. There are also flights to Phuket, the Seychelles and Dubai, but destinations such as Vienna, New York and Stockholm have vanished. The isolation is not complete, but it can be felt.
- In St Petersburg, artist Aleksandra Skotjilenko is in custody for putting stickers with anti-war messages on groceries in a supermarket. She faces up to 10 years in prison and is one of tens of thousands who have suffered from increasing repression linked to the war.

The examples of how Russia is changing are many. The population is increasingly anxious, the economy has been affected by Western sanctions and society is becoming increasingly totalitarian, but there is more to the social picture. The fears of many Russians in the spring that borders would be closed have not been realised. Instead, migration has become a safety valve for the Kremlin. The ability of those with money and connections to flee the country mean that many of those who previously took part in protests or publicly spoke out against the Putin regime now find themselves in exile. This, coupled with the tightening of the thumbscrews on what can and cannot be said, has led to the spread of silence.

## Small Pockets of Resistance

The relatively large protests that took place in several cities across Russia at the start of the invasion have been silenced; the repressive apparatus is well-resourced and effective. Non-governmental organisations and free media find it impossible to operate. With censorship comes self-censorship. The small pockets of resistance that still exist are about action rather than words. They exist in cultural expressions, in private individuals' aid to Ukrainian refugees and in conversations around the kitchen table, but they are fragmented. The same is true – at least for the time being – of the groups of Russian citizens who are working from exile for a democratic Russia.

There is no public recognition in Russia that the invasion was a fatal mistake. The propaganda about the war is so void of reality that it can be adjusted as necessary as the situation develops. The military setbacks have shifted the rules of the existing pseudo-debate: calling the war a limited “special military operation” is simply impossible when the whole of society is being reset for mobilisation and militarisation. Better, then, to talk about war not on Ukraine, but with the whole of NATO and the West. In this way, the setbacks become more understandable and it is possible to maintain the delusion that the “Ukrainian little brothers” deep down want to be saved from Western influence and to be incorporated into the “Russian world”. This makes the war all the more existential and justifies the sacrifices now required of the population. Because sacrifice is now all that is on offer. The earlier implicit contract with the middle class, where political inactivity was rewarded with stability and the promise of increasing prosperity, has been broken.

Knowledge of what has happened in Butya, Irpin and Mariupol makes it increasingly difficult for citizens to share the official image of the war. In this context, the moral price of political inaction has risen sharply. The easy choice is to look the other way. For the majority of the population who do not follow regime-critical channels on the Telegram app, independent *Youtubers* and exile media, it does not even appear to be a choice. However, life is changing for the entire population. Rising prices and difficulties in obtaining certain Western goods are one thing, but the mobilisation in the autumn of 2022 was what really brought the war home to people's daily lives.

The fact that it is a called “partial” mobilisation does not really matter – it affects everyone of fighting age and has no end date. The word partial is barely useful as a fig leaf for those who want to play down the fear caused by the mobilisation. Now the sacrifice must mean a readiness to die for the fatherland. The prevailing reasoning then becomes: “If our boys have already faced death as heroes for the liberation of Ukraine, then it cannot be in vain – surely the war must be justified”.

Shards of the previous contract have been polished up: combatants and their families are promised debt forgiveness and financial benefits that to many appear astronomical. Children of combatants are awarded free entrance to coveted universities without exams. Such things are hard to resist for many. Those who leave the country or try to avoid being mobilised are portrayed as weak and disloyal. There is now talk in parliament of confiscating the property of those who have fled.

## Mobilisation Worked

Many remember the pictures of Verkhniy Lars on the Russian-Georgian border and the queues on the Finnish border. We remember the reports of burned mobilisation offices and protesting conscripts. What is easily forgotten, however, is that the vast majority did what was expected of them: they registered at the mobilisation offices, they accepted their conscription order and turned up where they were supposed to at the appointed time. They were ready to adapt. Adaptation is, in fact, the main feature of the Russian population's reaction to the war. A few months later, after the Kremlin leadership had dragged its feet on the mobilisation decision, it was able to breathe a sigh of relief. The remaining protests concern the conditions the conscripts are living in, their training and equipment, rather than the mobilisation and the war itself.

What does this all mean? It is easy to fall into wishful thinking. The hope that we are only days, weeks or months away from change in Russia is tempting and makes the war easier to bear for us as spectators. Our hopes may even extend to believing that a changed Russia would automatically be more democratic, more open and more peaceful. Unfortunately, there is little today that points in that direction. Today's Russia is defined by the war and the needs of the military are increasingly taking over everything. Repression continues to increase as sacrifices have to be justified. The propaganda can be adjusted but its basic premises still set the framework for the choices the regime can make. There are no credible challengers to the Putin system in sight.

One thing is clear: without a Russian defeat in the war, there are no prospects for a brighter future for Russia. A Russia to which democratically minded exiles return, where Aleksandra Skotjilenko can work in freedom and where flights to Brussels, Oslo and Montreal are once again on the departure boards. First and foremost, a Russia that no longer poses a threat to its neighbours. The situation today looks bleak but history teaches us that the unexpected can happen and, when it does, it happens fast.

## Reactions to the War From Inside Russia

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, an estimated half a million to one million people have left Russia.

More than 19,000 people have been arrested. Over 400 people are awaiting trial or have been convicted in connection with anti-war protests, according to the non-governmental organisation OVD-info.

Surveys conducted by the Russian polling institute Levada on whether Russians prefer a negotiated solution or continued military action paint a picture of divided public opinion, while most avoid making any firm pronouncement. Extreme positions are significant, but not predominant: 24% of respondents say Russia should "definitely" continue the military operation while 22% say they are "definitely" in favour of a negotiated solution. However, opinion polls in countries with limited freedom of expression should always be taken with a pinch of salt.

*By Måns Mannerfelt*

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