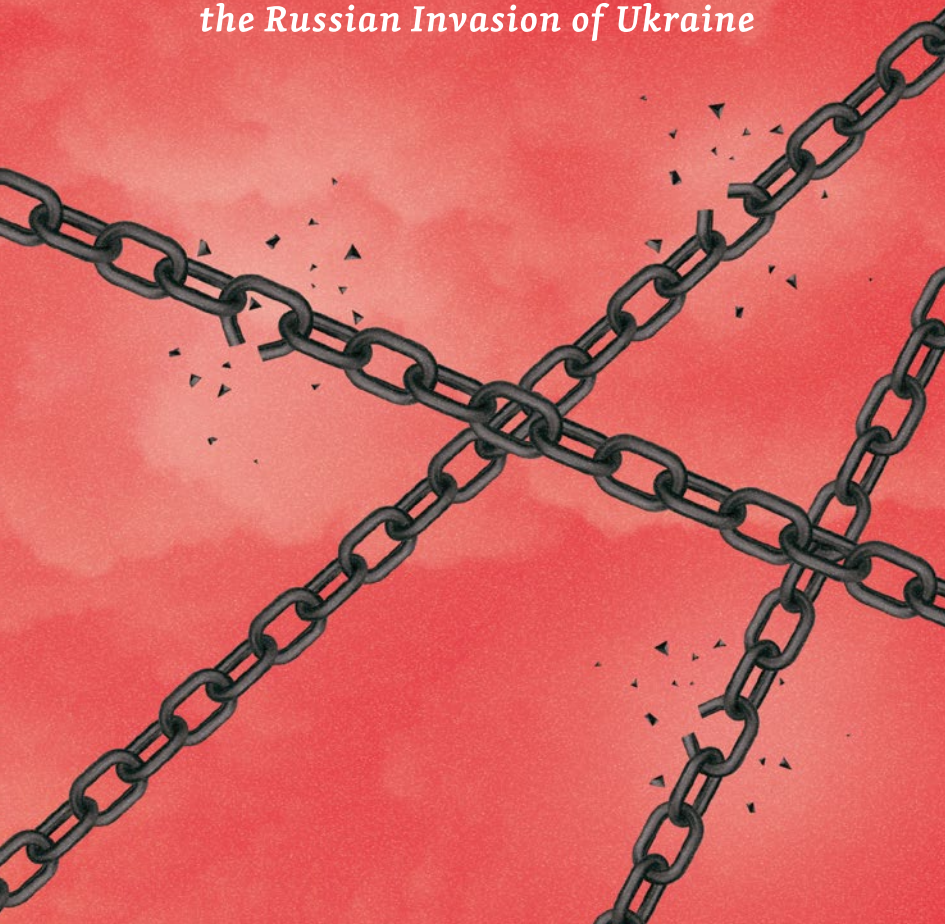




SAYING NO TO WAR

*40 Stories of Russians Who Oppose
the Russian Invasion of Ukraine*



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Managing editor | Vadim Meshcheriakov

Editors | Alsu Kurmash, Regina Khisamova

Literary editors | Alexandra Finogenova, Pavel Mironov

Translation from Russian | Letitia Rydjeski, Irena Chalupa

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Cover designer | Rim Saifutdinov

Layout | Jan Kravčik

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Egor Maximov, Alsu Kurmash, Ramazan Alpaut, Maria Yablonskaya,

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Sound editors | Regina Khisamova, Alsu Kurmash

This book consists of narratives of 40 residents of the Volga region of Russia who opposed the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the first six months of the war. Their methods of struggle are completely different: from single pickets and publications on social networks to anti-war initiatives and conversations with relatives. All the characters in the book suffered one way or another because of their views: many were detained by the police, others were fined, several people were fired or expelled from the university, others were forced to leave the country, and someone has been awaiting a sentence in detention. At the same time, they have one thing in common: the desire to resist this senseless war.

This book is based on interviews recorded by Ekaterina Maiakovskaia, Andrei Grigorev, Ekaterina Lushnikova, Artur Asafiev (all four designated "foreign agents" by Russian authorities), Konstantin Silin, Daria Komarova, Vadim Meshcheriakov, Todar Baktemir, Dmitrii Liubimov, Rima Abdrashitova, Vlada Dubrovskaya. The interviews were originally published on idelreal.org website.

Scan QR-codes to listen to each story. If the code doesn't work, find an audiobook "Saying No To War: 40 Stories of Russians Who Oppose the Russian Invasion of Ukraine" in your favorite streaming services.

Reviews

This book consists of the stories of people from the Volga Federative District (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Saratov, Penza, and the Kirov Oblast), who have found themselves to be in a state of war after February 24, a war that they did not declare and that no one asked them about.

Forty people with anti-war positions agreed to talk about their experiences and give their names, in and of itself the most valuable witness testimony of our times. Some of them have become well known thanks to their arrest and criminal prosecution, but most of the story tellers are ordinary people.

Reading this book shows well just how complicated each of these individuals are, how heroes are made, how they describe their feelings, how they try to put the indescribable into words: psychological derealization, the feeling of illusion all around them, shame, the dreary fear, loneliness, and powerlessness. In many texts the following scenario repeats itself: I am surrounded by good people who think as I do, but they remain silent. There are also many who support all that has happened, and that is frightening. But my main resistance occurs inside myself, in the realization that it was impossible not to do what I did.

Methods of protest chosen by people subject to unbearable limitations are sometimes very creative. One braided a green ribbon into her hair (she was arrested for this).

Another pounded out into the snow the statement, “RF – occupiers,” (he was summoned to the police for interrogation, and later left Russia). But most often these protests were ordinary conversations in which the individual tried to explain his point of view, or introduced arguments, or convinced his mother to watch educational and nature programs instead of state television (this lasted a month). The refrain is heard over and over again, “I do not want to emigrate,” “I don’t plan to emigrate,” “My loved ones are here, along with my work.” But it’s not hard to believe that some of the narrators have already been forced to leave Russia.

The cumulative impression that arises from these stories can be described as at once hopeless and encouraging, a contrast which might seem impossible in the former reality, but one that is now entirely possible. In each story is heard the voice of a conflicted person who understands that it’s impossible not to do something, but any activity is senseless. Harmless, miniscule acts give rise to disproportionate official reaction; the entire clanging police machinery cranks up full force when police officers see a girl with a green ribbon in her hair, or a girl standing on the central town square with a red heart on a blue and yellow poster representing the Ukrainian flag. And all around these activists is a frozen desert, populated by people who understand everything, who are guilty of nothing but who will remain forever silent. The language used to tell these stories is the language of free people, who doubt, reflect, and remain conscious of their weakness but invulnerable in the constant presence of their own conscience.

— Ekaterina Schulmann, political scientist (in April 2022 was designated “a foreign agent” by the Russian authorities)

The war that Russia has unleashed on Ukraine, has in the most unexpected and obvious way forced people inside Russia to seek their own small identity, to break up into their own tribes. To define oneself as separate from “people in general” who seem to collectively support the insanity of mass murder. This has become an answer to the feeling of collective guilt, or at a minimum to collective responsibility, or simply the “general indebtedness” that the Kremlin has decided to connect to everyone who carries a Russian passport, beginning with conducting the “special military operation” in their name. Only since the beginning of the war, the contrast between “everyone” and “each one” has become noticeable. The poor are for the war, but I am not poor, and I am against the war. The provinces are for the war, but I live in the city, and I am against the war. The bureaucrats are for the war, but I am not a state employee. Teachers are for the war, but only the older, hapless teachers, but I am young, and I oppose the war. Russians are for the war, but I am not Russian, I am Jewish, Tatar, Bashkir, I am also a Russian, but I oppose the war. The neighbors are for the war, but we are not like them, we are different.

It’s redemptive, that for the first time since the 1990’s, when everyone had to learn how to work independently to earn their keep, to come to the rescue of those who do not want bombs to drop in their name.

The book “Saying No to War” is a collection of simple stories of the individual heroic deeds of people who not only separated themselves from Russian militarism, but who announced their actions openly. They committed acts that will allow something to be returned to them in their name some-

day, after the shroud falls to the floor and the realization of past events comes knocking at the door.

The stories of these people will return to us the right to call ourselves Tatars, Bashkirs, Mari people, Russians, Volga region inhabitants. Exact and nuanced stories of resistance will allow Russians to overcome future shame and call themselves Russians, to separate themselves from the warmongers but be able to remain united with each other.

— Timur Olevsky, journalist

When the country sinks into darkness it's very important to know that there are those who will dare to go out and protest on the town square to cast a bit of light, to call things by their real names – a war “a war”, a tyrant “a tyrant”. You read about them, you look at them, and you feel that there is hope. Many thanks to them for this.

— Sergey Khazov-Kassia, journalist, writer

To oppose the war inside Russia today, to oppose evil publicly without fading, this is not only a rare form of bravery, but also a kind of salvation. A salvation of one's own human dignity. A salvation of honor for the nations living under chauvinistic and militaristic pressure. A salvation of the honor of a state which has turned itself into an evil stepmother to these nations. When the pain of war dissipates, the selflessness of the heroes of this book will be remembered with gratitude, and perhaps even with awe, just as we recall the sacrifice of those who came out and protested the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia.

— Vitaly Portnikov, Ukrainian journalist,
author and host of the “Roads to Freedom” radio program

Since February 24 the entire world is asking the same questions: Why are the Russians protesting the war? Why do they support it?

I understand where these questions come from. It also seemed to me in the first days of the way that it was enough to go out into the street, grab the nearest passerby by the collar and ask, “Hey, do you know what’s happening?” Opposition to the war would get bigger like a snowball growing larger as it rolls down a hill. I was convinced – and I still have not entirely lost the conviction – that not one mentally sound person in Russia would support the invasion of Ukraine, a war with a neighboring country that is most close to us.

But another snowball has grown from rolling down its own hill, and that is one of blockage and amendments to legislation that have made any anti-war expression impossible. The words “No to war” have become forbidden. Any appeal for peace has been criminalized and penalized. A poster in an individual picket, a post on social media, even a blue-yellow flower bouquet means a police protocol, a fine and the prospect of a criminal case. And an answer to the question “why.”

This book speaks to how these questions can begin with another word, not “why,” but “really.” Are Russians are not protesting against this war? Do they really support it?

Of course not. The Russians are protesting. People do not support the war. Many of them are saying it out loud and paying the price which the totalitarian authorities have set for them. This book focuses on this very important phenomenon which is not well known outside the country.

— Svetlana Prokopyeva, North.Realities project
(Sever.Realii) by RFE/RL’s Russian Service

On August 25, 1968, eight young people went out on to Red Square in protest of the Soviet bloc invasion of Czechoslovakia. They held up posters, the most famous of which read, “For your and our freedom.” The demonstrators were arrested, beaten, thrown into psychiatric hospitals, and forced to emigrate from the country.

This political, moral (and seemingly romantic) act resounded strongly in the history of underground activities in the Soviet Union, and for our contemporaries, people of the “Putin era,” it has become the example of how to conduct protest activities. It’s not by chance that since 2008 this protest has been re-enacted four times on Red Square. In 2013 it took place with the participation of Natalya Gorbanevskaya, and again in 2018 when her granddaughter Asya had been arrested. When waves of mass protest have spread across Russia, when the authorities have tightened the screws, the individual street picket has served as the weapon of protesters.

I recall the experience of the dissident demonstration of 1968 in order to emphasize the tradition opposition reflected in this book through the interviews of those who have protested Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. I am moved by the personal and political bravery of the people who have gone out and conducted anti-war protests in Russia, of those people who openly gave these interviews.

It’s amazing to observe the personal feelings and morals connected with the political protests the Russian invasion. These are completely ordinary people who have been charged by the FSB and prosecutor’s office, whom the court will sentence not according to the law and conscience, but according to the demands of the political hardliners. In successful cases (which rarely happen), these protestors receive

the aid of defense lawyers and the human rights community. Protestors in the most recent anti-war campaign have turned out to be defenseless against the authorities' arbitrariness, which is reflected in their statements. They are subject to moral and physical abuse, they are arrested unlawfully, and their apartments are broken into. But this does not confound or deter them. They maintain their moral position. Their will for opposition is amazing. These are the true patriots of Russia, not those who paint a "Z" symbol in public and call for the commission of war crimes in Ukraine. The patriots of their cities, the "angry city dwellers," the free inhabitants of the Urals and Volga Region, those who take the position formulated by Yuri Shevchuk, a native of Ufa, that "The homeland is not the ass of the president."

It was with heartfelt support and professional interest that I read the testimonials of the protestors of Ufa and Perm and of the university in Kazan, and other leading intellectual centers. Some of the younger protestors came out and protested first; the war forced them into this. Others had long been mobilized by the Navalny movement. Even though the authorities have destroyed this movement, this has not broken people. Older people have been protesting for a long time now and refuse to give up the practice of peaceful street protest.

Practically all the interviews begin with a description of the personal feelings of the respondents when they learned of the Russian invasion on February 24. Shock, anger, fury, some level of confusion, and then a regaining of composure and a desire to deliver a personal answer in the public space of their cities. Contained are descriptions of the actions of the hardline forces, the reactions of passersby, and a very important aspect, the reaction of families to the protes-

tor's actions. Testimonials contain strategies for relating to loved ones who do not support protest actions, and there are a few excellent recipes for commutation. Dreams about war which bring subconscious worries into the realm of political expression. There's urban artistic actionist, the anti-war feminist voice, and the voice of the anti-war LGBT community. One of the hidden forms of protest is the study of the Ukrainian language and watching Ukrainian television. Most of the respondents do not intend to leave Russia despite the terror presently directed at them. One item of note is that the protestors went out on the streets before the implementation of the law against anti-war expression. The authorities needed a few days from the beginning of their "special operation" to impose full military censorship.

And finally, a very important part of the book consists of university and high school protests. It is known that the state budgetary authorities have subject academic administrators around the country to great political pressure. Many universities in Moscow and St. Petersburg caved into such pressure. But the heroes of this book remain distinct: they have challenged the approval of the war by their academic leaders. They have written open appeals and have faced the loss of employment without fear. Teachers act as examples to their students, and students support their teachers. This is an unusual and moving example of solidarity. Here I will bring up Czechoslovakia after 1968 and the so-called history of Soviet "normalization," when those who disagreed with the policies of the Soviet "older brother" were terminated from their jobs and lost their right to speak. Despite this, the experience accumulated in civil opposition led finally to the liberation of the country from Soviet-style rule at an inevitable histori-

cal and political moment, with an inevitable leader, Vaclav Havel. This moment should also take place in Russia, which is suffering now from a wave of imperial ambitions, and not from the “victory of Russian arms” on the Ukrainian front.

“War for territory” in a contemporary political sense is overtly senseless, and the type of war that Russia is fighting in Ukraine will lead only to the international tribunal. Those who go out and protest inside Russia understand this, and they do not want such a fate for their country, even if it might be unavoidable.

I believe that the voices collected in this book will not disappear into the fog of contemporary political history. They will not figure in the news tapes and in Telegram channels that speak of the most recent Russian war crimes in Ukraine, or in the pro-war public space where people agitate for the “special operation.” The voices of the living witnesses of the anti-war opposition are more important for history than the silent zones in the soul of the “it’s not so simple” crowd, or in the black zones under the “Z” symbol.

— Elena Fanailova, commentator
for the Russian Service
of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

Foreword: The Stages of Opposition

For years, even generations, the Russian regime has transmitted to the citizenry the following, simple pieces of advice by exerting and ratcheting up the strength of its propaganda machine: Sit quietly. Be satisfied with what you have. Don't get involved in politics. The world will go on without you. So that people understood these simple rules better, the authorities had to crank the wheels of repression in a way that would show anyone who was thinking of protesting, just what happened to others who actively came out against the comfort of doing nothing.

New articles were added to the criminal and administrative codes. The norm became the free, convenient, and on-the-spot implementation of these articles against people. The repressive apparatus grew. It applied pressure on and crushed the media. Courts made only "necessary" decisions and have discredited themselves over the past twenty years not less than the Russian army has discredited itself over the past six months. Opponents of the state vertical have been forced into exile, have been killed, and been imprisoned on fabricated charges. A peaceful protest or inaccurate post can carry a prison sentence comparable to that for murder.

As a result, the war found Russian society in precisely the state in which the authorities have intentionally brought it to over the past two decades, to indifference, denial and apathy.

Almost every storyteller in this book remembers what he

or she was doing on February 24, 2022, what he or she felt when the repugnant but usual order of things ceased to exist, when the world that they knew had been destroyed, and plans and hopes that had until then been shrouded in a fog of uncertainty and clouded by a caustic, sour smoke. With this new world around them suddenly possible, they began to fight so that it might become accessible to them too.

In the first days and weeks of the war on the streets of Russian cities, protests took place that might not have been as large as many would have liked, but they qualified as mass protests all the same. Out of their inertia, hoping that they would be heard and that they would be able to change something, people experiencing shock, grief, and worn down from feelings of powerlessness, took to the streets to express their own “no” to the crime into which the regime had decided to pull the entire country.

People went out into the streets to see that they were not alone. Such was the motive for many at the end of February and beginning of March. People drew up posters with simple slogans such as “No to war,” and gave each other high-fives at the protests themselves. Heroes came out, people who knew what threat was involved with even minimal civic activity inside the country, where the information autocracy had changed into a dictatorship. All the same, they decided that conscience and justice are worth more than a fine and stronger than the policeman’s club. The authorities were ready to cut off the protest at its very roots, using their unconditional monopoly on physical force.

The protest wasn’t broken, but rather dispersed, and its seeds spread from the central squares of the capital to the streets and kitchens throughout the entire country. It became

silent, but more massive. If before people who dissatisfied with this or that decision of the authorities, but who were not ready to go out and demonstrate in the streets could placate themselves with the thought that there are people who are ready to take to the streets “for yours and our freedom,” now, those same people, seeing the futility of these most recent mass actions, began to take action however they could.

Protest actions were devoid of dramatic clashes with the police. However, through their ordinariness they began to reach the consciousness of a greater number of citizens, such as in a post or a repost, through some graffiti on a fence or in the passageway, or on a T-shirt; through a lone citizen, standing on the roadside with a poster reading, “I am for peace,” a now-indictable offense. Under threat of arrest, physical violence, fines, deprivation of parental rights, employer blacklisting, people who were horrified by the realization of the hopelessness of it all, that is, students and citizens of Russia, chose the path of disobedience, of struggle against an intimidating reality and hopelessness into which the regime had thrown them after February 24.

On that day, Russians, no matter what views they held, were given a lethal diagnosis. Some heard it but did not understand it. Others decided that this was not any diagnosis and certainly not a lethal one. Still others tried to convince themselves that this did not affect them. But then there were those, like the storytellers of this book, who saw the word “war” and all that it stood for: suffering, downfall, poverty, physical death, and the death of the moral principles that they were raised on.

The authorities quickly caught themselves and changed the name of the diagnosis, calling it a “special military op-

eration.” They forbade calling a war a war, and those who dared to call it by its name were threatened with unprecedented penalties, from outsized financial penalties to prison sentences of up to 15 years. All for a word, a thought. The authorities gave a very clear signal: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil, and nothing will happen to you. And if you dare to open your mouth as the story tellers in this book did, and declare, “I am for peace,” then you will be convicted of “discrediting the army.” It’s forbidden to be for peace; it’s forbidden to be against the war; it’s forbidden to listen to your conscience. It’s you who is the problem, and not the surrounding insanity, because insanity is common sense now; the truth is a lie, and peace is war. This is the “special military operation.”

For the first time in recent Russian history, society has been hit by a shock of this magnitude. Each person has reacted and continues to react in various ways. Tens or even hundreds of thousands of Russians have left the country, separating themselves from their homeland forever, or at least WPL – “While Putin Lives.” More than one hundred million remain and have become divided in their reaction to events. They are bound only by the psychological model of emotional behavior, known as the “five stages of accepting grief.”

Introduced into popular culture at the end of the 1960’s by the psychologist Elizabeth Kleber-Ross, this theory at first described the behavior of the terminally ill and their loved ones at the shock of receiving a terminal health diagnosis. Later professionals from different spheres adapted this model to their own work, and it took on the name, “The five stages of accepting the unavoidable.” Today, Russian society, atomized and apathetic in its entirety, is going through these

stages as defined by Kleber-Ross. And while they take place one after the other, they do not always replace each other. The stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance.

There are those in Russia who support the war, bolstering their position by arguments provided by state propaganda. According to social opinion polls, they form the majority, although not most respondents. (It's hard to believe in the research, because the question really being asked in these polls is, "Are you for the war, or do you want to go to prison?") Finding themselves in denial, these people do not want to hear any arguments that contradict their views. In response to any undeniable, shocking fact about this war, they react just how the authorities have taught them to. That is, by closing their eyes and ears or lashing out in anger, to defend their safe, comfortable world where Russian soldiers are saving the children of the Donbas from the Nazis. Or at least they might respond, "It's not that simple." However, most of the "it's-not-so-simple" crowd are in the bargaining stage, trying to agree with reality, trying to find peace and balance within it so that there's a chance they don't go crazy.

Those who have left Russia have passed through a stage of depression (sometimes very brief), and into the final stage of acceptance. But also, within this group are the millions of those who have remained in Russia, weakened by the apparent futility of changing anything in the country, or of being heard and taken seriously.

These are the people who have stopped reading the news, who have "cleaned up" their social media accounts, or who have retreated into themselves. They feel alone in their grief, that there will be no light in the end of the tunnel, and only

a fog looms in front of them. As one of the story tellers in this book, a 29-year-old lawyer from Syzran, recounted, “when they chase you into a fog, you understand that if you want to remain on the bright side, it will be necessary to cross the line and take up action.” In his narrative, this storyteller recounts how his own protest was “not exactly heroic, not one of those that they write about in the books.” (It is worth noting that his one-person protest required some ten police officers to break it up.) Having given me an interview in May 2022, his protest is being written up for this book as of September, along with others like himself, who have not submitted to events, who have not accepted the unavoidable, because the darkness now is unavoidable, and that means that accepting it makes no sense at all.

The heroes of this book, some 40 of the thousands protesting the war, are inhabitants of the Volga Region and a few neighboring regions. They represent various social strata, religions, nationalities, various professions, and views. Among them are those who “did not take an interest in politics” until February 24 along with very seasoned politicized individuals. Some of the story tellers want to do right by their grandchildren, others have relatives in Ukraine, and still others have no connection with Ukraine, but they are protesting all the same. Some stage individual pickets: others post commentary on social media or are attempting to change the minds of their family and friends. And all of this comes for one purpose, and that is to stop the criminal war and steer the country from a path, where the final station is the abyss.

They fill the lists of those arrested; they are the ones with their faces pushed into the pavement; they are the ones threatened; they and their families are the ones frightened.

(As of the end of summer 2022 there are some 16,000 individuals under arrest throughout the Russian Federation). Some of them are awaiting their prison sentence. The individuals whose life stories are recounted in this book, are all experiencing fear, bitterness, anger, but also inspiration. As Kleber-Ross wrote, they are going through the stages gradually, but the emotions can become confused or collide inside them. Whatever the case, these individuals are far from the stage of acceptance. More likely, in making a conscious choice to protest, they are transitioning into a stage of active opposition. They are fighting to calm their own conscience, being unable to accept what the current regime has brought the country to. They are fighting to show others who oppose the situation that they are not alone. And they are fighting to get those who are for the war or the undecided to think about what is happening. But most of all, they are fighting to overcome fear and impotence. And in this they are succeeding.

The Editorial Board of "Idel.Реалии"

Irina Gen

English teacher, 45

Penza

Interview recorded in April 2022

On February 24, we treacherously violated the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine and began a blitzkrieg against the entirety of the Ukrainian lands. This is a shock and madness. The situation which is taking place in Ukraine has worried me from the very first minutes of the invasion. I am taking it all very emotionally and painfully. My father comes from Ukraine. Moreover, I have relatives from my mother's side of the family who moved there years ago.

In the Olympic reserve college where I used to work, many of the children began to take an interest in why we turned into an outcast country, why the entire world has turned its back on us. I began to explain the reasons to them. In our country most of the population does not possess the full information available in international social media. In talking with the children, I realized that they supported the war because their parents did. I was deeply shocked that most people from my circle of acquaintances support the war, as they exist in an information vacuum and do not understand what is happening there. One of the children mentioned to his or her parents that the English teacher has a completely different point of view on events in Ukraine. One of the pupils has a parent who works in the FSB. I think

this parent came up with the idea of obtaining an audio clip of me so that it could be passed on to law enforcement. This means we have gone back to informing on and denouncing each other.

For some reason, the global situation that has come about because of Ukraine has turned out to be very painful for our society in terms of fear of losing this horrible, monstrous, unjust war. Imperial, territorial gene dominates the minds of most of the people, who don't understand what this represents, and why we are doing this, and why this is necessary for us. Certainly, eighth graders are not the population group with which it is necessary to conduct such a discussion, but they are also participants in the information process that takes place around us. I am trying to present to them a different point of view. The only problem with this is that I have not reached the minds of our students.

On March 23, I was at work. Two FSB officers came to me there and told me to come with them right off. In the Penza Oblast FSB, I was told that they have a recording from March 18 in which I am talking with the eighth graders about various forbidden topics. They then explained to me that they were going to open a criminal case against me because in my conversation I was spreading "fake information" about the armed forces of the Russian Federation¹, and specifically, that I touched upon the topic of the bombing of the Mariupol maternity hospital. After this they released me. On March 28, an FSB officer called me and invited me

¹ On March 4, 2022, the Russian State Duma has adopted a bill on introducing "criminal liability for the dissemination of fakes about the country's Armed Forces" and administrative liability for "discrediting the Russian Armed Forces".

to accompany him to the Investigative Committee. Then the FSB opened a criminal case against me for spreading “fake information” about the armed forces. This is a public spanking, a public show trial intended to instill more fear in society. And I am very afraid.

On April 1, I quit my job at the Olympic Reserve College, not because they asked me to leave, but as a spontaneous emotional decision. It’s not very pleasant to continue working in an academic institution where you have gone through such an unpleasant episode. The director and the head of the academic department treated me with understanding, kindness, and warmth. They advised me to hire a good lawyer and wished me success. And with that we parted ways.

My parents are very afraid for me. They are the only people close to me. I can’t say that my father shares my views on Ukraine, but he strongly supports me. Practically no one from my circle of friends and family, both close and distant, supports me. My friends and acquaintances and I have understood that if we disagree on the topic of Ukraine that we won’t bring it up, because otherwise we’ll begin to cuss each other out. If you have no like-minded people around you, then what’s the sense of trying to press your point of view on another person? He has his world view, his information sources, and accordingly, his take on the issues. The extent to which the nation is zombified by the propaganda is seen in how the propaganda is packed with false sources of information. Perhaps someday the authorities will reconsider and allow people to look at this situation differently. However, now, most of the population demands absolute victory over Ukraine, and this is appalling. It’s frightening to realize how much the Russians support the war.

Now I teach English privately. I give private tutorials and for now I have no plans to look for work anywhere. I first need to find out what my sentence is going to be².

² In early August 2022, Irina Gen received a five-year suspended sentence. The court found that “experiencing persistent hostility towards the President of Russia, during the lesson she told the students false information that the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation were seizing the territories of other states, started a war in 2014 in the Luhansk People’s Republic and the Donetsk People’s Republic; bombed a maternity hospital in Mariupol; planned to overthrow the president of Ukraine; while on the territory of Ukraine, they shot down a plane of a foreign state — a Boeing 777 belonging to Malaysia; engaged in the annexation and seizure of others and the expansion of their territories.”

Iskander Yasaveyev

Sociologist, 50

Kazan, Republic of Tatarstan

Interview recorded in March 2022

The night I spent in the police station from February 27 to the 28th was the first peaceful night for me because the previous days had been terrible³. We followed the news and understood that the very worst was coming true. It was impossible to tear myself away from the news or to not try and exert any influence on events.

And what was there left to do? Only to express my opposition and face punishment. When I undertook that action, I understood that it would end with my arrest. Our situation is not comparable to what is happening in Ukraine. Even the special detention center in which I spent my time is nothing compared to what is happening there. In the reality of war, you can't compare it to anything else. The feeling of internal division will continue, and I do not know when it will end. Maybe never, at least in the nearer perspective.

I left the special detention center on March 4, and you could say that I then returned to a looney bin. I had come out to another country. Everything had become more night-

³ On February 27, Iskander Yasaveyev was arrested for picketing with a poster reading "This is war and not "a special operation". No to war". On February 28, he was sentenced in court to five days in prison.

marish. The only person with whom I discussed the war in Ukraine at that time was a very respectable person, a very intelligent doctor. He had been arrested for leaving the scene of a car accident. But according to his words, he had not noticed that he had slightly bumped another car when he was turning his vehicle. The police arrested him on February 28.

He too was appalled at events in Ukraine and said that in Russia some 98% of all machinery and consumer goods were imported. He didn't know how he was going to treat patients and what medical supplies he would be able to obtain. Here was an example of an ordinary, non-politicized person, but his estimation of the situation was very close to mine. He said he saw no future in the country, and that his children should emigrate. He said, "I also want to go out and protest" but from his reaction I understood that he was, of course, afraid. His was a very instructive example. First, he was thinking of his children's perspective, and secondly, how was he going to perform his work and how could he work in his profession. The world is moving forward, and we are going to start going backward because we will have no access to technology. We will be forced to use imitations.

You know, I am no psychologist, but it seems to me that a kind of internal tension is arising in people. They understand that they are being lied to, that this is propaganda, but they want to delude themselves. It's simpler this way, it's easier this way to calm that internal tension. In talks with the police, they repeated word for word the same official lines that we were all hearing at the time, such as, "Where have you been these past eight years?". We discussed these topics with the police for two days as they were transporting us from one police station to another and then to the court

for our trial. I explained to them that already in 2014, Elvira Dmitrieva (ex-head of Alexei Navalny's campaign in Kazan, Tatarstan. Died October 26, 2019, of a long-term illness) organized a picket against the war in Ukraine. So, there was the answer to the question of where we were these past eight years. We also protested that first war as well.

The second thing the police kept saying: "This war is to prevent war against Russia, a war with NATO and even nuclear weapons." Supposedly there is no way to avoid this, so war is being conducted. That is, we are at war, so there will be no war. An absurd position! I will remind everyone: In the USSR, during the war in Afghanistan in everyday conversations people voiced the line that the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan only hours before the Americans were set to invade. Had we not sent our troops there, the US would have occupied the country, and we would have had a launching site right on our border for an American invasion of the USSR. It's all very familiar. Really, nothing has changed. I think that the current authorities in a completely deliberate manner laid the same ideological groundwork that was laid in the Soviet Union.

How long will this go on? I would say for as long as people are able to delude themselves. Despite everything, there is a lot of information. There is more credible information about casualties. I think that people will begin to think about what this war says about them. During the war in Afghanistan some 13,000 of our soldiers died. In my opinion it is very important to discuss the casualties. Namely this might cause people to come to their senses.

While I was serving my prison sentence, practically no information from the outside reached me, except for brief

commentaries from the police. They would say, “They are advancing,” or “We are advancing.” I received no information from my lawyer. He visited me in the special detention center, and in general terms described what was happening in the war. I understand that on both sides now the casualty numbers have run into the thousands, which is terrible. Just before the war I saw some data from the independent research organization, the Levada Center. In a survey they conducted, about half of those questioned said that war frightens them greatly. About one-quarter said that war does not frighten them much, and the remainder answered that war did not frighten them. All the same, war is obviously terrible for citizens, and they relate to it negatively. Of course, a part of the population supports what is happening. I see this with the police. Those who express their views, express them in support of the war. This division exists, but I assume that a reckoning will happen quickly. How long can this be supported? Maximum a few weeks. Many people will begin to compare their own situation with what they hear and read in the news. The realization that all they are hearing are lies and propaganda should take place.

Lyaisan Sultangareyeva

Employed in the culinary industry, 24

Tuimazy, Republic of Bashkortostan

Interview recorded in May 2022

War is a horror. When I saw in one of the Telegram channels the post that Putin had declared a military special operation, at first I didn't believe it. I looked at a whole bunch of news sources before I could accept that information. I felt awful. I didn't understand how in our time war could be possible. In all probability our country will never wash away the stain of this war. This war is not being fought in the name of the Russian people. The majority of them, I am convinced, did not want it. There is no justification for this war. It is purely the imperial ambitions of our president. Only he needs this war.

I have gone out and protested seven times in my life, four of which were anti-war protests. At my first anti-war demonstration in Tuimazy I went and protested on the very first day of the war. On that day all kinds of announcements were made concerning the various picketing actions across the country, but I did not have the possibility of traveling to Ufa or another major city. My poster read: "NO TO PUTIN, NO TO WAR", something I thought up myself. I stood for about an hour along the "Magnit" grocery store in the center of town, which is the most public spot around. All went peacefully. No police approached me.

On March 2, I went out to picket once again with my poster. This time I stood for about 40 minutes until police officers approached me. I refused to show them my ID papers because I had committed no crime. I was standing in my own picket, expressing my opinion as a citizen of the Russian Federation. The police called someone and spoke for quite a while, and in the end all four of them decided to take me by force to their car. From the police station they decided to take me to the drug enforcement office for some reason, and from there, a temporary holding cell where I spent the night. My trial took place the next day, where the court found me guilty of “disobedience” toward the police and fined me 3,000 rubles.

The third time I went out and staged my protest in Ufa, I carried a sign that read “WAR IS DEATH AND POVERTY”. This time the police did not arrest me. The fourth time, when I protested with a sign reading “FREEDOM TO RUSSIA, PEACE TO UKRAINE”, the police arrested me and drew up protocols at once for these two protests accusing me of “discrediting the army”. My trial took place based on one of the protocols, and the court fined me 35,000 rubles⁴.

I went out and protested because I could not remain silent. I could not watch all of this from the sidelines. It’s difficult. I do not know even one person in Tuimazy who would openly go out and protest this war. But when I went out, I was not afraid, because at that time criminal liability for anti-war protests had not yet been introduced. When the po-

⁴ The Tuimazy Court of Bashkortostan fined Sultangareyeva 30,000 rubles under the article on “discrediting the army” for an anti-war picket she held on April 11. She was also fined 35,000 rubles for the second picket held on April 25.

lice drew up the protocol for “disobedience”, I understood that this was a criminal charge, but I was not afraid.

Afterward, when they arrested me on a new anti-war charge, I became afraid. First, I wanted to go out and express my opinion publicly. Of course, I am afraid of going to prison, and I will attempt to avoid that fate. But psychologically I am prepared, even though I understand that I cannot be fully prepared for that eventuality. It will upend my life and the life of my family, but it seems unavoidable. I accept these risks. I will make the decision of whether to leave the country or not only in such a case that I feel my life or freedom are at risk.

Demonstrations in Ufa and Tuimazy are very different. It's easier in Ufa. First, there is greater probability of meeting up with acquaintances, for example, my mother's friends. Secondly, in Ufa you receive more positive encouragement. I believe that these actions can change people's thinking. Some people don't watch the news at all, others watch only the propaganda channels. Having seen my poster, it's possible that I will begin to think and search for information simply because another person went out and stood on the street with a poster.

I believe that everyone today can speak the truth to their family. It's complicated, I understand. I spent a lot of energy in the effort to convince my grandmother of my cause. But this is important. To open people's eyes by talking with them is still safe and not punishable by law.

Ivan Koretnikov

Artist, 83

Perm

Interview recorded in May 2022

I graduated from the Surikov Institute in Moscow in 1973. From the beginning of my creative journey, I understood that the Soviet era was one of the most complicated periods in the history of our country, in terms of life and civil wars. The times were turbulent and uneasy, but this was never reflected in art. You would visit the Tretyakov Gallery and see only boasting about how the Russians defeated the Germans and White Guard, and how great the socialist period was. Art contained no history. I decided for myself that if I don't want my work to end up in the garbage bucket, then it's necessary to do what is real and reflect real events that occurred during perestroika, or the Yeltsin or Putin eras. Simply put, I could not lie.

I well remember February 24. The news came like thunder from a clear sky. I never thought that our president would commit such an idiotic deed. I never thought I would survive so many wars. Only during the Putin era, we've seen several wars: the second Chechen war, the Georgia war and the war with Ukraine, which is a real war, and not some "special operation".

Every day I follow events in Ukraine. Moreover, my wife is Ukrainian, and she is generally very heartsick for Ukraine.

I am afraid that the government will draft my 17-year-old grandson into the army when he turns 18 in a year. And would they send him to serve? We are not in a time of peace now. They could send them once again to Donbas, to Kher-son or even to the Kyiv area. This war has an artificial character because there are no reasons to fight it. None! Well, the Russian empire has fallen apart, which means that is the reason. Czechoslovakia fell apart, but people did not suffer from that, but here we have missiles and tanks and what have you.

On April 6, I went out and conducted my own individual picket. My poster read something like, “MAKHONIN, HOW MANY FUNERALS HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN OUR REGION?”. Makhonin is our regional governor. Another poster read “RUSSIANS ARE SHEDDING RUSSIAN BLOOD”. As you can see, nothing on my posters opposed the war outright. There was no judgment of the correctness or fallacy of the war. I decided to stage my picket because it was within my strength. I am convinced that this is not a war by the Russian people, or the citizens of Russia. Our government is conducting this war. It is the war of the top leadership which now finds itself in power.

I didn't even stand my own picket, but rather I went to the statue of our local hero Aleksander Popov, who was behind the invention of the radio. But I was not allowed to reach the statue; the police stood around it. I unrolled my poster, and not 30 seconds later, police officers approached me and took me off to the police station. I didn't think I would go to court for this.

The police said nothing to me at the station. Earlier they had tried to both agitate and reason with me, but I am an old man, so how are they going to change me? I understood that

the police were not basing their acts on the law, but on the orders of their bosses and the authorities. No one is bothered by the fact that I am an old man who knows what war is. I clearly state that the war in Ukraine is a real war. And they are afraid to say that word. And why should we go to war? No to war!

The Dzerzhinsky Regional Court in Perm fined me 30,000 rubles. That is more than my monthly pension! My friends and family decided to collect money to pay the fine, and it turns out they have already collected 61,000 rubles. There is enough extra money to pay the fine of another person. Putin has tread on the most sensitive area for the Russian people, which is war. Russia will not forgive him for that, and because of this, the President of Russia is afraid of that word. The situation is such that if Ukraine wins this war, then Putin will fall.

Nail Zagidullin

Teacher of physics and computer science, 52
Sterlibashevo Village, Republic of Bashkortostan

Interview recorded in June 2022

The changes have affected everyone, but some do not want to admit this. My views have not changed. Just as I was early against what has happened, I am still against it. I still consider this to be an invasion of a foreign country and say that the deaths of people from both sides should end. Human life is precious. I am convinced that man should not kill for whatever reason or reservations or purposes. It's a law of humanity, a quality that makes a person human. I have written about this on social media since the beginning of the war and continue to write about it to the present day. At school meetings I have said that we should not mislead the children. Teachers should teach them to differentiate white from black. Teachers cannot condone killing as this is against our nature. I said that this all works against us. I am not interested in what people think about me or my positions. I know that I am right, and I will never support the death of humans.

No normal person can support the situation in Ukraine. Even if someone is against the war, he remains silent because he is afraid. This is the instinct for self-preservation. My colleagues know my position, and I am grateful that I work with them. We all honor a principle which states that everyone is

entitled to his or her own opinion. How a person thinks is a personal matter for everyone. I treat my colleagues who support the war with understanding. They have their own opinion. Some are misguided, while others sincerely believe in what is happening.

It's true that there are some who speak foully, who put pressure on or harass others. When I understood that my old friend is a "vatnik"⁵. I tried to reason with him. I heard from him in response, "You're a traitor", "fifth column" and "state destroyer". This was unpleasant. I perceive him as a victim of state propaganda.

My wife agrees with me. She is also a teacher, but as a woman she tries to protect me. "Keep quiet. Don't talk. Don't write anything. We're in a tough situation. How will we live if we lose our jobs?" I understand her, but the truth is too dear. The authorities are manipulating people by fear because a frightened nation is easy to control.

We've come on to hard times. I never thought that I would ever see authoritative teachers who are afraid to speak their minds. I never imagined that pupils would write complaints against their teachers. Teachers have ended up in a difficult situation. They have been transformed into soldiers in the service of the authorities and obligated to say that evil is good. The students, fortunately, are not dumb. They see and understand everything. Some students are interested in what's happening and ask questions, but in conversations with them you must remain attentive because they can re-

⁵ The word is used to denote a supporter of the political regime of the Russian government. It comes from the word "vatnik" — the quilted jacket, a Russian piece of clothing.

cord your answer. There are students who are close to me to whom I will explain things if they ask me to. It's frightening that these children are absolutely losing their trust in the older generation.

That said, they need to see that there are adults who have a different opinion. I receive anonymous notes: "These kinds of teachers are teaching our children? What a disgrace! How come the police or prosecutor's office do not take notice of what he says and writes?" There are those who do file complaints. After all, recently new laws on "fakes" and "discrediting the army" have come out, and everyone keeps these in mind whenever they voice an opinion about anything. In such a way the authorities have frightened people and turned them against each other. There are those who don't care for me and the fact that I am so active.

I do not need television. I search for different information; I then dig into it; I find and read forbidden independent media. It's important to me to remain human. I don't know how to deal with the shame, I fear the "coward" label. From one angle I look like a fly that fears to fly outside the window. Let this be my own personal struggle. If I can change the opinion of a few people, or save someone from leaving for Ukraine, then my efforts will not have been in vain. People read my posts in social media, but they don't even place "likes" to show their agreement and approval. This is what fear is.

I also fear the following, but every day I ask myself, "Who are you? A human being or a trembling creature?" I am afraid of the return of such concepts as "anonymous note", "denunciation" and "slander". After all, we remember the Stalinist times as a terrible period. Millions of people

were sent to prison, shot, or killed for political smears, for stealing grain or for knowing several languages. Tragedies occurred in many families, and we know that people were afraid to talk with one another. The situation now is like that of Stalinist times, only the “wording” has changed a bit. How did we come to a situation where a person who expresses his opinions is called a “foreign agent”⁶? How did we return to this time? This is what frightens me. We do not know how to learn from our mistakes.

Every day I look at the statistics for Russian soldiers killed in war, and my hair stands on end. I don’t want to lose hope, but the reality is harsh. Corpses are constantly returning to Russia, but the individual republics are swearing in more and more “contract fighters”, luring in these volunteers with money.

No matter how we try to improve our life, the economic situation in Bashkortostan is deplorable. In every nook and cranny of the republic, almost in every home, no matter who heads the family, the sons are either going to Siberia to make a living, or they are traveling to Tatarstan to work in construction. Women run the homes. To move and settle in Siberia involves a thousand problems. Because of this, many young men consider joining the army and earning money through military service. Now the authorities promise 200,000 rubles for such service, which is a lot of money for

⁶ A “foreign agent” is a status given in Russia to individuals, media outlets and organizations that the authorities believe receive foreign financial support or are “under foreign influence.” This status officially appeared in 2012. Since the end of 2021, individuals — journalists, activists, scientists, writers, etc. — have also been included in the register of “foreign agents” in Russia. The ECHR recognized the law on “foreign agents” as violating human rights.

someone from the country. The attraction arises from local poverty, as we are very poor. We consider our lives secure when we have our own garden and home. Turning the army into a means for social mobility is a tragedy.

I do not blame those who have left Russia. A person himself decides how to live his life. You can understand why people have left because of fear. If someone is threatened with a criminal case, then it's obvious he risks being sent to prison. Everyone has his reasons. Some simply want a peaceful and secure life. No one has the right to condemn them. I don't think that everyone has left, and we are here alone. I am not alone. I hope that change for the better will occur, and that the deaths will end.

Yulia Kaburkina

Photographer, 35

Cheboksary, Republic of Chuvashia

Interview recorded in June 2022

On February 24, I was drinking coffee with a friend as we discussed various news stories. That morning there was only one topic: the war. At first, I could not believe that this had happened. After all, many had said that war would certainly not happen, and here in the morning news were descriptions of explosions. I wanted to scream, I wanted to do something so that this would turn out to be untrue. We have friends and acquaintances in Ukraine. They are almost like family. And in general, Ukraine has always been close to my heart. I do not want to get used to war. This is the most important issue for me.

Several times I have dreamed about war and woke up with tears in my eyes. I cried right in my sleep. In the first dream, I went out early in the morning to walk the dog, and along with the ordinary urban scenery I saw burned out houses and cars. In my dream I walked about a deserted city, and I was very afraid. In the second dream another woman and myself were taken hostage, and prior to that, we were running away in the dark from the soldiers. They were running after and following us. I woke up then and could not fall back asleep for a long time. Life as if in a dream. I dreamed

this, but there are some people who have experienced this. It's very frightening.

In one of the supermarkets in town, I decided to put small paper cutouts of people with anti-war proclamations right next to the price tags for goods. I had no fear of doing this at all. I felt courage from the fact that I was doing something necessary, and that I was following the right path. My girlfriend supported me. She also wanted to cut out similar paper people and leave them in populated areas. An acquaintance told me that this was a "kindergarten" move, but I had already decided that I would not be stopped. The idea took off in my head to the point where I cut out so many paper figurines that I had enough for an entire paper demonstration. I glued them to places on the street and felt a pleasant thrill, but not fear.

My parents did not know what I was doing, and those relatives with whom I was communicating either knew and supported me, or they were smiling. But in my soul, I hope they are proud of me.

My parents support the war. They watch only the television. It's hard to convince them of other points of view, but I am trying. Any political conversation begins quietly, but then we begin to raise our voices, and in the end, we go our own ways with our own opinions. Our country has no prophets. I feel that I am failing in my mission to bring the truth to people, but I am not giving up, and I continue onward.

During the first days of the war, I wanted to leave Russia. I found it very shameful to live in an aggressor country. Now I understand that my departure will change little. In a way I feel like leaving, but I am not making any plans to do so. I would like to say that I am not afraid, but I can't fool

myself. I am a person who panics and worries for any reason. At first my court case on “discrediting the army” was very hard to take. In the Chuvash Supreme Court, I wanted to appear publicly, just as someone like Ilya Yashin has. I wanted to choose words that would touch the soul, but the first court wrote in its decision as if I had admitted full guilt and confessed. I was not listened to at all. I concluded that there was little sense to being crucified again in a second trial.

No one will say what awaits us. I would like to see a free Ukraine, a free Russia. Russia should push itself up from the depths, having shed everything grim that has pulled us to the bottom. It should become that country of which we can be proud of. I wish that the authorities observed all the rights and freedoms of the citizenry, and that foreign policy was directed toward cooperation, and wish we could forget once and for all the saying, “We live well, only let there be no war”. We should forget the word “war”. Looking at today’s situation, you could say that it is difficult to believe in a happy future in Russia.

Yakov Ovchinnikov

Photographer, 54

Perm

Interview recorded in March 2022

We lost the war even before we began it. I don't know what kind of geniuses sit in the General Command, or what our State Duma thinks about when it unanimously voted to send troops into Ukraine. Do they not understand the situation? Ukraine is not that country which the propaganda artists describe. You could say that it is the direct opposite of what all the Solovyovs, Kiselyovs and Skabeyevs⁷ are trying to frighten us with. And when Putin made his speech about Nazis, drug addicts and so on, I understood that this was total shame, and that there would be a war. I understood that US President Joe

⁷ Vladimir Solovyov is a Russian journalist, state radio and TV presenter hosting "The Evening with Vladimir Solovyov" show on the Russia-1 TV channel. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, the European Union, Canada and the UK have imposed personal sanctions against him.

Dmitry Kiselyov is a Russian journalist and a state TV presenter. Deputy General Director of the All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company since 2008, General Director of the "Russia Today" agency since December 9, 2013. Since March 2014, Kiselyov has been under personal sanctions from the European Union for supporting the war by Russia against Ukraine.

Olga Skabeeva is a Russian journalist and a state TV presenter. She hosts the "60 Minutes" talk show on the Russia-1 TV channel. In February 2022, the European Union imposed personal sanctions against her.

Biden was telling the truth. The only thing he achieved was the postponement of the beginning of the war. Having original plans of invading Ukraine on, say, February 16, the Kremlin bosses dreamed of holding a concert in Kyiv with Oleg Gazmanov, Valeriia, Filip Kirkorov (Russian singers) and other loyal performance artists on February 23 (Russian Army Day). This is what I think.

I've been taken to the police four times already. Three in the past year, and the last time on March 6, 2022. I was filming the demonstration, and because I am not a member of the press, they loaded me onto a police bus. They transported us to the Leninsky police station. I have been there three times already — it's like home now. As a police officer was drawing up the protocol, he asked me if I had had enough already, and I answered, "If I had had enough, I would not attend demonstrations. I have had enough of the current authorities."

When I worked loading goods in the supermarkets, I noticed just how many elderly people came and stood in line to buy past-dated goods in the trash area. It was impossible to watch this indifferently when others are buying palaces, yachts, chateaux in France and Italy, castles, and homes in London, and at the same time, the people here live in poverty. Moreover, these are people who worked hard all their lives. It's very unjust. Of course, you can say one hundred thousand times that the world is unjust, but this does not calm me down. And the older I get, the more clearly, I understand that I am leaving to my child as a heritage a garbage heap instead of a nation.

Earlier in life I planned to become a professional photographer. I never thought about politics. But my eyes have

been opened. I never was a supporter of the authorities, but I did not get into politics because I lacked full information and my circumstances were different. Public information varied: where the truth lay and what were the lies was not clear. Working in school during 1988-2000, political discussions were not acceptable. And then Boris Nemtsov⁸ and later Alexei Navalny⁹ came on the scene. To be honest, I did not share Navalny's nationalist views, but today Navalny is a mature politician with nuanced, concrete, and purposeful views. Most likely my views are cosmopolitan. For me the planet is much more important than individual countries. Until 2018, I avoided politics. I needed to raise my son, which was difficult. We survived, but there was no normal work, and money sufficed only for the bare necessities. Life was complicated. Now that my son is 18, I have the time for politics.

A fatigue with injustice has set in because I realize that during my entire life, I was unable to earn enough money to buy an apartment. I have 34 years of employment, and

⁸ Boris Nemtsov, a Russian politician, the first governor of the Nizhny Novgorod oblast, first Deputy Chairman of the Russian Government, member of the State Duma, one of the organizers of mass protest rallies "For Fair Elections" in 2011-2013, was shot dead on the night of February 27-28, 2015, in the center of Moscow. The assassin has not yet been found.

⁹ Alexei Navalny is a Russian opposition politician, founder of the Anti-Corruption Foundation. One of the main critics of Russian President Vladimir Putin. On August 20, 2020, as a result of poisoning with a chemical nerve agent from the Novichok group, Navalny fell into a coma. He underwent treatment in Germany. On January 17, 2021, he returned from Berlin to Moscow, where he was detained at the passport control. He is currently serving his sentence in a penal colony. In May 2021, the human rights organization Amnesty International recognized Navalny as a "prisoner of conscience". Leading world leaders demanded to release the politician. Human rights activists and supporters of Navalny consider his persecution politically motivated.

from now until my death I can accuse myself of being a loser. I studied to be a teacher and I ended up a worker? As Dmitry Medvedev said, if teachers don't like their work, they can find another job. They say, go and work where they pay you the most. That idea warped me because teachers are needed in our country no less than ministers. Their work is surely as important as the work of the president of the country. Perhaps the president should make more money than a teacher, but teachers, nurses, cleaners, courtyard janitors and workers should not live in poverty. The state is obligated to provide citizens with a decent minimal standard of living and health care. There should also be no corruption or force. We should have the guarantee of freedom of speech, freedom to vote, religious freedom and security. But Putin has stripped us of these rights during his 20 years of rule.

Polina Mukhacheva

Student, 22

Kirov

Interview recorded in June 2022

On February 24, I was attending practical studies in the morning and did not watch the news. When I read later that day that a “military operation” had begun, I was simply in shock. I understood right off that this would bring about a kind of financial instability, and this frightened me first. Later I realized that this was a real war. I lived through the next few days like I was in a fog. I didn’t know what to do, how we are going to live with this. My head spun in confusion, truly I was lost. Now of course, I have gotten used to the situation a bit, but the psychological discomfort remains.

My parents do not think it’s necessary that they express their own civic views. In their opinion the right thing to do is to sit quietly and, so to say, don’t rock the boat. At most they might engage in private conversations about the kitchen table. And at home there is a television in the kitchen, and one is in the main living room as well. After every time we watch TV together, a family scandal erupts. More exactly, a family scandal used to erupt. Now we don’t talk about anything at all. My parents accept the position shown on television; although my mother is probably more neutral in her

views, my father is for the war, and my grandmother and I are against it. It's impossible to convince anyone of another view of the situation, and my mother is seriously concerned that such political discussions will lead to the breakup of our family. For this reason, she tries to remain silent and not heat up the conflict any further.

We have a relative that lives in Crimea, while her children have remained in Ukraine in Odesa. She talks about "how we sit in the cellar, and the Russian army drops bombs all around us", and her relatives don't believe her. "You are bombing yourselves, and we are saving you," they reply. One friend of mine, with whom I got along very well for four years, found out about my anti-war stance, and cut off all ties with me. Even among those I know who have the same views, among those who are against the war sometimes run into conflicts among themselves. All of this has brought about a major shock.

I read on the internet that green symbolizes peace. For this reason, I have begun wearing a green ribbon in my braid. It's both pretty and symbolic. On April 2, I was walking around Theater Square in Kirov with that green ribbon in my hair. I consider that an expression of my own opinion. How come people with the "Z" sign on their shirt can feel free to walk around on the streets, but I am not allowed to do the same with my green ribbon? Of course, I was a bit afraid, but now any person who has his own civic views feels fear. Unfortunately, fear has become a constant emotion for everyone.

My walk lasted literally three minutes. Right off some police officers came up to me, officers of the Center for Combating Extremism, and informed me that I was being ap-

prehended. They took me to a police bus. Together five other activists in the bus had been picked up in various places around Kirov. Three of them were also wearing ribbons — green, yellow, blue. The two others wore no ribbons. They were just standing on the street and were caught and brought to the bus.

In the Leninsky police station I had a very interesting conversation with the police officers. I asked, “What should I do with this ribbon in my hair? Unbraid it? Is a green ribbon really a crime?” “We must remove the ribbon from your hair, measure it, record the removal in the protocol, all according to procedure,” explained the officers. I became interested and asked, “And what if my hair were dyed green?” They replied, “In such a case we would have to cut a sample of hair as evidence,” answered the officers, completely seriously. “And what if I were wearing a green coat or a hat?”, I continued to ask. “It is not recommended to walk around on Theater Square in a green coat or hat,” warned a police officer, and none of them were smiling.

At first an officer by the last name of Eroshkin conducted an informal conversation with me. He asked me various questions, such as who my parents are, do they know what I’ve been up to here, what do I see as symbolic in the green ribbon, why did I come to Theater Square. Later they took from me my official explanatory note, and asked, “Do you often braid into your hair a bright green satin ribbon? Have you taken part in earlier public protests? Are you familiar with the political activist Alexei Navalny? What do you think of him?” I refused to answer any of these questions, basing my refusal on Article 51 of the Constitution (absolution from the obligation to testify).

So, all green ribbons in Russia are now considered to be anti-war symbols? And what about blue or yellow ribbons? And green hats, blue coats, and yellow scarves — can you wear those? Or are all these items now symbols of anti-war protest? And what if I have green eyes? Am I allowed to walk around with green eyes, or will they be considered a “discrediting the army”?

There are many reasons why people in Russia remain quiet. The first of them is the climate in which we live. Long, harsh winters mean that Russians must wait patiently for spring. They aren't used to making quick decisions or concerted moves. They are used to enduring. Then there are historical reasons: serfdom, which was abolished relatively later than in other European countries. An absolute monarchy held power until the end of the 20th century. And then there was the long Soviet period, when a citizen could end up in the camps even for telling a joke told in the kitchen. But the main reason is the aggressive effect of contemporary Russian propaganda. A book written by Dachau prisoner and American psychologist of Jewish origin, Bruno Bettelheim, “The Enlightened Heart” made a strong impression on me. If we read the author's work, and compare the methods used in the Third Reich to zombify the people, and the methods used today in Russia, there is a lot in common.

Now in Russia the cult of “Z” weighs down on people. That symbol follows you everywhere: on buildings, in trams, on the television, at work, on the T-shirt of the regional governor. But if you step out in public with a green ribbon in your hair, they immediately apprehend you. You are alone. You are against the masses, against the illusion of the majority. People are afraid. And what if they fire me? And what if

they cause problems for my family? And what if we go out to protest and they beat us up? And if we endure that, what if they throw us in prison? And of course, there is the fear of fines. If a person doesn't always have enough money for food, and he must pay a 50,000 fine for participating in an anti-war protest, he will think it over a thousand times next time: Do I go out and protest or not?

When people are constantly afraid, some become indifferent and apathetic, and others take on a fearless despair. There are few of the latter, but they do exist. Revolutions are carried out not by the passive majority, but by the passionate minority, people who decide to go out and form their own Maidan. That was the case in Ukraine, and this will be the case in Russia.

Alexander Dneprov

Special equipment salesman, 33
Naberezhnye Chelny, Republic of Tatarstan

Interview recorded in May 2022

On February 24, I was reading Telegram channels, and it became clear that a full-scale invasion had begun. I understood this when bombs were exploding near Kyiv, when I began to watch the video clips that were coming out of the Ukrainian capital. Then it was clear that this was no territorial defense, but a full-blown war.

I never believed that this could happen. My friends and acquaintances and I were constantly discussing the possibility of war. Some said, “Well, look, Putin has already indicated his own red line.” But I did not believe until the last moment that war had begun. And even to this day, honestly speaking, I still don’t quite believe it. It surpassed my imagination about what would be necessary to happen for such a decision to be made. I thought that we would see yet another spectacle showing the protection of peaceful citizens, but this all turned into an all-out war.

On February 24, I felt mixed feelings of shame and disbelief that our president committed such a monstrous crime. I wouldn’t say I was afraid, but rather I felt upset and ashamed vis-à-vis the Ukrainians. I felt a kind of guilt for what had happened. If until then I had not felt that I was

part of political events, then on that day I knew that I could no longer remain silent. And, we had to admit that we were all guilty of something. Could we have stopped this earlier?

My attitude toward war was adamant from the beginning. Until the end I was banishing the thought of it and thinking, “it will never come to war”. You can’t just look at such a situation, you need at least to try and do something, even if it’s only talking about the situation. Russia should long ago have left Ukraine in peace, back in 2014. As concerns Crimea, I consider what happened to be an annexation. It doesn’t matter how many Crimeans supported it. Until 2014, there was nothing really going on in Ukraine; it was Russia that cooked up the situation, and it is only Russia that bears the guilt for what happened.

Until April 2022, I never participated in any protest actions. I could have written something in protest somewhere, but that would have been it. I never saw the use of such acts and considered them useless. Of course, I know about all protest actions that took place in Moscow and other cities, but I saw that they produced no results afterward. Well, perhaps I am mistaken, because if one person goes out and protests, and then another goes out, then two or three people might see and hear about it. Maybe they won’t change their opinions, but they might think about them. I think that action must be taken. It is necessary to be seen and heard. Obviously, I have become a bit braver.

Beginning in April, I began to go out into the city to stage my own individual pickets. Passersby reacted in various ways. In those days the propaganda was working full steam, and it presented data of opinion poll takers that suggested that over 70% of Russians supported the war. But

from my own experience I can say that most people are against the war: Some people simply winked, nodded, and smiled when answering the opinion poll questions. I had the opportunity to speak with an older woman who worked as a schoolteacher. She discussed biolaboratories (in Ukraine), NATO — all the standard propaganda topics plus some poorly argued opinions.

As for my own family, they watch television. Whenever I begin a discussion about Ukraine with them, a kind of dissonance arises, because the television says one thing, and I am describing something else. We experience a mental gap between us. So, for that reason we try to avoid discussing the topic. Older people, however, cannot seem to tear themselves from the television and turn to other sources of information. I have a relative who completely supports what is happening. In recent times he and I have practically stopped talking to each other. I don't know what we must talk about when all discussions lead to difficult topics, and these only ruin relations. And I have either cut back or cut off completely many of my friends who one way or another support the way.

I try to convince my friends and family. I have had long conversations with them, but at one point I simply became tired of it all. Let's assume that I conduct a political discussion with someone, and it produces no result. The discussion repeats itself two or three times. I see that nothing changes. This is the same as beating my head against the wall, you understand, and from this you only destroy your nerves. I attempt, I speak, I establish a line of conversation, based on facts. However, in recent times I have given up a little. There are people with whom this is all difficult to discuss, and it produces a negative vibe.

Everyone understands everything about the situation perfectly, but they try to justify the war. It's the same with the economic sanctions. Some Western politicians announced that the sanctions are not harming Russia because when civilized Western people face sanctions, they understand they have done something wrong. And Russians are just the opposite — they lash out against the West. For now, I cannot understand or get my head around this psychology. Price rises on groceries, as I understand it, scare no one. Everyone is trying to stick to the line that it's necessary to free someone somewhere else, or to eliminate the Nazis in Ukraine, or Russia has always been an imperialist country, this is all normal. But what is the most frightening, I feel, is the lack of mass protests because military censure forbids them. People are simply afraid because they think they will be arrested. Honestly, I cannot explain this to myself. But I do not believe that the nation has simply accepted what is happening. Perhaps people are waiting for something to change.

These events will lead to a worsening of the standard of living in Russia. War will lead to stagnation or economic degradation of the country. We see that many people appear to return to the Soviet past. In the 1990's, Russia took a path to democratic and liberal development. The country has already made a 180-degree turn and has gone in completely different political and economic directions. And now some would like to spin the country this way and that, but Russia will always spin right in the same place. I do not think there will be any serious geopolitical collapse, but no matter what, this will not end well.

Maria Chuzayeva

Student, 23

Yoshkar-Ola, Republic of Mari El

Interview recorded in April 2022

Until now, I have never been interested in politics. I never took part in any political activity. Starting in 2018, I began watching “The Laughter League,” the Ukrainian comedy festival. There were some comedy troupes that performed in Russian and others in Ukrainian. I began to follow some of the participants of this program on social media. Not all of them were famous — after completion of the festival, they went back to their everyday lives. Perhaps because they were not super popular, they were able to broadcast their visions and opinions. And it was not through their publications that I found out that the war had begun. In the beginning, certainly, their emotions came through. These comedians suddenly began taking an aggressive stance toward Russians. At first, I did not understand them: Why are they speaking so badly of Russians? Then it became obvious that there was a war, and they were suffering, not us. During the first week, I took all of this in somehow, but during the second week came the understanding that I had to do something, that help must be offered because there are people there and they are having a hard time with things.

As I understand things, in normal, free countries, if there is something people don't like, they go out and express their

views in the main square of their own cities. I began to look at how this is done. Permission must be requested from the authorities before assembling a public gathering. I understood that the only available option for me was an individual picket. I went out with my own placard. I drew the Ukrainian flag: I colored the top half of my placard sky blue, and the bottom half yellow, and in the center, a red heart. I drew this out on the street and immediately went to a nearby square.

A heavy snow was falling. In Lenin Square, I stood by the length of a railing. After seven minutes, some officers of the Main Directorate for Traffic Safety, who had been stationed on the street, came up to me. They said hello, introduced themselves, asked me a few questions, and then asked me to leave. I said that I could not leave because this was my position and I had come here to express it. I was not shouting anything. I was simply standing there with my placard. After this, the Directorate officers went to their colleagues with the patrol-sentry service, located nearby, and returned with seven more officers, at which point they said to me, "Let's go and determine your identity."

They put me into a "Gazel" vehicle, and we immediately went off to somewhere. It turns out that it was to the police station. At some point, the officers began drawing up a new document (an explanatory protocol). They questioned me and began to recommend their own wording in the protocol. I stopped answering their questions as I thought that they had begun their manipulation. I did not know about the law against "discrediting the army". And this was what they put into my protocol.

I didn't go out to protest anything. Only after my interrogation did I manage to come up with that wording myself.

First, there were emotions — it was simply necessary to support the Ukrainian people. At that moment, I wanted to say that I was against this aggression. At the police station, I was confused: what can I say so they won't accuse me of being against the army? Moreover, female officers began to hurry me: "Speak quicker. We need to go home. Our children are still in kindergarten," they said. One of them wanted to include in the protocol the wording that she had recommended. I refused to sign it — and as a result, I sat at the station for three and a half hours. I left there only at 21:05.

My trial took place on March 25, one month after the beginning of the "special operation". The court found me guilty of "discrediting the army" and fined me 30,000 rubles.

On the day after my arrest, March 15, the dean of Mari El State University, where I study, asked me about what happened. Later, back in the dormitory, the dorm supervisor summoned me to her office and told me that someone wanted to speak with me. I remained in her office until a man who introduced himself as the assistant to the rector arrived. He and I spoke for about an hour. He asked me who I was, where I was from, where I live, who my family is, and whether I had any relatives in Ukraine. He told me that the university's position was the following: It supports Russia, but for some reason I have broken away from that position. He reminded me that I have debts and that my studies are not going very well. I answered that I would repay my debts. I had a lot of debt from my fourth year, but I managed to cover it all. And now I have only one more exam that I need to take. At the end, the rector's assistant said, "Get a hold of yourself. We are not going to take any sanctions against you. Get all of this out of your head and start studying." Afterward, I was not able to

take the exam at the repeat seating, and the commission took a severe line. One of the girls passed the exam with a “3” and three of us failed. I was told that we would all be expelled, and there was nothing we could do.

The next day, I dropped by the dean’s office to find out if I could file an appeal, and if I could attend classes. The dean told me, “Well, this is the commission’s decision. You did not pass the exam, so the rector will consider the matter. You can matriculate in a year.” In the dormitory, people are calling me an outsider.

I do not regret what happened. I was obligated to go out and picket. My regret is simply that I did not notice the police car parked along the square. It’s possible that this diminished the meaning of my stand, as no one noticed me, no one saw me.

Alexei Nurullin

Software developer, 37

Ulyanovsk

Interview recorded in March 2022

To me, it was obvious that this military operation of the Russian Federation was against a free, democratic country in which the president and parliament are elected in fair elections, and in which there is local self-government. This is the exact opposite of Russia; thus, this “operation” was no surprise at all. Even when some officials in Ukraine said that this operation would never happen, that it’s all geopolitical games, I always was inclined to believe that military action would take place all the same, as Ukraine was surrounded by our army. And although in Russia the official word was that the army was engaged in exercises, everything became clear on February 24.

I am worried about the future of Russia, and for this reason I participate in actions to express my opinions¹⁰. Because it’s obvious: The direction in which the country is headed now is the road to collapse. Many political experts have noted that peripheral forces in Russia’s regions will gain in strength, while the center, in contrast, will weaken.

¹⁰ In March 2022, the Zavolzhsy District Court of Ulyanovsk fined Alexei Nurullin 30,000 rubles under the article on “discrediting the army”.

If we are to speak on an everyday level, this means that prices will grow rapidly, wages will grow minimally or even fall, demand for goods and services will fall, and accordingly, employment will contract. All of this is seen already in all spheres of the economy. And I do not understand at all just what Vladimir Putin's geopolitical interests are. In my opinion, he sees himself in this historical episode with Ukraine as someone who will resurrect the Soviet Union. But this is not in the interest of the people.

I think there is no one right now, given the current situation, who is not afraid. But we should remain humans. And all these laws which the authorities have passed to punish us for even one-person pickets are unconstitutional. The law in a totalitarian state, which Russia has become, does not function anymore. It only functions for the ruling class.

I am secure in myself and resistant to stress. This helps. I don't have to wonder if I will be fired or not. I can express my views. I think the practice of terminating people from their jobs simply for expressing their point of view, which we observe now inside the country, is wrong. In state institutions employees not only are terminated, but the authorities chase them into dead-end life situations, a part of the totalitarianism that has already occurred. This is a dead-end practice for the country.

My friends and family have differing opinions on my life situation. Some support me, others are neutral. But no one has come out against me. My grandparents are already long enough in years that I don't inform them of my activities so as not to upset them or cause them any discomfort. Everyone in the family supports me. I am reserved in my reaction to other points of view. But those on the other side of the

argument call for arrests, deportations and so on. There is the feeling that people have been totally zombified by the propaganda. When the authorities lie outright and push their propaganda full blast, accordingly, many people give into this, and begin to search for enemies even among their acquaintances. Ties of friendship, even family, are destroyed. And those who knowingly push such propaganda should be punished for inciting this hatred on such a gigantic scale.

Changes will take place no matter what. They are already taking place. Practically all imports from around the world have been blocked from Russia. If the majority of people do not come to their senses, this situation will lead to sad consequences. If people manage to strongly oppose the deadly course the country is currently on, then there is a chance that Russia will survive as a state. If people come to their senses only when they themselves feel the consequences, then I fear it will be too late.

Ravil Sharafutdinov

Lawyer, 29

Syzran, Samara Oblast

Interview recorded in May 2022

On February 24, I still really didn't understand what was going on. And when everything became clear the next day, that they are bombing Kyiv, I wrote to my relatives, "They are bombing Kiev. War has begun." And my mother replied, "No, no, no, there's no war. There's only the Donbas. No one is bombing Kyiv. Nothing of the sort is happening there!" And I too, certainly, for a long time could not accept what was happening, even though my mind understood it. I could not get used to the new reality. It was so awful for me that I felt stupor and panic. One thing I can say for sure: From the very beginning I was categorically against the war.

In May, I decided to stage my own picket. It had become physically difficult to remain silent. My conscience simply could not quiet down, and with every day the line between black and white was becoming clearer. Balancing between this black and white became impossible. You are chased into a fog, and you understand that if you remain on the light side, then you will have to overcome yourself and cease to be idle.

At the very beginning, I was not entirely supportive of the dissident view, and just like in everything, my opposition

was more hidden “in the kitchen” than displayed in public. However, whenever I speak to people, I said then and I say now, this “special operation” is wrong. Most people don’t think that way. But when people find out even a little bit about what is really going on, they change, or more exactly, they acquire an opinion. But despite this, there came a moment when I understood that simply talking about all this was not enough.

Until now I never participated in political demonstrations. And my picket was not totally a heroic story, not like those that are written up in books. In March I attempted to stand and picket in the city center. I stood there a few minutes and realized that I was not yet ready to leave in a police van to spend time under administrative arrest in a prison cell. Of course, the street cameras caught my action, a few people approached me and looked, but no consequences came of my action. And then I thought, “And why not?”. I’m a lawyer and I know that I am doing nothing against the law. And for that which our government considers to be unlawful, I will receive an administrative fine and I’ll serve a brief sentence for a few days. And I will remain a human being.

On May 1, I went to the city concert in a T-shirt on which I wrote “I AM FOR PEACE”. To be honest, it started out terribly. There was the first, then the second and then the third police officer. They all began talking among themselves, phoning somewhere, following me, one of them even crossed the street behind me. But it seemed that they all decided in the end that my “I am for peace” slogan was permissible. They didn’t do anything, they only followed me around and observed me. And passersby looked at me, very surprised, but nothing unpleasant occurred. Some of our acquaintances

came up to us and asked, "So you're not afraid? Good for you!" And suddenly the whole episode was not so frightening, and I felt relief.

At that point, May 1, I still did not think I would go and stand with a "NO TO WAR" placard, but what happened that day gave me more strength. As far as I know, in our city there were no anti-war actions or pickets, but I was no longer afraid to take my own placard and go and stand with it in the center of town, on the main square. Do you know what surprised me the most? That I was walking through town and thinking about how about 80% of the nation believed in the so-called "special operation" I thought that they would start calling me names or something similar, but I decided that it was necessary to fight for the undecided thinkers. But in fact, as people passed by me on the main square, they signaled by giving me the thumbs up and shouting, "Good for you! This is necessary! No to war!". Many people shook my hand. An older woman came up to us and began reading something from a book. A 17-year-old girl approached us and said that she too wanted to join our protest, but I said that in no uncertain terms should she join any protests until she turned 18. I did not expect at all that this protest would affect so many people, that it would resonate with them so strongly, that there would be so much support. When I saw all of this, my fear subsided once and for all, and I didn't really think of it any further.

I stood there for literally 15 minutes before the police arrived, and after that, I remained for more than two more hours. One after the other, police officers pulled up in their cars, presented us with this and that. One declared, "You have a demonstration", and I answered, "As a lawyer, I am

telling you, this is not a demonstration.” Then they said that I did not have permission for a picket. I explained that for an individual picket, no such permission was necessary.

In the end, more than 10 police officers arrived on the square, from a sergeant to a lieutenant colonel. Even the traffic cops were there, walking here and there, asking for explanations, and which war was I against. I replied that I wasn't going to answer any questions, and if they thought that I had violated some law, then they could write up a protocol. In the end, they did write up a protocol based on Article 20.3.3 of the Code of Administrative Offenses of the Russian Federation, for “discrediting the army”.

After writing up the protocol they did not take me away. At this point they could have stopped what they thought was a crime being committed by, for example, taking my poster. We had filled out the protocol, and I was still standing there with the poster. And then we signed the protocol, and I was still standing there with the placard. And yet they could not take me to the police station based on the charge listed in the protocol. At this point, they must have understood that they had made a mistake. One of them said to me, “You're a drug addict! You have bloodshot eyes; white lips and your hands are trembling.” My wife and I verified the video of this moment, and I showed nothing of the sort. “No, no,” the officer then countered, “We suspect that you took some drugs, and you need to undergo medical testing.”

I now understood that their only goal was to take me to the police station. I said that I would not go anywhere. They answered that they were apprehending me for “disobedience of a police officer”, and for refusing medical testing. They began to push me, they knocked me to my knees, but I did not

release the placard. In the end, they handcuffed me, took me by the arms and legs, and threw me into their “Gazel” van.

At this moment, I understood as a lawyer that no one could apprehend me according to Article 20.3.3 of the Administrative Code. So, they decided to turn me, the father of three children, into a drug addict. They could lock me up for more than a day, throw me into administrative arrest with total drunks, and force me to sleep there on wooden boards. As soon as I exited the station, I went for independent medical testing; they found no trace of narcotics in me at all. I do not regret at all that I went out and protested. If I had any expectations from my act, then the result far surpassed them. I realized that I had done the right thing.

The “special operation” can end in any way possible, but for Russia nothing good will come of it. Whatever the post-war settlement is, it will not benefit us. Either a peace agreement will be reached that will destroy the Russian economy, or Russia will break up into dozens of different countries, or World War III will erupt, or still something else.

I think that many people do not go out and protest due to the influence of television. Not because of the propaganda, but because everyone thinks that everyone else is for the “special action”. And if someone has doubts about the situation or is completely against it, he thinks, “And who will I show my opposition to?” I also thought that way. But it turns out that such is not the case. It turns out that very many people are against the war.

Albina Ardakhanova

Social media specialist, 30

Naberezhnye Chelny, Republic of Tatarstan

Interview recorded in March 2022

I believe that in the 21st century there are different ways to resolve problems other than military operations. While some sit at the negotiating table and divide up territory, others are losing their brothers, fathers, and sons. Within my own circle of friends and family there is no one from Ukraine, but I am following the fates of many people who under bombardment and the wail of sirens have been forced to abandon their homes and their country and have been left with nothing. I see how the media takes photos of the dead. These young guys, many of them, are from my age group, and I don't wish them such a fate. These guys are supposed to have families, work in business, travel, and do what they want to do, and not die by military orders.

I expressed my disagreement with the world situation when I wrote "NO TO WAR" on a piece of wallpaper and hung it out on my balcony. I do not consider this to be an act of bravery. While a student, on World War II commemoration day in school and the institute, we kids always reminisced about the horrors of war and were in solidarity with the belief that it should never take place again. I consider myself to be a patriot of Russia. I want for my country a future where I have nothing to fear.

On that day I hung out the wallpaper, and a police officer knocked on my door. I wasn't afraid at all, as I had done nothing bad. It became clear that the officer wanted to look at my balcony. I asked him to present to me a search warrant or court order, but he had nothing of the sort. I informed him that whenever he had the proper documents, that I would discuss the matter with him then. During our chat, I could not shut the door as the officer had blocked its closure by inserting his leg by the door and holding it open.

A bit later one more person arrived at my apartment; he turned out to be a lieutenant colonel. During our conversation the threats began, that "the boys" would show up and "take care of things". I didn't understand who was supposed to come and what they would do. I live alone, so I became afraid that someone would arrive and force their way into my home. I gave the officer the slogan on a wallpaper. During the arrest the officer did not use physical force against me. I was afraid of that, so I voluntarily went with him to the patrol car.

The police took me to a police station. One of the officers had an aggressive stance toward me, saying to me that "people like myself should be sent to Ukraine". When I asked him if he supported the war, he didn't answer, saying only that "he supports Soviet authorities", but then corrected himself and replied "Russian authorities".

In court, I refused to give any testimony without my defense lawyer present, and I did not admit to any guilt. The court found me guilty of "discrediting the army" and fined me 30,000 rubles.

In my family there are various views regarding what happened. Nevertheless, all of us are one family, and we

try to help each other however we can. My parents to this moment do not believe that the court convicted me for a “NO TO WAR SIGN” on my balcony. They, just like I, do not understand what exactly they found me guilty of.

I don't fear police or social pressure, but I am afraid of how informers have become active, just as in Stalinist times. I am more afraid of persecution from those who do not agree with my views. I found out from the police about the person who informed on me about the poster. It was on his tip that the police came to my apartment. In the investigation protocol I saw his name and address. He lived right across the street from me.

I see that many people are now out of work. Naturally I have noticed that prices are rising every day in the shops, and these are the prices of the necessities. It's frightening that nationalist convictions are growing in society. Another alarm bell for me is that children are being brought into politics. Changes are happening every day, and it's impossible not to notice them.

I do not want to leave my family or my home. I hope that it won't come to this.

Kamil Churayev

Artist, designer, 46

Ufa, Republic of Bashkortostan

Interview recorded in April 2022

What has happened is so terrible, and it touches every one of us. To give the impression that this all is not affecting you is a dishonest reckoning with yourself. Pickets¹¹ were a natural reaction in the wish to convey to people that I am personally against what is happening. It's all a bit of a helpless feeling, though. What can I do? I can scribble something on a poster board and go out into the street. I have no other levers of influence except writing something up in social media.

I have no close relatives in Ukraine. I have some acquaintances through social media, but this is not so important. You can very easily imagine yourself and your family in the situation of these people. This will sound like atavism, but we have a close linguistic medium with Ukrainians, and when abroad, it's impossible to differentiate between Russians and Ukrainians. My acquaintances from Ukraine write that it's important to them to see the support of people from Russia.

¹¹ Kamil Churayev went to solo anti-war pickets on February 24 and 27, and also on March 2.

A year and a half ago during the wave of protests in Belarus (authorities unleashed a widespread, brutal crackdown on peaceful protesters and their supporters in the wake of the August 9, 2020 presidential election) and events surrounding Kushtau (rallies by local activists to protect Kushtau Hill from mining in August 2020), some siloviki approached me and invited me to a meeting with them, but I did not go. Now I support the position that it is better to hide and stigmatize the regime's devils from a safe place, to call them who they really are. I consider this to be my sacred right. If a war is going on, I am going to call it a war. Yes, I think that I am hiding now, although I might be kidding myself. I don't live at home; I have changed the SIM card in my phone; and I don't use the GSM network, but I do not want to emigrate, nor do I have that possibility. What gives me much support and fuels optimism and reassurance in me is that we will witness the agony of the regime.

I think the root of the problem is that from childhood we are taught obedience and submission. A person grows up ready to submit to a commanding voice, not particularly checking for the basis of his submission. This is not a problem only for Russians, but for all of humanity, and it can lead to wars. People think that if someone gives an order, then it is necessary to obey it. People should be brought up in a way that they bear personal responsibility for their actions which no oath or order can eliminate. In this way, the question of whether to submit or not will take on a different feel, and people themselves will have to determine how to answer it.

Zulfiya Sitdikova

Temporarily unemployed, 45

Kazan, Republic of Tatarstan

Interview recorded in July 2022

When the war started, I didn't believe it; I thought that Putin once again is out to scare someone. Only after a day or two I began to look more deeply at what was happening and was shocked by it all. In any case, this is a war, not a "special operation". How can you attack a sovereign state? We have such a huge country — why do we need foreign territories, because of the ambitions of one not quite healthy person?

During the winter of 2021, I attended all the rallies in support of Alexei Navalny¹². Then it was easier, we were allowed to march, to chant. But now everything has become tougher, and people endure and endure. We are going to turn into North Korea soon. After the start of the war, I went to demonstrations. I was detained on March 6 and 13, the first time I was released without a report being filed, the second time I was detained for a day and a half and fined 10,000

¹² On January 23 and 31, 2021, rallies were organized in dozens of cities in Russia and around the world demanding the release of Alexei Navalny. He was detained on January 17 at the Moscow airport after returning from Germany, where he was undergoing treatment after being poisoned with a chemical nerve agent from the Novichok group.

rubles. I bought a sweatshirt on the Internet with NO WAR written on it. On June 12, Russia Day, I walked around the city wearing a sweatshirt. On June 14 there was an Oleg Gazmanov concert. It was a warm day, so I draped the sweatshirt over my shoulders. There was danger in wearing that sweatshirt, but I wasn't too concerned, I did not think that there would be serious consequences, including arrest. On the other hand, how long can you stay silent? Someone must do something! Recently I began to be interested in politics, when Crimea became part of Russia, I did not understand why this was necessary, but then I did not yet realize the depth of the problem.

At the end of the concert the police came up to me and said, "come with us". I was taken to the police station. Everything was very calm on this day, the policeman who dealt with me was very kind. A protocol was drawn up against me for "discrediting the Russian army"¹³, they confiscated my sweatshirt and released me. On July 6, the district police officer called me and said that he needed to return my sweatshirt. Sometime around 6 pm I came to the police department — the duty officer told me to go to the district police. At that moment, there was a lot of commotion in that police office, they closed the door and started telephoning someone, saying: "Hurry up, she's here." I realized that something was wrong.

That day, after going to the police station, I planned to leave the city and told the police officers that I could not wait. I began walking to the exit. A policeman ran after me and

¹³ On July 2, 2022, the Novo-Savinovsky District Court of Kazan fined Sitdikova 40,000 rubles under the article on "discrediting the army".

said, "Wait, they're on their way." Three policemen drove up, they did not introduce themselves, and just said "Let's go get the sweatshirt." I told them to return it to me on the street, as I was heading out. They insisted that I go into the police offices. One of the police officers appeared to have run out of patience, he took me by the hand and began twisting my arm, leading me back to the police office. And it was only at this moment that I was told they needed to correct the record of my June 14 detention. They made up this entire story about returning my sweatshirt just to get me into the police station. I told them to summon me with an official police notice, they just laughed at this. They dragged me into the police station and said that they would draw up a report on me under Article 19.3 of the Russian Federation Administrative Code ("Disobedience of a police officer's lawful order").

I was kept at the police station until the next morning. In the morning, a horrible policeman appeared. He yelled obscenities at me because I refused to undergo a videoconference trial. I asked him to introduce himself so that I could write a complaint against him, but he refused. I asked to speak to the police chief, he again refused and declared that he would no longer come near me and would not escort me to the toilet. "That's the only way to deal with you!" he said. I was shocked. And he really would not take me to the bathroom. I banged on the door, so the entire department heard it. As a result, the person in the adjacent cell also knocked and the policeman approached. I asked him to call an ambulance for me and then he became a little frightened. I was shaking all over. I went to the toilet, washed, and felt a little better. For a few minutes, I was able to talk to a lawyer and explain to him what was going on. Later, I found out that the

lawyer made a call somewhere and complained, and a few hours later, the ambulance arrived.

I was taken to court with two sets of charges against me, but the case was adjourned. I was brought back to the police station, where I again spent the night. On July 8, the court held me under arrest for 5 days for police disobedience, while refusing to listen to the audio recordings of my conversations with the police. I told the judge: “You tried to punish me, but you only made me angry.” History shows how all this turns out. I don’t want to be afraid! How can you be afraid if every time it just gets worse and worse?

Some of my relatives and friends are surprised by my position. Even when it comes to rising prices, I ask: “What did you do to prevent this from happening?” They don’t quite understand me because our generation has a slave mentality. However, now the situation is changing a bit — people, including some police officers, are beginning to understand what war is.

Right now, in my circles there are not so many people who support the war, but the majority is simply afraid. I try to talk to those who support the war, but it is those who have doubts that need to be persuaded. Many just say that they don’t understand politics, are not interested in politics, and I simply say to them “Don’t you understand that this is all interconnected?” I just can’t keep silent. If a protest is announced, I will most definitely be there.

Konstantin Kikeyev

Installer of small building constructions, activist, 37
Kirov

Interview recorded in April 2022

I have never been influenced by propaganda. My television stopped working long ago. I have never voted for Vladimir Putin. When Boris Yeltsin announced him as his “successor”, I thought that nothing good would come of it. The Russian people went crazy after Crimea was seized in 2014, and since then that insanity has only grown. Still, I did not expect Russia to attack Ukraine, to begin bombing Kyiv, and to murder women and children. I was in shock for over a month after the outbreak of war. Despair simply tore me apart, and then I began to go out and protest.

My work involves constant business trips. I install small building structures in Moscow, Kazan, Ulyanovsk, Kirov and in other cities around Russia. Everywhere I go, I try to engage in anti-war actions. Of course, I must be careful, and mostly conduct my protests at night. For example, I have taken a balloon and painted on it “STOP THE WAR!” on buildings, fences, in the snow and in underground passageways. When the events in Bucha occurred (Ukraine has accused Russian forces of committing atrocities against civilians in the town of Bucha in March 2022), I wrote “BUCHA” in red paint. In the winter, I pounded out with my feet the words “RF — OCCUPIERS” in the snow in Kazan.

Sometimes I go out during the day either on the street or in the metro with a poster that reads “THOUSANDS OF INNOCENT LIVES” or “REPARATIONS”. Such actions usually last about ten minutes because the police will notice if they last any longer. But if during those ten minutes 100 people pass by me in the Moscow metro, and one of them begins to think about what is happening, then that is good. Most of the time people react with hostility and aggression. They yell, they cuss me out, they spit at my legs, they threaten to beat me. Some call me a “traitor” and that I should be shot.

This is a war of the Russian people who have felt a rare inspiration, having united around their leader, Vladimir Putin. The victims among peaceful civilians, and even among the soldiers, do not upset them. Cruelty, force, plunder, murder, crimes against humanity, all of that they justify through the necessities of state and “geopolitical interests” of Russia. Some Russians give the impression that none of this is the point, and do not know what is happening, that the internet inside the country does not work freely and that it’s impossible to find out the truth. The truth can be discovered, but they don’t want to discover it. They are more comfortable in a zombified state. The “Z” sign is now visible on theaters, schools, government buildings, trolleybuses, city buses, and personal vehicles, even in kindergartens. We certainly aren’t going to take our older child to school now and will begin to home school him. We have refused to pay taxes because we don’t want our money going to bombs.

I believe that fascism has always existed in Russia, and I have in mind almost the entire 20th century. Is it not possible to call the communist ideology an equivalent of fascism, especially taking into consideration the number of its

victims? How many people were killed during the civil war, during dekulakization, and during the mass repressions? I think the following: Earlier we had red fascism, and now it's brown. Earlier it was leftist, now it's the far right. I have the impression that in Ukraine, I saw Chechnya for the second time. What the Russian soldiers did to peaceful civilians in Chechnya, what they did to people in Syria, they are now doing to Ukrainians. Some of my school classmates served in Chechnya. Twenty years have passed, but they still refuse to say what exactly went on there. They committed such things that to this day they still shut up about it all.

I feel that I am playing with fire. Recently, I was apprehended in Theater Square in Kirov with a poster reading "RF — OCCUPIERS". It seems that someone informed on me by calling the police. They came up to me, talked with their commanders for a long time, and asked them what to do with me. Then they led me to a police booth and wrote up an administrative protocol, accusing me of "discrediting the army". I tried to prove to them that I had the Russian population in mind, and not the Russian army, but such nuances do not concern them. What's going to happen to me? An administrative penalty or are they going to ratchet it up to a criminal penalty, I don't know¹⁴.

¹⁴ In mid-May 2022, Konstantin and Nadezhda Kikeyev left Russia with their children and applied for political asylum in Lithuania.

Vladimir Danilov

Children's party organizer, 55
Yoshkar-Ola, Republic of Mari El

Interview recorded in June 2022

No one believed that a war would break out, because such a thing would not occur to any normal person. Everyone believed that Vladimir Putin would not unleash this war. It seemed that there might be a mass protest if a war erupted.

What frightens me is that most Russians support the war. There are many supporters among my own friends. Earlier, whenever we sat around talking, we would discuss the elections, life, and politics, and it was obvious that they did not support Vladimir Putin's power. After February 24, a transformation took place in their minds. They began to say, "If we've already begun the war, then we need to continue it through." This point of view, of course, is lethal. I have long wondered what happened in their minds. There was even a theory that this mindset was the result of Covid vaccinations or alcohol. But in the end, I concluded that this phenomenon was the effect of television. It has that kind of influence on people. And most people watch Russian state television on channels 1 and 2, and do not search further for information sources. It's obvious that alcohol, Covid vaccinations and televisions are not the issue, but rather the permanence of political power in the country.

I have three purebred Samoyed dogs, a father, mother, and son. The father is 12 years old; the mother is 10 and the son is 5. I keep them all in my apartment, and I perform with them around the city at children's parties. I made some skis and trained my dogs on how to walk in a harness. In the winter we began pulling children along the snow in a sled without taking any money for it. Later, I thought up a summer wagon accompanied by soap bubbles. Also, in the winter we made ice sculptures around the entrance to our apartment building. We had all kinds of amusements from Irish dancing, bachata dancing, polar bear swims, running and skiing races. I enjoy the sled activities and bubbles. These are free shows, and I like showing them. These parties are not a business, but a very expensive pleasure for me. This has been the case now for ten years. Nine years ago, when I was still beginning all of this, people had a good attitude toward my dog's entertainment. They would bring food for the dogs, for which I was grateful, and they would offer money which I did not accept. Now that is almost never the case, and most people don't even say thank you.

In 2014, I staged my own protest with a poster that read "NO TO WAR". I am against war in general. Back then, there were also many people who were for the war in Ukraine. When I staged my protest, many people condemned me, but I do not hide my views. For example, I picket every February 27, the anniversary of the assassination of Boris Nemtsov. I think it is important to express my position publicly. My wife supports me, but she is very worried about what I do.

I have many connections with Ukraine. Back during Soviet times, I traveled all around Ukraine. I was in Kyiv and in the Carpathian Mountains. I made business trips all

around the Soviet Union. Nowhere was the attitude toward army conscripts better than in Ukraine. Because of this, the current situation is very painful for me. I do not believe that there are Nazis in Ukraine. Of course, Ukrainians form one nation, but now it is divided. There is Ukrainian-influenced ideology and Russian-influenced ideology, and the situation has become tough. And because of the war, the Ukrainians hate us. And they will continue to hate us for 100 years and afterward. I would hate them if they attacked us.

The war needs to end. That is certain. How many people have died because of it? Perhaps my words will help someone change their minds. But if only the bots express their opinion in social media, then this will form the impression that everyone supports the war. I will be ashamed to face my grandchildren if I remain silent. In May, I reposted in VKontakte (social media in Russia) the anti-war text by film director Kirill Serebrennikov. I do not know his work, but his article that included the photograph of the dead Ukrainian woman with the red nail polish made a strong impression on me. Such descriptions of war can lead to tears.

I have expressed my opinion, but what happens from here, I do not know. But I am afraid. Something else depresses me, though. In the city everyone knows that I entertain children for free with bubbles on a dog sled. And now, bots are condemning me on social media, and afterward I will be judged¹⁵. It's possible that they will close my web site that has attracted children to my free parties. How many thousands of children have ridden my dog sled over the years? How

¹⁵ On July 6, 2022, the Yoshkar-Ola City Court fined Vladimir Danilov 30,000 rubles for “discrediting the army”.

many children have I made happy? I will continue to hold my free parties, only I won't advertise them. I think this is my main life achievement.

Anti-war sanctions have affected everyone. My daughter doesn't perform in Moscow like she used to. Earlier we used to go to international competitions for Irish dancing, and now we do not go. Moreover, in Moscow, Irish judges presided over such competitions (national championships). Without these judges there can be no real event, and now the Irish are not going to come to Moscow.

But change is happening all the time. People are beginning to ask questions.

Yulia Samoylova

Massage therapist, 53

Ufa, Republic of Bashkortostan

Interview recorded in May 2022

I never took part in demonstrations before. I was far removed from politics, did not stick my nose into anything and was not interested in anything. But since February 24, I simply cannot live in peace. I see that many people think as I do, and this makes me happy.

The first time I went to a protest was February 27. I stood near the obelisk dedicated to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights holding a sign that read “SHAME ON THE WAR”. I stood there for three minutes. I was detained by the police and taken to police station #9. They asked whom I was associated with and who told me to stand there. I told them that I was doing this of my own free will. I was given a warning and released.

On March 27 and May 3, I went out with a poster “I AM FOR PEACE”. This time I managed to stand there longer, but again the police came and took me to the same police station. They asked me: “Which peace do you stand for? What do you mean?” I answered that there is only one peace, and everyone knows how they think of it in their minds. The third time, the police did not know what to do with me: it was a weekend, and the duty officer did not know what to ask me. Then someone called the duty officer and told him that

he had to question me in a different way. So, he questioned me again. I responded the way I needed to respond. They tried to provoke me, asking “Do you oppose the actions of the Russian military?” I answered: “I did not say anything, I just have a poster for peace.”

I went to protest for the fourth time on May 9 with a poster “MY GRANDFATHER FOUGHT AGAINST FASCISM”. The police came a few minutes later, but for a long time did not know what to do. In the end, they took me to the police station, interrogated me and released me without writing a report.

I think we need to avoid fines because they serve a specific purpose. That is why you need to be smarter and shrewder. The psychological pressure of the police does not work on me. Thank God I have a strong psyche, am very logical and I hope I have enough brains. It is better to prove your point at a protest than at a police station. I am aware that they can write up a police report about me, I am ready for this, but I will defend my rights and prove that I have not violated the law.

I participate in protests for myself and for people, so that they are not afraid. When I protest, I receive support, people come up, shake my hand, say “thank you, you’re doing a great job,” they snap pictures. Of course, there were also instances where people were aggressive, they would come up to me and demand “what do you want to prove with this?!” But I believe that everyone has the right to express their point of view. You need to express your position. I hope that my actions do not go unnoticed by people, I hope they influence them. I understand that many are scared, they are afraid, they have something to lose, but I am glad that they at least feel as I do.

It was scary to protest for the first time, I felt my voice trembling whilst speaking with the police. Despite the fact

that I was demonstrating for the first time, I was not afraid of the police. I understood that I was right. When a person knows that they are right, this gives you strength and confidence. And this also applies to the article about “discrediting the army”. I believe that if a person is right, nothing in the world can discredit him. A person who is in the right doesn't need to prove anything.

My friends and family react differently to my protests. My son says “What will you achieve? What do you need this for? Everything will stay as it is.” But I believe that water wears away stones. My father and some of my other relatives support me very much. When they tell me that I need to be a patriot of my homeland, I answer that I am a patriot, I love my country and I want people here to live in dignity. And I am for peace, I am against death in peacetime. Yes, there are people who think that war is good. This is because of years of propaganda, brainwashing, huge drives to promote the military lifestyle and militarism. This did not affect me, because my grandfather fought against the Nazis, he went through the entire war. When I was little, he told me stories about the war, and that's why I'm against it. I believe that a normal person should have an aversion to war. The fact that we have saber rattling during parades is wrong.

I think our country is in for a disaster. I have no idea when this mess will end. I would like it to be sooner, but I'm afraid all this will come at a great cost. We already have repressions, poverty, we are under blockade from all sides. I don't know who can stop this war: probably politicians, at the highest circles, can do it. But I still consider it important to come out and express my position.

Iskander Gabdrakhmanov

Logistics specialist, 25
Kazan, Republic of Tatarstan

Interview recorded in May 2022

I began to take an interest in politics when I was a university student. During that time, in 2017, a film came out from the Anti-Corruption Fund about the corruption of Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev. From that time onward, I took an interest in politics. Back when I was in school and I would watch the news with my parents, I would see, for example, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov on TV. At the time he seemed to me to be a serious person and a good orator. Later I began to watch various film clips of him, and I realized that Lavrov behaved rudely, and exhibited a complete lack of culture on the world stage. In January and April of 2021, I went to demonstrations following the arrest of Alexei Navalny after his return from Germany. I should say that with time, I realized the importance of all of these stories.

On February 24, I thought this all had to be some kind of surrealism. My parents taught me back in school that any kind of military operations are not normal. Russia would never invade another country. And suddenly it happened. A strange feeling, honestly. A shock.

After February 24, Russian authorities began passing laws to frighten the nation. At the beginning, of course, I was

afraid to go out and protest in the streets. You know that for two to three weeks, people in various cities were arrested or had their homes searched for things they wrote on the Internet. I am afraid now, but prior to May 9, I understood that I had to do something. Also, May 9 commemorates the victory over fascism. I thought that this would be sufficiently symbolic. I had such a world view that something needed to be done. The problem will not go away if I bury my head in the sand. From February 24, even though I was interested in politics, all the same I had my head in the sand out of fear. And the problem did not go away.

On May 9, I went to the center of Kazan with a placard reading "NO TO WAR". At first two young men approached me and asked me to put away the poster. I refused. They answered that they would send for a police squad. One of the officers stayed to watch over me, and the other went to summon the squad from the police station. They also talked about taking the placard, after which they asked me to accompany them. We went to the police station. I tried to understand just what was the matter with that placard. Nothing terrible was written on it. I simply stood there, not answering to anyone, not shouting. I did not want my encounter with the police to become physical, so I agreed to go with the police. Later on, the court fined me 30,000 rubles for "discrediting the army".

My mother's view of the war, if it is not neutral, then she neither condemns nor praises what is happening. And my father wants to bring back the Soviet Union. This is the country in which he was born, where he spent his youth, a time which for him was perfect. I understand his opinion, but disagree with him to the core.

I think that many people support my position. I see this among young people and people actively engaged in politics. Only now they simply are afraid to voice their views. If someone brings up this topic, I try to engage with simple, present understandable arguments to express my own views. Some people accept this, others do not. It is their choice. Whenever you use force to convince anyone of your views, it never works.

I can't imagine what's going to happen now. Until February 24 I could not believe that all of this would happen. I am inclined to think that things will get worse, but maybe something will change. I haven't honestly thought about emigrating. For now, I am not considering the idea. I was born here, my parents, relatives and close friends are here. I can't leave them. But I am not going to say never, because anything is possible in life.

Oksana Asaulenko

Journalist, 45

Perm

Interview recorded in May 2022

On either February 24 or 25, I wrote the following on social media: “In the end, the sick bastard attacked Ukraine. Eternal, indelible shame.” During these days it became extremely clear to me that I will never disown these words. The past two to three months have shown that this was the terrible truth.

Certainly no one in Russia today can feel free, but I still try to be a free person in these conditions. We see what happens with people who want to live in freedom. Many of them end up facing persecution for various reasons, even ridiculous ones. Some people are forced to emigrate from Russia. I think that this is a tendency that should be fought.

The authorities not only want to prohibit us from expressing our opinion. They want to prohibit us from expressing, analyzing and writing anything, which are my professional skills as a journalist. Undoubtedly, I should forget calling things by their name, but I am prepared to answer for my words. I am still going to call a war a war, and call the murder of peaceful civilians and children as I see it.

I cannot live how they want me to live. During these past months I have seen how terrible things have happened to

people. In fear they have expressed their solidarity with the aggressor. People approve silently. We are all hostage here, and in such a situation the city begins to speak. I walk the streets and see the writing on the pavement or building facades: “NO TO WAR,” or someone crosses out the “Z” sign. We will continue to resist whatever the case. They won’t put everyone in prison, but the agony could last for a long time.

I don’t want to emigrate anywhere. I am half Ukrainian. I have relatives and friends there in Odesa and Zaporizhzhia. Despite what is happening there now, I understand that we here in Russia are in a terrible situation — in a human sense. Here is a people and a nation that possesses lesser strength as it now frees the world from evil. On the one hand I am proud that I have Ukrainian blood in me, there’s a feeling of shame and hellishness in my soul. I understand that things will become better there, and they will remain bad here, so people like myself are needed more here. We will all have to pay for this war.

Nuriya Mukhametdinova

Women's activist, freelancer, 39
Ufa, Republic of Bashkortostan

Interview recorded in April 2022

I was on a business trip on February 24. I felt terrible hearing the news, and I felt that I absolutely had to do something. I understood that this would make me feel better. When I returned to Ufa, I found some allies, including some young female students who also could not stand the thought of doing nothing. In March, we went out to the Friendship of Nations House with a placard reading, “STOP FIGHTING IN UKRAINE”. Someone photographed us, so we did not manage to remain very long out on the street. Our action had lasted all of seven minutes when plainclothes policemen arrested us.

An officer of the Center for Fighting Extremism questioned me. Certainly, I was less fortunate than the others, because they did more than just confiscate my telephone. They threatened me with force, and would find ways to take it from me. They yelled at me and used verbal pressure. They forcefully took our fingerprints and wrote up basically the same protocol for everyone, claiming that we took part in a forbidden action.

At the court trial, not all of us were able to defend ourselves. They simply did not allow us into the courtroom and then later told us that they had fined us. They sentenced me

as a participant in an unsanctioned protest and gave me a fine that was 5,000 rubles higher than that which the others received. It's clear that they especially disliked me.

Our protest has an effect. First of all, I felt better. I felt that I had done nothing against my conscience, that I had done something righteous. All of us are role models for someone, and people see that I am not afraid, that I go out and express my position. And if I, Nuriya, am not afraid, then why wouldn't I do it? Our action did not have a massive effect, but it did have a purpose.

Everything that has happened in the war is simply awful. Sometimes when I am falling asleep, I think, "What, we are at war with Ukraine?" I have already thought through the stages of grief: denial, anger and bargaining, but I cannot reach the stage of acceptance. I am stuck in the deepest of depressions. All of this simply does not come together in my head, it's terrible.

The first thing I thought when the war began was, "Time to get the heck out of here". This is the most logical reaction to loss. On the other hand, I don't know a time when activism was so necessary and required as now, when we can still somehow influence people and get them to change their views. Yes, this is a bit of a suicidal position. The numbers of denunciations are increasing as if we were back living in 1937 or in a book by Remarque. All the same, I am an optimist, and feel that it's necessary to remain in Russia, at least while there is still no real threat.

Vadim Khrushchev

Student, 21

Kazan, Republic of Tatarstan

Interview recorded in March 2022

I went out and participated in a protest right on February 24. I had no possibility to prepare for it, though. I had no posters, nothing. The invasion began so unexpectedly, that I simply snapped and understood that it's necessary to go out into the street and express my opinion.

A bit later I saw how students from all universities in Russia, from Moscow and St. Petersburg to Ekaterinburg, were collecting signatures against the invasion of Ukraine, and writing their own appeals. I thought that I also would like to sign such an appeal from the Kazan Federal University, but it turned out that the university put out no such appeal. I decided to write one myself, because I know just how many people at the university were against the war. I wanted them to see that they were not alone, that we are together, and we are many. In the text I wrote: "War has touched all aspects of life, including the sphere of academia and education. Free scholarly and academic activity is not associated with bloodshed and suffering. In becoming an aggressor and continuing military activities in the neighboring sovereign nation, our country has become an outcast and dooms itself to isolation."

I think that fewer instructors signed the appeal than students. That is obvious, as many of them are more afraid than the students. Instructors hardly participate in student chats. With whom will they seek out a connection so that they might see the appeal and decide to sign it?

From among my own instructors there were never any “hurrah-patriots” who would call people to go and fight on the front and protect Ukraine from Nazis. I very much like my department, because all of my instructors are fairly free-thinking. They do not fear to speak out on political, social and other such topics. We never discussed Ukraine during class, but in general I liked the atmosphere which reigns within the department. It’s possible that in other departments the instructors discuss the necessity of the Russian invasion, but I personally have not had to deal with this.

I very much hope for the signatures of the instructors. This is very important. If the bureaucrats can call us students stupid children, that we don’t understand what is happening in the world, then the instructors, professors, docents and doctoral candidates can refute that. If we have their signatures, then the magnitude of our appeal will increase sharply.

After we disseminate the appeal, we can expect anything to happen. I know for sure that I study well, so if someone wants to expel me, then they will have to try very hard to find an acceptable reason for it. When I wrote this appeal, I realized just what kind of consequences it could carry, and I can say with certainty that I am ready for them.

As with many activists, my family does not understand what is happening. The propaganda has a strong effect. Even when you are making arguments, they always find a way to oppose you. It’s very difficult to fight against this, but I am

slowly and surely trying to do this: I bring up facts and try to prove them, while not entering an argument. I do not advise any young person to get into arguments with his/her own parents. The times are very hard, and we all need to stick together. Parents are the only people who will never abandon you and truly love you.

I understand that I can't simply snap my fingers and the situation will change, and the war will end, and the Russian troops will leave Ukraine because of my appeal. The main purpose which it pursues is to draw university leaders' and the Tatarstan leadership's attention to the problem, and most importantly, to express the relationship of students to what has happened in Ukraine. I want all students who are against this war to know that there are many of us together. The stronger we stick together, the harder it will be to break us apart¹⁶.

¹⁶ A few days after the publication of the anti-war letter, Vadim Khrushchev suspended the collection of signatures due to a new law on "disseminations of fake information" about the Russian army. Some of the students who signed the letter said the university administration threatened with criminal liability. Khrushchev decided to resume the collection of signatures. On March 17, the student's apartment was searched: his phone was seized. He refused to answer the investigators' questions, citing the right not to testify against himself.

Sergey Maryin

Human rights activist, 66
Saransk, Republic of Mordovia

Interview recorded in July 2022

I knew that Putin could begin a war. For me, the news about the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory was emotionally difficult to bear. I could not understand how this could happen. In the beginning I did not believe it. I thought this was a bad joke. My grandfather died near Leningrad in 1943, and my father grew up fatherless. While still a child I read the book of the Tomsk author Vladimir Kolykhalov, “Wild Sprouts”. It described the childhood fate of my father. There are many similarities with his own life. I would like other people to meet such a fate as portrayed in the book. And this was well behind the front. What happened on the front itself... We watched the film chronicles where fighter planes shot at columns of escaping refugees, and homes were destroyed by bombing. For me, war is the worst thing.

No one among my family and friends is for the war, although there are some who support the Russian presence in the Donbas. Everyone understands that they can end up in trouble for expressing their views against the “special operation”. The authorities are forcing the nation to remain silent or express their support. They have begun to track down those who do not agree. As a human rights activist, I am one

of their first targets¹⁷. When I write on the internet, I understand perfectly the threat I face. Independent people are the greatest threat to the current authorities.

During my trial I told the court that bringing me to trial for my internet commentary is a violation of the Russian Constitution. I reminded them that after the fall of fascist Germany there remained tons of documents which helped condemn not only the Nazi leadership, but ordinary people. One of my old acquaintances is a judge. For a long time now, in cooperation with the authorities, she has acted in a not entirely legal way when it concerns my cases. I will continue to express my opinion. I will continue to stage my own protests, but I will wait until autumn. I am not going to pay the court-ordered 40,000 ruble fine. I simply do not have the money. My monthly salary is 12,000 rubles.

Personally, I am not thinking of emigrating from Russia. I am of more use to society here. As I said earlier, I will demonstrate with the flag, with the flag of the human rights activist.

¹⁷ On June 30, 2022, the Oktyabrsky District Court of Saransk found Maryin guilty of “discrediting the army” and fined him 40,000 rubles. He was charged with posting on a social network in which he stated that “Russian troops <...> are killing civilians.”

Artur Ablatypov

Self-employed, 32

Ufa, Republic of Bashkortostan

Interview recorded in May 2022

I went out and recorded an anti-war protest because I am not afraid to say the forbidden word, “war”. What is happening in Ukraine, with its use of heavy weapons, military technology and major loss of life, cannot be called a “special operation”. Our government constantly flips the meaning of ideas. It always finds some slang which will distort the scale of what has happened. This is aimed at people who watch television every day and drink it all in. My mother was like that. Every day she would watch television. Talking with her and her parents reached a pivotal moment. I listened to their pro-government positions and understood that I should do something. I wanted to show that not everyone supported the war. I also saw that in Ufa not all that many people came out to protest in public like in Moscow or Saint Petersburg. There have been no mass anti-war actions here, nor are there any opposition politicians as in Moscow. Despite this, people who go out to express their point of view in public are arrested. And I wanted to become a part of these people, to get closer to them and show that I share their views.

For more than 10 years, I worked in Bashneft (a regional Russian oil company). I left a year ago when the company introduced a policy of forced Covid vaccinations, which I was

against. No one much discussed politics at work, but whenever the company management found out that people did engage in political discussions, they held preventative conversations with them. Back then, I had something to lose. When you work in a state enterprise, you do the same thing day in and day out. You follow the established routine. You're afraid to do something to violate that consistency and monotony. And you don't want to lose your nerves and leave your zone of comfort. For me this state of being formed limitations on me, and because of that I never took part in any public actions.

After I left work, I felt more free and began to take an interest in political opposition movements. I experienced an epiphany. In 2021, I went to a demonstration in support of Alexei Navalny. I was not arrested, which is what I wanted, because I feared falling into police hands. After leaving my job I was unable to find decent work, and now I understand that I cannot return to Bashneft because after my anti-war protest, I would never pass the background check.

On April 25, I went out and picketed. I had no lofty slogans on my placard; I wrote only "NO TO WAR" on it. A war is being conducted and I am against it. I am a pacifist. Military actions and physical force are unacceptable to me. If there is a conflict between two people, I consider it a fight and want to resolve it. There is always a point of compromise, whatever the nature of the confrontation. And compromise can be found not only between two people, but also between groups of people and governments. Everything can be resolved, the question lies only in how much effort must be exerted to peacefully resolve the conflict.

To tell the truth, I was very afraid to go out and protest. I am a man, but I cannot say that this act did not produce

emotions in me. When you stand there for 10 minutes, though, you begin to get used to what you're doing. Nothing happens, and it seems that nothing is going to happen. People walk by, look at you, young people often offer words of support, and there are some who disagree with what you're doing. I understood, of course, that the police would arrest me, that they would pressure me and so on, but I did not expect so many police vehicles. It was a veritable "holiday" of flashing sirens. I did not intend to resist, and they grabbed me under the arms and led me to a vehicle. I had the feeling that the police were provoking me and wanted to knock me over. They asked me if I had any sharp objects or narcotics even though I did not look like a criminal. When I began to exit their vehicle on their instructions, they shouted at me, "No sharp movements! We will find handcuffs for you now! Don't even try to run away!" As if I was going to try to run away.

The police arrested me with my wife, who was filming the protest on her telephone, as well as some acquaintances and Lyaisan Sultangareyeva, who also stood in our picket. The police took us to police station #7. They wrote up reports for me and for Lyaisan accusing us of "discrediting the army"¹⁸. They issued warnings to my wife and one of our acquaintances. For my wife this episode was a great shock which caused her blood pressure to rise at the station. The police were asking me, "Who is paying you? Where did you get the idea that a war is on? Have you seen that we have martial law here? Do you have any connection with Ukraine?" They checked me in their database and were surprised to find that

¹⁸ Ablatypov was fined 30,000 rubles under the article on "discrediting the army".

during my entire 32 years, I had never once been charged with any infaction for my behavior. When they wrote up the report they said, "Now you're under administrative arrest. Next time you'll do time in prison." They said that I was goofing around here while "our boys" were fighting the Nazis. I needed to rally around them. They created an atmosphere that made you feel as if you had betrayed your country.

After our protest ended, my wife's parents began to worry about me. They feared for me and began to wonder what would happen to me. They told me I should no longer engage in pickets or take an interest in them. But my mother shared my position. I suggested that she stop watching Russian state television. At first, she resisted, because you get used to feeling constant tension from what they show you on these state channels. When this disappears from your life, you feel an emptiness. But when they tell you about "radioactive dust" as if it's as ordinary as buying potatoes, that's not normal at all. My mother has cable TV, so my television recommendations focused on channels without propaganda, those that don't cause stress, like travel shows, nature shows, and informational shows. At first this did not help her, but after about a month I could see that it had.

Earlier my wife also did not support me. When the war began, we had disagreements within the family. She did not see the sense in talking about the war. She said that we had more important things to deal with, such as taking care of the family and earning money. But I spoke with her, and the influence of my everyday family opposition produced results. Whereas she had been neutral, now she is more supportive of my position.

Maksim Suprun

Programmer, 32

Cheboksary, Republic of Chuvashia

Interview recorded in July 2022

I am a programmer. I have held opposition views for ten years now. I do not approve of our government's actions, but I do not consider myself an activist, I do not often express my opinion through active expression, for example, protests or rallies.

I don't remember February 24 exactly, that day I had a lot to do, I was working hard. My reaction came a few days later when there was finally time to read the news. I asked myself — "Seriously?" I didn't believe it until the very end. It felt like all of it was unreal.

I am scared, but the fear appeared when they came to me with a search warrant, when I became a witness in a criminal case on false mining¹⁹ and when statements were drawn up²⁰. But even then, I understood that right now, it is much harder for people in Ukraine. And then my fear faded into the background.

¹⁹ On May 5, Suprun's house was searched in connection with a deliberately false report of an act of terrorism.

²⁰ Maksim Suprun was twice fined by the court for a total of 65,000 rubles for "discrediting the army" due to posts on social networks.

As regrettable as it is, repressions have become commonplace for us. On the other hand, this is also bad for the authorities, because they carry out repressions in order to frighten; but when every day you hear that someone has been detained, someone has been searched, someone has been charged, there is no longer any fear of reprisals. But ultimately, I believe that people should not get used to fear.

Earlier, in my circles, there were people who supported the war in Ukraine, but I stopped interacting with them. It makes no sense to talk to them; it's a waste of time — you can't convince them. It does make sense to talk to those who have doubts or those who do not strongly support what our authorities say.

For now, I will not continue expressing my anti-war position — it is too dangerous for me. I have already been fined twice under the “discrediting the army” article. In addition, I am a witness in a criminal case about false mining.

If we talk about the future, then our country is in for big shocks economically. Grocery prices have risen quite a bit, I had to cut costs. Sanctions will touch every person, even if some people do not feel their consequences now. I think that the Putin regime will collapse, and Russia will cease to exist in the form in which we are accustomed to seeing it.

Yevgeniy Prokin

Internet marketer, 26

Perm

Interview recorded in August 2022

During the first days of war our family experienced a huge range of negative emotions. At first, my wife and I simply did not want to believe what was happening. On February 24, I woke up quite early and saw the first posts online about the invasion and bombing in Ukraine. We hoped that this was all someone's joke, but how can we talk about any kind of jokes here? From the first days of the war, and even now, we are experiencing constant anxiety. I don't know about other people, but it's very difficult for us to feel calm when your country has turned into a terrorist.

What kind of attitude can you have towards war in general? War is always a tragedy and a catastrophe for all participants. There are no good wars. Therefore, we are categorically against this madness.

On April 30, I went to protest with a poster "WE CAN'T BE BRAINWASHED BY PROPAGANDA, PEOPLE THERE ARE JUST LIKE US". How can you be silent? Obviously, this will not change anything, but while I was standing there with my sign, people nodded to me, waved, someone even approached and thanked me, because they themselves are afraid to speak openly. I went out to at least show people that they are not alone.

I was detained by the police. No one is surprised by this; they detain nearly everyone holding slogans or demands. In fact, we are detained for nothing, for an article thought up by some clown that contradicts the Constitution. At the police station I realized that everything was already decided as far as I was concerned, so I did not even bother arguing with the policemen; they calmly filed a complaint against me for “discrediting the army”²¹. Although the detention was illegal, they treated me politely.

I was afraid to go out and protest, I’m still scared, but, as they say, the eyes fear, but the hands do. For the most part, protesting is scary not for yourself, but for your loved ones, who may have problems because of your actions. I would like to do more, but I have no right to put my family at risk.

Our courts do not work. During every court session you feel that the judicial system has no consideration for you. They are told to do something, and they do it. That is why this is not a real court and there’s nothing to say about it, certainly there are no polite words to describe it.

I have no parents; I grew up with my grandmother. Unfortunately, she is very susceptible to propaganda. My wife supports me, our views are the same. I don’t have that many friends, but it just so happens that they are all disgusted by war and power. Among my acquaintances there is no one who supports the war. I am sure that there are many such people.

Clearly, nothing good will happen in the future. I think they will continue to tighten the screws; although it seems that they can’t be tightened much further. I think that dis-

²¹ The court fined Prokin 30,000 rubles for “discrediting the army”.

content and tension will begin to grow in the national republics, among the smaller nationalities. It is obvious that years of racism towards these peoples and the deterioration of the quality of life in the provinces will have a corresponding effect. In general, there will be a deterioration in the quality of life everywhere. Until we change ourselves and our ruling powers, nothing will change.

We have decided that we will leave. We can discuss all we want about who should save us, who should do what, but how can we act when from every side you have denunciations, snitching, repressions, fines, imprisonment, and pressure? When all the opposition has been mowed down, when all those who could resist have left. We want to help our country, but we can't do this while such inadequate people are in power.

I want to continue my anti-war protest, but as I have already said, I have no right to put my loved ones at risk. Therefore, I will continue my solitary protests, but outside of Russia.

Richard Rose

Photographer, activist, 37

Kirov

Interview recorded in May and July 2022

I found out about the war on the morning of February 24. At first, I did not believe it, and I began to check the internet and realized this was the truth. I was shocked and could not hold back tears. I knew that sooner or later war would break out, but this was still a big shock for me. I had hoped till the end that this was some kind of mistake. I began to think of how I could help ordinary Ukrainians and young guys who had been thrown into the hell of war. For that reason, I began to conduct my own information war on Instagram. I made my first post that very day.

On the evening of April 14, I went to meet my wife after work. A “Gazel” bus stood near a pizza parlor. Some armed soldiers jumped out of it and knocked me to the ground and started to beat my legs with their clubs. They shouted, “Lie down! It’s the FSB!” They put me in handcuffs and threw me onto the floor of the bus. Two or three minutes later they stopped in front of a pharmacy where they apprehended my wife.

They brought us to the Kirov Oblast FSB headquarters, and took us to separate offices. They took away my phone and demanded my password, but I did not give it to them.

They began to threaten that they would beat my wife, and that they would take away our child and place it in a state orphanage. At that point I became afraid and gave them the password. The police held me at the FSB headquarters for 12 nights, and then took me to the Investigative Committee, which informed me that they had opened a criminal case against me²².

My interrogation proceeded in a civilized manner. The investigator treated me politely. I had been assigned a lawyer. In his presence they confiscated my phone, which they later slipped back into my pocket before my trip to the Investigative Committee. Later, the court chose to extend a more repressive measure against me in the form of incarceration under guard. The guards in the investigative cell treated me neutrally. They were interested in my views, and sometimes I revealed them. Some of them were surprised that people were imprisoned for them.

I do not regret publishing my post on Instagram. Unfortunately, speaking the truth in Russia has always been dangerous, and it's become even more so. I regret that my wife suffered in all this. I am afraid that all of this could end in a world war. I am afraid for my family. Until the start of the war, I thought that sense would prevail, that Russia would not attack Ukraine. But I was fooling myself, possibly, in maintaining this protective stance. After the war began, even people who shared my views broke from me. They took

²² Richard Rose was charged with spreading "fake news about the army" after he had posted a video about the murder of civilians in the city of Bucha, Kyiv region of Ukraine. Rose's wife, Maria, was also charged with spreading "fake news". In April 2022, Richard Rose was detained. His wife was forbidden to leave the house at night, as well as use the Internet and telephone.

off their masks, and from a few of them I heard such views like, “This was unavoidable. Soon we will be victorious and everything will be fine.” I am numb from such thoughts. How can you say that this was necessary? How is this necessary — the death of peaceful people, the destroyed cities, that in the 21st century brother would turn on his own brother? Or not even a brother, but at minimum against a neighbor, who is also a human being?

At the same time, I am proud of those who have come out against the war. I wish them health, happiness, the preservation of their freedom, and the treasures given to them from birth. Fight and you will be victorious. This is to everyone who is fighting for their ideals, for freedom, independence and democracy.

I have always had a negative attitude toward war. I condemned Russia’s actions in 2014, when under Vladimir Putin, it began behaving as an aggressor country. Putin is crushing Ukraine for its love of freedom and defiance. If the example of a free and independent Ukraine lies right across the border, his regime will never survive. The most important thing is that the leading countries of the world maintain their influence and do not allow for the eruption of a global war.

Those who have fallen will not return. Russia, in its current form, will soon see its end. The crises, the corruption, the war, the poverty and repression will bring about its collapse. If you are able to even temporarily leave the country, then leave and don’t say that I didn’t warn you. Save yourselves, save your loved ones, your relatives and friends.

Fairuza Kanafieva

Entrepreneur, 40

Almetyevsk, Republic of Tatarstan

Interview recorded in August 2022

I have many old, close friends in Ukraine. One of them has had his house destroyed; others have become refugees. This war, for them and for myself as well, is a very terrible thing. My friends have descended into hell. I was afraid that they would stop talking to me, but that did not happen. They understand that in Russia the authorities persecute people who think differently, and threaten them with fines and imprisonment. I cannot sit idly and remain quiet. This would be a betrayal to myself. I am convinced that the time will come and people will understand just what evil the Russian authorities have committed. They have committed a crime against humanity. You know, eight years ago I felt sorry about the “Luhansk People’s Republic” and “Donetsk People’s Republic”. I thought, why don’t they just join with Russia as was the case with Crimea? Why are they not called “independent”? Then I thought about how until 2014 there was peace and order there. I read a lot, talked a lot with my friends in Ukraine, and read journalistic investigations of events there. After the Malaysian passenger plane was shot down and I read the expert reports on the incident, I understood what was really going on and where all this was headed.

On August 12, I left the house to go and buy dog food when someone called me and said, “The police are looking for you.” I was surprised, and didn’t even think that this might be connected to my VKontakte posts. The police came to my parents’ home. Obviously, they thought I still lived with them, but that is not the case. After that, two officers came to my home and said that they “are obligated to question me” and that I “needed to go with them.” I thought that they would take me by force, and I didn’t want any scene out in the street, so I went with them. At the police station the officers showed me my VKontakte page and asked if it did indeed belong to me. They showed me the individual posts and asked why I wrote them. In one of them I had posted a photo of “The Apotheosis of War” by the artist Vasiliy Vereshchagin. To it, I added the words, “No to war”. There was also a repost of the World Congress of Tatars resolution. It didn’t contain my own opinion, but I fully agreed with it. (In a publication of the government of Tatarstan in exile, there is an appeal not to sign the resolution of the World Congress of Tatars which supports the Russian invasion of Ukraine.) The police considered all of this to be “discrediting the army”. I do not consider myself to be a criminal, so I wrote in my protocol that I did not agree with the charges filed against me. I asked the officers if I had harmed anyone with my posts. They answered that no, I hadn’t. They said that no one had denounced me, and that they had found my posts by their hashtags.

I spent three hours at the police station. They wrote out a protocol, and that very day filed my case in court. They wanted to set my trial date for the next day, but I said I would not come because I would not be able to find a lawyer in time. They then set a trial date for August 15. I came on that

day, but they sent me away, telling me that the protocol had been filled out incorrectly and they had returned it to the police. They didn't tell me when the next trial date would be.

This was my first experience in dealing with the police. It's obvious that they wanted to frighten me, but they did not succeed. I don't understand what I have to fear. There is no discreditation in any of my words. From childhood we have been taught that there should be no war. Every May 9 we are against war. I also say that I do not want war. And for this they have opened a criminal case against me? I am right, despite all this. When the police took me home, I said to them, "Listen, are you not trying too hard? Is this really a serious case for you? There are so many real criminals around. There will come a time when people like myself will be rehabilitated and deemed to be victims, and you will become the criminals." They answered, "Everything is possible."

I got into a fight with my parents because of my views. They are victims of Russian propaganda and can recite quotes by Putin from the television. We argued once again in the beginning of March and did not speak to each other for three months, but thank God, things are better now. They also understand that arresting people because they voice opposition against the war is absurd. My mother asked me not to write anything more, and said, "We understand that we are little people. We can't do anything here." However, I think that failure to defend the truth is a crime. Those who remain quiet are guilty. They fear that they might lose their job, and others fear that their children might be taken away, and others don't have money to pay a fine. Who is able to pay a 40,000-ruble fine when their monthly salary is 25,000 rubles? For these reasons they remain quiet. Many people

support me, but ask me not to write openly. They give me advice and say that they stand in solidarity with me. Muscovites write that they could not act as I do. I want people to hear me and begin to think logically.

People are now proud of how the comments to my posts on my VKontakte page threaten me with denunciations and fines. This surprises me. They are proud of something that in reality is shameful. Online there are so many fraudsters extorting money out of people, pornographers, and those who are encouraging young people to commit suicide. Such people should be brought to justice first and foremost. But the police don't mind using their time to sit around and investigate those who think about the war in Ukraine.

There is still one more reason for all that has happened, and that is people's material situation. For the most part people live in poverty and don't see any sense in life. Prices continue to rise and many can barely make ends meet. And suddenly, that person writes a denunciation, and he begins to feel like he is a master, that he can influence events. I do not justify the acts of such people, but rather I am trying to understand them. This is a sign of the degradation of our society. Could I have ever imagined ten years ago that the residents of my city would react to my wishes for a quick end to the war by saying "I want to put you in prison?" Me, the mother of three children. Everything seemed fine, but as it turned out, it was only fine on the surface. We live in a state where we have no right to express our opinions. People are cruel to one another. Homophobia and xenophobia are everyday phenomena. We live in a sick society.

One more thing that upsets me is that women and mothers support the war. Every fallen soldier is someone's son,

grandson, or spouse. Women should be the first to say no to this war. No one should die, much less die at war, but we do not learn from history. In reality, no one has truly explained to us just how monstrous the situation was inside the country in the 1930's. How much school class time has been devoted to the 1930's and the history of the Gulag? Who has explained to us why all of that happened? No one. And that is what is now repeating itself.

I sometimes imagine Germany in the initial phases of fascism. Each time I think that at that time in Germany there were also women who had children. I try to imagine what they thought and did. It's impossible not to understand what this is all leading to. In those times in Germany there were also people who protested the war; they certainly had to be afraid. This is exactly how I feel now, and why I am trying to stop all that is happening.

I feel very sorry for those who have died on both sides. Many of the victims are still children who are 20–22 years old. They are supposed to study, marry and have children, but they never will. Who bears the responsibility for this? The state, which is sending them to their deaths. I have something to lose. I have three children. My oldest son already has his own family, and I have two minor children whom I am raising on my own. I believe that with time, things will be fine again. At least I will not have to be ashamed in front of my children and grandchildren. I will say that I tried. The most important thing is that my conscience remains clear.

This past spring, I asked my children's teachers not to involve them in any pro-war activities, such as war appeals, or patriotic song festivals. A child should study and gain knowledge in school. I do not want my children to become victims

of propaganda. I speak a lot with my children about the war, and against fascism and protecting the family. We watch and analyze films. I do not worry about them. They are different.

No one should participate in this war. Many soldiers from Tatarstan are contract servicemen who receive money to fight. This means that any words about stability and development inside the Republic are nothing but a pretty facade. How come after these conscripts fulfill their military service, they do not return home, but return to fight? How come they have neither money nor an apartment? They remain in the military to earn money. Who lives well in Almetyevsk? Only the directors of Tatneft Oil Company. The average wage in the city is 25,000 rubles. Older Tatars work from morning to night, and keep small farms, but the young people do not want such a life.

And what about these national battalions²³? How are those to be understood? They imply sending the representatives of already small nations to their death. It's very unfortunate for the Tatars, Bashkirs and the Buryats. There will be no men to form families, and women wishing to marry and have children will remain alone and single. If there were no war, this could all be different.

²³ At the beginning of the summer of 2022, dozens of Russian regions announced the recruitment of volunteers for contract service in military battalions. They are being sent to the war in Ukraine. In the ethnic republics, the battalions are called either in an ethnic language or by the name of local famous warriors. So, in Tatarstan they are called "Timer" (from the Tatar "iron") and "Alga" (from the Tatar "forward"), and in Mari El — "Eden" (the hero Eden, according to a legend, helped Maris to escape the raids of nomads from south in the Middle Ages), "Poltish" (Prince Poltish led the Meadow Maris in the fight against the Russian tsar Ivan the Terrible) and "Akpatyr" (Mari national hero, founder of the first Mari village and holder of the Mari faith, who lived in the 16th century). Experts call the creation of such nominal battalions "covert mobilization".

I don't know when and how this will end. The civilized nations are helping and supporting Ukraine. Russia has become isolated. Those who watch television think that they are strong, but with time they will have less money and less food in the refrigerator. I hope that they will begin to ask, "Why did the war begin? Why are people dying?" I want for this time to arrive as quickly as possible. I don't even want to imagine that this could last for several years. I am tired of this hell.

Vladimir Avdonin

Psychiatrist, narcologist, activist, 30

Samara

Interview recorded in May 2022

At the end of February, I was very bogged down by work, renovation work in my apartment and in other everyday matters. The news of the war caught me by surprise. In the beginning I experienced short-term shock, followed immediately by the understanding that it was necessary to do something. We cannot remain silent because all of us, the citizens of Russia, bear responsibility for what has happened. On that very day I began preparing for my individual protest, and the next day I went out into the street.

At my protest the police refused to identify and introduce themselves. They took my poster but said that no one was going to arrest me. It was necessary to protest because even according to the Constitution of Russia, the source of power in the country is the people. Whether we like it or not, we all bear responsibility for the policies that the state conducts. If you do nothing and remain silent, then you become an accomplice to the crime. And I do not intend to become an accomplice to Putin's crimes, and consider that with all that I have done during the past ten years, I need to remain in the country and continue to express my opinion.

People in Samara have stopped going to demonstrations because they have been made afraid. And it's not the point

that the regime was able to frighten people, it also was able to do what in psychoanalysis is called impairment. The regime put the idea into the heads of people that public acts are senseless, that they will lead to nothing except more repression. All my friends who have left the country tell me that I should also leave, but I do not even have a foreign passport now. But I am not afraid and plan to go out to protest actions in the future.

My parents have never been supporters of Putin, and they do not support the war, but they feel that participating in any kind of public political protest is dangerous and unwise. In their opinion it will lead to nothing good, and because of this, they do not support me. When the police searched my apartment on March 6, they searched my parents' apartment at the same time²⁴. This was a big shock for them and my younger brother, when they were awoken by people wearing masks and holding automatic weapons. My brother has since developed sleep problems, and my parents have blamed me for this.

As for my colleagues at work and acquaintances, I have encountered with them exactly what Soviet dissidents encountered. They are afraid to have anything to do with me. They fear that if there are any more searches of my apartment, then the police will find their names and addresses and they in turn will become victims of repression. Because of this, even those people with whom I have had relationships for many years have cut off contact with me, and I have begun to feel very alone.

²⁴ On March 6, Vladimir Avdonin's house was searched in connection with a criminal case on an allegedly "false report of an act of terrorism". A protest was planned that day.

I feel that Russia has turned into a terrorist organization, and many countries are absolutely correct in their consideration of Russia as a terrorist state. Three weeks after I went out and conducted my picket with a poster reading “GLORY TO UKRAINE, PUTIN TO THE TRIBUNAL”. It was encouraging to me to see that the majority of Western countries held the same position, and that they had begun preparations for such a tribunal and collection of evidence of Russian war crimes, including those committed in Bucha.

I am convinced that Putin will lose the war because he is not fighting against Ukraine, but against the entire world, and peace will win over war. But it seems to me that after Russian troops return from the occupied territories to their own homes, that the authorities will tighten the screws inside the country as much as possible, and repressions that we cannot even imagine will take place. Those who publicly oppose Putin will find life very difficult. I do not believe that the Putin regime will be destroyed by internal pressure or intervention, but more likely, a long and exhausting war fought between Russia on one side, and the entire world on the other. And the citizens of our country will have to pay for this war for many decades to come.

Igor Savelyev

Writer, 39

Moscow and Ufa, Republic of Bashkortostan

Interview recorded in June 2022

February 24 gave me the feeling as if some phantasmagorical bubble, which had been expanding and expanding over the past years, finally popped. Events turned catastrophic. Their scale can be compared to 1917 and later years, when part of the Russian people perished during the civil war and then later in Stalinist camps, and another part left the country, and yet another part tried to adjust to it all.

In June, I announced my “Z-less City” project. The authorities have thought up a thousand ways to punish people for the slightest anti-war expression, so we have invented the 1,001st method to come out in opposition for those who are not prepared for fines and repression. This method is similar to the “Italian strike”, whereby protesters do not do anything considered illegal. For example, at a state enterprise where the “Z” symbol is visible, a dossier of various violations from environmental to labor rules is accumulated. Active citizens bombard the enterprise inspectors and supervisors with complaints about these violations. The inspections that the enterprise supervisors must conduct then complicates the operations of the enterprise. Such methods (as of now there

are no other lawful ways to do this) will come as punishment and a lesson to those who hang the “Z” symbol in their institutions. Hang a “Z” and you’ll pay for it, I wrote on Facebook. To some extent this idea resulted from despair, because since February 24, I and many other people have been overcome by total confusion. We have passed all the classic stages of grief with the exception of acceptance: shock/denial, anger, bargaining and depression. It was incomprehensible to us just what to do and how to influence the situation.

While in Moscow at the end of February, I went to an anti-war demonstration and was arrested. After that I stopped going to demonstrations. I considered other forms of protest possible in our times when all free speech about the war has been quashed. What can you do to be heard? I wrote articles, expressed myself on social media, but none of this has had much effect. Yes, it’s all a bit absurd too, because the struggle against the “Z” symbol is not as important an anti-war task as the task of stopping the war altogether. All the same, I recommend the idea, all the more so because it offers certain guarantees of safety for those who decide to pursue it. I also view this idea as a form of psychotherapy for people who want to do something against the war, but do not want to fall victim to the repressive machinery of the state.

The state began this “Z” campaign, and a certain part of the population that harbored a revanchist spirit, caught on to it. We, of course, are fighting against this “Z” because we cannot fight directly against the war. We cannot stop the advance of Russian troops. It turns out that we are taking out our anger at this symbol by the principle of Freudian transfer. “Z” for those against the war is the essence of the horror of what is happening in Ukraine. It reminds us of something

much like the swastika, the symbol of the Nazi Third Reich, and it is taken as a sign of aggression. Accordingly, whoever agrees with the current aggression, hangs the symbol in his vehicle, or on the walls of a building, and so on.

Quite a few people believe what they see on television. They believe the war to be just, but they are hardly going to support it actively and hang a “Z” in their vehicle. For this reason, it seems to me that there is a fairly strong division among the war supporters themselves. A large part of the population has become used to simply believing “the party and government line”, and for the most part, the war in Ukraine has not provoked great emotion among them. But there are those who are emotional about the war. For them, the “Z” is the symbol of future victory, and forms the basis of their motivation and activities. This results from, I assume, their own world view that has arisen since the breakup of the USSR.

For now, I have no concrete plans on how to express current events in my art. The confusion which arose in me after February 24 has also influenced my artistic self. The war has destroyed the foundations on which Russian literature was based. Everything, or almost everything that literature discussed in the past, has lost all meaning. As a writer, I consider it a bit of good fortune for myself personally that no book of mine was published immediately prior to the war. I did have some book plans before the war. I was working on a few ideas for novels, but after February 24, I realized that they had lost their meaning. Besides, among my writing projects was a book on a topic that suddenly became irrelevant, one that did not reflect the mood of current events at all. It was that book that I had actually begun to write.

As a result of the war, Russian literature feels compromised, just like everything else. For example, my book contract with a French publisher was canceled in January. What happens now with Russian books and the publishing industry is a complete mystery, so for now I am writing for the desk drawer, that is, for myself. I think that literature will begin to bear the weight of the new laws about “discrediting the army”, of the narrower permissible themes on World War II, and the like. Of course, there will be problems with the artistic coverage of the most recent events of our history. There’s a whole lot to censor there.

I think that repression of my initiatives is possible, but I relate to this fairly calmly because facing a sentence for “discrediting the army” is not such a terrible thing. It’s not worth remaining silent for that. As a writer I must think about my reputation with the understanding that to a large extent, it will depend on what I do now.

Vladimir Kuznetsov

Actionist/artist, 37

Penza

Interview recorded in August 2022

The events of February 24 did not especially surprise me. I had already talked with many people who were saying several months earlier that war would erupt. All the same, this “readiness” did not make the shock any easier to take. I fell into a depression. My interests and activities cover marketing and publishing. In 2018, I began to produce YouTube projects on the topic of tolerance in general, and LGBT in particular. We filmed shows in an entertainment style, and conducted interviews and surveys. Last year our account where both of our projects were recorded, was blocked and deleted, and because of this, our group fell apart. At that moment our LGBT channel was the biggest Russian-language program on YouTube, although we did not concentrate solely on LGBT issues.

In May, I established a second channel, “TheOut2.0”. In the following slogan, which I thought of more than a year earlier, “Art must not remain silent”, lies the idea of obligation. This all is, of course, a bit pretentious, but this mission is the obligation of all creative people. Cowardice inspires no one, and I want to inspire and support people. I set up this channel for the simple reason that I want to discuss that

which worries me with the help of art, and without mixing in hype as an end in itself. We want our activities to inspire millions of people and for everyone to know about us, but I understand that right now it's enough that my own circle of friends knows about this. I also understand that the art form in which I have chosen to express myself is not understandable to everyone, and not everyone will respond to it. After the 2019's amnesia performance, creativity in general became a means of self-discovery for me. I would not like to limit my activities only to the anti-war theme. Overall, I have created only two works that are devoted to this topic. My "NO" Performance, in which three girls dressed in Russian, Belarussian and Ukrainian flags respectively make love on a white sheet which symbolizes the canvas of history, is more about acceptance. And the other performances concern freedom of speech, societal relations and power in general.

Does fear rule now? In general, now in Russia, life has become frightening. If you think about this constantly and do nothing about it, then you lose your self-respect. You don't want to feel like some mute zero. We wanted to put on our anti-war performance back when all of these "exercises" were taking place near Ukraine's borders. Already at that point this performance had a sharp tone, and the propaganda was ratcheting up the hatred in society. Many people felt then that "something was going to happen". At this point we did not think in terms of an anti-war performance, seeing as the term "special military operation" was not taken seriously, but rather as a work that concerned human relations. From conditions of general hatred, can peace and harmony grow? It seems impossible, possibly because some kind of superhero would be needed to bring this about. Because of this, in

the “NO” Performance, the girls were not portrayed as the national flags, but were dressed in superhero costumes in respective national colors.

In March, the thought of reconciliation took on new meaning. This “operation” took on more than one front. From the beginning of the war, society was becoming more and more divided, both sides fighting with one another, one group of people fighting with another. By the idea of reconciliation, I understand an internal reconciliation from within society, among ordinary people, which with every new day and every additional death requires ever greater effort to achieve. Now you understand: reconciliation either takes 100 years to achieve, or everyone needs to become a superhero to achieve it. It’s upsetting to realize that people do not accept your message when you think they should, including those who are close to you in your creative efforts. In April-May, I tried to get to know more actionists and activists because it seemed that creative people should now try to find ways to unite and support each other. However, because of the hateful propaganda in this country, even creative people were divided, even actionists and activists. Because of this, in the “NO” Performance and in my actionist work in general, I consider the most important message to be that of reconciliation.

It seems to me that the country has two paths, neither of which leads me to any illusions. The first path ends in Russia becoming like North Korea. The second has the surrounding environment merging with Putin and the existing regime. And how to achieve this? By allowing what is happening now to happen. However, taking into account how the regime changed in the 1990’s and who came to power afterward,

nothing good will come of this process either. The war will end someday, and people will need to heal their souls. I believe that this will occur with the help of art, and because of this, I will continue to express myself as long as I can, and in whatever way I can.

Yulia Babintseva

LGBT leader and activist, 36

Perm

Interview recorded in June 2022

Each and every one, in their own way, is experiencing a deep crisis of the consequences brought on by the “special military operation”. We are all in this now. Even before this, LGBT people had a hard life: a high level of homophobia and rejection in society, resulting from state policy²⁵. That is why many LGBT people are accustomed to leading a closed lifestyle and not talking about their identity.

According to surveys of the LGBT community Rainbow World, in recent years, only 10% of LGBT people are open about their relationships. They do not reveal their LGBT identity at work, at home, and on social media. Now, in addition to homophobia in society, we’ve also got repression

²⁵ In 2013, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law against the “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations” among minors. As a result of the law, films and advertisements have been censored, activists targeted, and groups offering support to the LGBT community shut down. Russian rights activists and international watchdogs have said that the law has encouraged discrimination and abuse against Russia’s LGBT community.

On July 18, 2022, Russia proposed a bill to ban the broadcast of LGBT content. The law proposal seeks to add changes to existing Russian laws against propaganda and the publication of topics like suicide and drug use, adding “the denial of the family as a social value” and “non-traditional sexual relations” to the list. The Russian State Duma hasn’t yet passed the bill.

against LGBT organizations, an economic crisis, and violence witness trauma. In such a situation the general level of anxiety simply cannot but rise.

LGBT people feel anxious. In the first three months after the “special military operation” started, we received twice as many requests for psychological assistance, sometimes seven requests a day. This is an awful lot: almost twice as much as before the war. In March-April 2022, we started additional psychological support groups, where people shared their experiences, told us how bad, anxious and depressed they felt, they were afraid to be alone, and their relationships with loved ones deteriorated significantly. They said it was scary to plan their lives for longer than a few days. Now many say that they are tired of the war and are trying to find strength in simple everyday things: walking, meeting friends. They avoid talking about politics and try to live here and now.

I, like all civil activists, as an LGBT person, feel very vulnerable in Russia. In the current world situation, on the one hand our position becomes newly complicated, but on the other hand — interesting. I understand that our work is more important now than ever.

I am sure that things will be better in the future, long awaited changes will certainly come, and human rights will become a primary value for our country. The only question is when. It is important to believe in yourself and not give up, to be with those you love, to support one another, to ask for help when you need it and to help when you can, to live, enjoy life, to give and receive love. I don't think about leaving Russia. I feel that I am needed here.

Denis Mokrushyn

Student, 22

Kazan, Republic of Tatarstan

Interview recorded in June 2022

On February 24, I was working on an architectural project. It was about 5:00 in the morning, and no one was sleeping. It was then that the first reports came in about the Russian army moving onto Ukrainian territory. In the beginning we didn't understand what was going on, we were all in shock. We realized that war had begun, that we were the aggressor, and this shocked all of us. No one had expected this, including me. I realized then that our previous life had ended, and a nightmare and madness had begun.

We discussed what was happening with friends and relatives. Our entire dormitory was talking about this, everyone was in shock, some of the guys had tears in their eyes. This was a tragedy for everyone, and we understood that sooner or later, this would affect everyone. I first thought this might happen back in November 2021, when the news came through that our troops were amassing for exercises. Everyone understood that this might happen, but we all hoped for the best, no one actually thought the regime would do this. This is a fatal step for the regime itself!

My attitude was definitely negative, it was formed back in 2014–2015. It was then that I was following Boris Nemtsov,

he often appeared on Dozhd TV²⁶ and Ekho Moskvyy²⁷. Even then I viewed the annexation of Crimea negatively, I did not support it. I am categorically against war — it is death and tragedy. It's an obvious fact: we attacked, we arranged it all, and this is a war and not some kind of “special operation”.

On February 27 I went to the Kazan city center to hold a solo demonstration in memory of Boris Nemtsov. I had a poster with his portrait and the slogan “the truth is stronger than bullets”. I wasn't scared, I didn't think there would be any consequences. I understood that the repression machine was working full force, but still...

After my solo demonstration on February 27, I began to publicize my anti-war position on social media. I stopped going to public functions. I already suspected then that my solo protest had been noted and it would not be wise for me to be too public again²⁸. I thought I could participate in other activist efforts, and help those people who continue to take part in protests. I understood that if I went out again, there would be more serious consequences.

²⁶ Dozhd also known as TV Rain, is a Russian-language independent television channel. It was launched in 2010 in Russia, and since 2022 is based in Latvia. In March 2022, the Russian government blocked access to Dozhd in response to its coverage of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The channel relaunched from studios in Riga, Latvia on 18 July 2022.

²⁷ Ekho Moskvyy was a 24/7 commercial Russian radio station based in Moscow. It broadcast in many Russian cities, some of the former Soviet republics (through partnerships with local radio stations), and via the Internet. On 1 March 2022, it was taken off the air by Roskomnadzor as a result of its coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On 3 March, the Board of Directors voted to close the station down.

²⁸ On February 27, 2022, Denis Mokrushyn was detained at a rally in memory of Boris Nemtsov in Kazan. He was fined 10,000 rubles for organizing an unauthorized event.

It started in April. Investigators came to my university to take an explanatory statement from me and to check my documents. They asked for my phone number and social media accounts. I told them about myself but did not say anything that others don't know. This ended the conversation. Then later in May, the dormitory director called me and told me we needed to go to the police station to deal with suspicion of vandalism. When we arrived at the station, the police showed me screenshots of my Instagram account. The dorm director became indignant and said to them, "Why are you lying, just say that you need a person to suspect of vandalism." At the police station I did not tell them anything and pleaded article 51 of the Constitution (Nobody shall be obliged to testify against himself, his (her) spouse or close relatives, the range of whom shall be determined by federal law.). This ended the conversation. On May 20, investigators came to the university. I was taken to the police station and a statement was drawn-up about my "discrediting the army" in my Instagram posts.

Many are afraid to speak or write their views about what is happening, but in my circles, no one supports the war. If someone had doubts at the beginning, now their opinion has changed dramatically. I personally do not know a single person who could support this. My mother absolutely supports me and shares my point of view. She was in the same state as me when all this started, we went through it together. She understands everything, she follows events, we watch the same news, the same channels. My mother is a huge support for me right now. My grandmother initially felt that it was better not to stick out, but she felt this way because she worries about me. Initially she had doubts, but my situation

changed her mind. She began to understand what was happening and was very bewildered by it all.

My father never lived with me, but he does keep in touch with me. He also has a negative attitude toward the war. As far as I know he has relatives from Ukraine, and he himself comes from there. There is no disagreement on this among my relatives. On the contrary, it has brought us together even more. Our relationships were always good, but now they are especially good. I wouldn't have made it without my family.

I will continue to speak openly about what is going on. I can't keep silent; it makes me uncomfortable. I plan to channel that activism towards students' rights, because students are the future of this country. If we repress them now, forbid them from expressing their opinion, it will be a huge tragedy. We have to do something about this.

I do not plan to emigrate. Yes, we did have these conversations in our family, but it's probably better for me to stay here. I just can't imagine what I could do somewhere abroad. It is important for me to be among the people who are here, to experience the real situation with them and be aware of the real picture. If things become oppressive and I come to understand that it is necessary, then yes, most likely I will have to emigrate. But so far, I do not see any such dangers that would force me to do so.

Ilmira Rakhmatullina

Choreographer, 30

Ufa, Republic of Bashkortostan

Interview recorded in July 2022

On the eve of February 24, my sister and I were watching a video on Ilya Varlamov's YouTube channel²⁹ about whether the invasion of Ukraine could actually happen. Experts concluded that such a possibility is fantasy. On the night of February 23–24, my sister and I could not sleep, we were very anxious. We learned about the beginning of the war immediately. Of course, we were shocked and horrified by what was happening. We immediately said to one another — this is what Putin has brought us to, this is what his long reign has led to, he imagined himself an emperor and decided that everything was possible for him now. The silence of the Russian majority has also brought this on.

Five months have passed since then, and my position has not changed in any way. I still have a very negative attitude towards the war. Problems are not solved like this in the civilized world, they are solved through dialogue, which our ruler does not know how to do.

From the very beginning of the aggression, I began going to demonstrations. First, we went together with my sister,

²⁹ Ilya Varlamov is a Russian journalist, entrepreneur and youtuber.

she fully shares my opinion. On March 6, we went to the square near the Bashkortostan hotel — we were immediately detained by the police; dozens of people were detained in Ufa then. We were given a warning and told that if we went to demonstrate again together, we would be charged with a group offense. After that, we decided that I would go to the protests alone³⁰.

Since then, I have been to several protests. Of course, I'm a little scared, but I understand that I'm demonstrating for a just cause — and I'll continue to do so. At least maybe someone will change their position from indifference and start protesting, and for this you need to show your position to other people so that they do not just sit idly by and fall into despair, thinking that nothing can be done. The main thing is that they do not get used to what is happening in Ukraine, nor to their helpless state. We should not get used to neither one nor the other, since such a state and silence simply kills a person both literally and figuratively.

I see that, compared to the initial stage of the war, fewer and fewer people in Russia participate in anti-war protests. They are afraid of reprisals against themselves, they are afraid for their families. I don't have a husband yet, no children. Maybe that's why I'm so brave. I do not blame people for their fear, but I still think that we cannot simply remain silent. At least, I can see from my protests that I'm not doing this in vain — passersby express their support for me: some-

³⁰ On August 18, 2022, Ilmira Rakhmatullina's sister Amrita was attacked by two unknown men and severely beaten. "They were yelling all the time that my sister Ilmira "will regret it" and "she is selling our homeland by supporting Ukraine," said Amrita Rakhmatullina. A few days later, the girls left Russia, fearing for their safety.

one shows a thumbs up, someone shows a heart, someone is interested in the details of what is happening and the topic of my protest. This once again convinces me that you must talk to people, you need to communicate your position to them.

I have a fairly large social circle, in which there are people of different ages and professions. And for the most part, these are people who do not support the war in Ukraine. There are — or rather, there were — also supporters of aggression, and I tried to explain the injustice of this war to them, but I could not get through to most of them, they were thoroughly zombified by propaganda. I simply left these people behind; I was unable to communicate with them anymore. However, I still managed to convince some — not so much with my eloquence, but by sharing with them links to interesting, important and, in my opinion, objective publications about what is happening.

As for those people who stick to their pro-government positions, I think that real events will convince them. When they will feel on their own skin the consequences of our country becoming a pariah, that it is subject to sanctions and their standard of living is falling. It will take time for them to feel this, perhaps half a year, because the thinking of such people is filled with inertia. So far, they just say “We have already experienced a lot, we’ve had all kinds of crises, both in 1990s and in 2008, we will survive this time as well,” they say.

The sanctions, of course, affect both my family and our environment. The price of food is rising, and we are unable to pay for many foreign goods and services via the Internet. Everything has become much more expensive. The younger generation meanwhile is accustomed to a normal lifestyle, to good food and nice clothing. But personally, I am ready to

endure the consequences of the sanctions, because I think that all this is nothing compared to what is now happening in Ukraine: there the Russian dictator takes people's right to life away from them, they are dying under bombs and rockets.

I am not going to leave the country. I love Russia, I want to stay and live here, hoping that the country will change for the better: the government will change, democracy will come, people will have the right to vote. And I want with my own — albeit modest — efforts to help bring this time closer. Against the background of other prominent oppositionists, real heroes of the struggle against the regime, I may seem insignificant as an ant, but I do what I can, and my conscience is clear.

I often think about what will happen to Russia in the future. I don't want to believe in negative scenarios, although I admit they are possible, but I don't want to think that in 50 years we will have the same situation here as in Iran or Cuba. That our planes will stop flying, because of the degradation of the technical base, the number of accidents in transport and in production will rise. Because of the decline of our entire infrastructure, people will starve, freeze, and die from the lack of medicines and modern medical devices and services.

I want to think that everything will change for the better. We have a large, resource-rich country; the main thing is that normal people come to power. I very much hope that at least in 15–20 years Russia will crawl out of this hole into which it has fallen, and its restoration will begin based on normal, human principles. My parents brought me up this way: in our family there has always been an understanding that there should not be a sole permanent power in the country, there should be opposition, fair elections, and democracy.

Ildar Sultangirov

Bank employee, 49

Ufa, Republic of Bashkortostan

Interview recorded in May 2022

I am the father of two daughters. My older daughter is 21, and the younger is 10. The events in Ukraine greatly worry me. I understand how this affects our children and their future, and not only in the short term, as this time things will have serious and long-term consequences. This is the first reason why I went out and conducted an individual protest with a placard reading, “PEACE IN ALL THE WORLD. WORLD PEACE”.

The second reason is that it is incomprehensible to me that it's possible to enter a foreign country and conduct some kind of special operation there. Such things do not make sense in the head! It's hard to find words to describe it. The events of February 24 seemingly did not touch us, but I understood right off what happened, and how long and how badly this will affect us. I have an economics background and I understand perfectly what the consequences will be. We see people dying, and it's frightening to imagine what is going on there. In the past Ukraine and Russia were countries with about the same living conditions. These people lived quietly and peacefully. I have not been there, but I cannot say anything about whether there are Nazis there, but I see the refugees and war victims and it's bad, it's awful.

Our country cannot exist isolated from the rest of the world. If we take any kind of industrial production, we see that inputs come from various countries. When companies leave Russia, people think, “So what’s the difference?” However, without the products that these companies produce, the entire production chain can collapse. Another kind of logic also applies: If relations are damaged among many countries, then nothing good can come from this. The destruction of economic ties, that’s isolation. We don’t have to look far for examples, we all know the example of North Korea. I remember what the 1990’s were like, and nothing good awaits us. All of this will hit people, their wallets and lead to higher prices. In addition to this, the reparations for war damage in Ukraine will rest on our shoulders.

I conducted my own protest at the Gostiny Dvor, and specifically along the wall dedicated to the Universal declaration of the rights of man. It was frightening, but I got used to it and stood there for about an hour. Most people did not react. They simply walked by. It was raining, my poster got wet, and I ended my protest and went home. The police came for me the next morning. From what I understood, they observed me as I walked to the parking lot and got into my car, and from my license plate they were able to determine my identity and find my address. I was frightened when they rang the doorbell to my apartment. When this happens to you for the first time, it’s unpleasant.

In general, I am a law-abiding person. I have never broken laws and have been charged with anything. I haven’t taken part in protest actions with the exception of the “Stop Kronoshpan”, which concerned the construction of an Austrian sawmill in Bashkortostan.

At the police station, I wrote in my explanation that I did everything myself. I myself thought up the message on the placard, and wrote it myself. At the bottom of the protocol, I wrote that no matter what these events are called, a “special operation” or even “war”, this is war. White is white, black is black, and round is round. When people start saying the opposite, it arouses disbelief and misunderstanding. Everything has its proper name.

I feel that as a representative of the aggressor country, I am to some extent implicated, although I had no such ideas of my own. I am a peaceful person. I did not want war. I want to live in peace and harmony. These feelings inside me have built up over time. After I went out and protested, these feelings left me and I felt better. I understand that I will face sanctions, but what I was able to do, I tried to do.

Alena Podlesnykh

Lecturer, 40

Perm

Interview recorded in June 2022

On February 24, I felt terrified. It felt as if the world had collapsed. It was impossible to find positive or even neutral words. As Leo Tolstoy said, war is unnatural to human nature. In the first days of March, I saw an announcement about a project in which teachers from Russia were invited to teach Ukrainian children virtually, in order to support them. I offered to teach journalism lessons. I teach Ukrainian teenagers once a week, most of whom have fled Ukraine and live abroad.

The first lessons were very difficult, I could hardly hold back my tears as I was teaching. It was March, and one girl wrote what was happening in Mariupol. It was very difficult to discuss such texts. We agreed with the students that although it is difficult, we would try not to touch military topics; the students wrote about the environment, about their favorite music.

I am in touch with Irina, the mother of one of the girls from Kharkiv. She told me that her daughter has a negative attitude towards Russians, but the mother is trying to show her that not all Russians are bad. I believe that my task is to show Ukrainian teenagers that most Russians are not enemies of Ukrainians. Among the students, there is a girl

who has not missed a single lesson. She is the only one who speaks to me only in Ukrainian. We do not always understand each other, but other students help to translate. I adore this girl named Alexa — and I think the feeling is mutual.

In early June, I went to the Prosecutor's office and the Inspectorate for the Protection of Cultural Heritage Objects because a banner with the letter "Z" was hung on the Officers House building. I was not afraid of any consequences. What kind of ramifications can there be when I point out that a banner is placed illegally on one of the buildings in the city center? It doesn't matter what its content is. The Perm Garrison Officers House is a cultural heritage object of regional significance. Why is there something hanging on it? The monument should be free to view, banners on monuments are not allowed. The banner is hanging directly above the entrance to the building, and this can be unsafe for visitors to the Officers House.

It is forbidden to place any graphic images on the facades of buildings. This is outlined in the Perm municipal rules. Therefore, I submitted another request about the banner to the Prosecutor's office so that they would check the legality of such a display. I never thought about any consequences for me because of this; I was just trying to enforce the law. At the same time, in my requests, I didn't analyze the content of the banner, I didn't criticize it, I simply pointed out that it was placed illegally. And here's an interesting detail, I don't analyze what is written on the banner, but the officials do. They would immediately remove any other banner, but this one they did not.

I received a letter from the Inspectorate for the Protection of Cultural Heritage Objects that the banner will be taken

down immediately. The next morning, I called the Inspectorate to clarify what “immediately” means. The inspector replied: “On the same day the Officers House administration receives a letter.” But half an hour after this conversation, notices appeared in the media saying the Perm Territory authorities did not allow the banner to be removed. It turns out that the banner will remain in place in violation of the law.

After that, I began receiving messages accusing me of betraying my homeland. I didn’t expect that my legal request to remove the banner would provoke such an avalanche of negativity from trolls. They wrote to me on every messenger where they could find me: they wrote text messages, e-mails, sent requests to friends and called on the telephone. In total I received about 100 calls, messages and other notices. In addition, they tried to hack into my accounts and even my personal account on the Gosuslugi website (unified portal of public services in the Russian Federation). I was able to establish that this was not a spamming program, all this was actually written by real people: probably those who are paid for such work and those who do it because of their convictions.

I wouldn’t call myself a particularly brave person: the feeling of fear is familiar to me, like it is to everyone else. After the incident with the Z-banner, I heard many words of gratitude from Russians as well as admiration for my courage. But I don’t understand what courage they are talking about, I only demanded that the city administration comply with the law.

Those close to me support me, this is an important reason why I am engaged in human rights activities. If it wasn’t for the support of family and friends, I wouldn’t be as strong as they think I am. There isn’t anyone in my circles who is

trying to change my views about what is happening. After February 24, I stopped communicating with some people, but there are only a few such people. Even my mother, who is 70 years old, absolutely agrees with me. I have been lucky with my friends and family.

In the future, I see Russia miserable, suffering and dripping blood.

Alena Bogdanova

Theater school student, 22

Ufa, Republic of Bashkortostan

Interview recorded in March 2022

I am studying by correspondence course at the Ufa State Institute of the Arts to become a director. I was studying in Moscow, but I had to return to Ufa because of personal circumstances. I also work teaching acting classes to adolescents and adults in a state institution. When I was 15, I began attending a theater studio and wanted to be an actress, but then I understood that I wanted to be anything but an actress. Acting is not an independent profession; you're always being told what to do and how to do it. It's not for me. I wanted to create something of my own. At the age of 17, I produced my own theater study called "The System", and then I realized that being a director would be much more interesting.

This study portrays how a group of people move in unison to a beat, with everyone performing identical movements, but at a certain moment one girl begins to show different emotions from the group. The others surround her from all sides and begin to show her grimaces which she is supposed to repeat. After a while, the girl takes a suitcase in her hand, one like they all have. She puts on her hat, the same one they all have, and stands in the common row. You need to see this. The skit is a study in movement; there are practically no words uttered.

Theater is the most accessible means by which to express myself. I don't really know how to do it any other way. For me, it's important that my work be sincere. That which affects me, that which moves me, what pains me, all is transformed into pictures, and in my head forms a connected picture which I think about. And then all of this is turned into a performance.

On March 8, I led a performance on the street in the center of Ufa. I put on a Russian national blouse and wrapped myself in barbed wire. When the war began I went into shock. It was frightening and incomprehensible. I didn't know what I could do. This performance came to life in my head, and I thought that this was it; this was the only thing I could do. I stood for about a half hour, even though the police came up to me right off and asked me for my passport. I told them that I didn't have it with me. I had nothing with me except a bouquet and a copy of Tolstoy's "War and Peace". The police didn't know what to do with me. They made phone calls, while more and more of them arrived on the scene. At one point one of them said, "OK, take the barbed wire off of her." As they began to unwind it off of me, passersby began to shout, "You'll damage her neck" at them. I thought, however, that the police action was quite appropriate and that it fit quite well into my performance. When I planned my action, I didn't know how things would go, or whether I would last even for a little while. Of course, I understood that most likely the police would arrest me, and I was prepared for that.

In general, passersby reacted with approval. It's true that a security guard came over to me and began to tell me that I didn't know what I was doing. I answered him, "Do you

have any sons who might go off to this war?” He went silent and walked off. In my family no one knew that I was planning to carry out this action. They found out via a live broadcast on Instagram and became worried about me. In general, they all supported me, but of course my parents worry about me, and it’s very difficult for them. You feel a kind of responsibility for them, you understand that you are upsetting your loved ones. But I could not remain silent. I feel that everyone should be against war. I do not understand those who walk around with the “Z” sign in support of the war. This is some kind of surrealism. On May 9 the government paraded all its weapons and tanks, and for some reason people took joy in that. Do you know who my favorite writer is? Erich Maria Remarque, because he discussed how everyone suffers from war, both the aggressors and the victims.

I was not afraid when the police arrested me. I consider fear to be an obstacle — and I do not have in mind here the fear associated with the instinct for self-preservation. There is fear and love, and they are directly opposite from one another. I am always for love and think that it is silly to be afraid. If you are afraid of something, work through that fear and get it out of yourself. Love of freedom and love for the truth overcome fear. That said, I think that I was very fortunate at the police station. They treated me well. I have read what they do to those arrested in other cities, and thought as concerns myself, what will be will be. I am not some porcelain doll; I won’t shatter from a couple of bruises. And if I die, there will be nothing to fear anyway. All my life I have said that I wasn’t connected with any politics, that I don’t understand anything about it and I don’t want to understand anything. I have always held to the principle that we should

build our own world around ourselves, a world that is righteous, good and radiant. But now it is impossible not to notice what is happening, and it's harder to keep out of politics. And building any world around myself has become outright impossible.

After my performance I received calls from the Institute containing strange questions. For example, I was asked if I had any Ukrainian relatives. My grandmother is Ukrainian, but she lives in Russia. During my childhood I visited Lviv and Kyiv, but I don't speak Ukrainian. I don't consider myself to be a representative of any specific nationality. None of this is important to me. It's not important which country you come from; it's important to be a person and not be indifferent to crime and force. I don't have the money to donate to charity or mass media, but I can express my view. I am not afraid of being expelled from the Institute. That means that it might be necessary, as it is not a place for which I am prepared to sacrifice my principles.

If the Institute kicks me out because of my action, I will be very sad because I very much like my work, but hey, I can organize my own theater studio. Of course, my performance is a part of my work. It is a creative act and not intended to offend anyone, despite the police judging me for it³¹. I am against all war and force, and now I am very ashamed that my country has become an aggressor. I do not call anyone to rise up, but if we all sit quietly, the situation will become worse and worse. We can stand for what we have, but really, we all have nothing.

³¹ On March 14, 2022, the Kirovsky District Court of Ufa fined Bogdanova 30,000 rubles for "discrediting the army".

I love our country for Chekhov, Stanislavsky, and Mendeleev and for its beauty. That which I do not like is not connected with the country, but with the state. Now I find myself in a state of suspension. I feel like the authorities have tied my hands and feet, because if I conduct another anti-war action, they can wage criminal charges against me, and Criminal Code articles for such actions carry a prison term of up to three years. I understand that I will upset my parents if I go to prison, but I cannot sit passively and watch as my wages shrink and food disappears. I don't know how anyone can have hope for change now, given the harsh propaganda now. Despite it all, I am an optimist, and because of this, I am trying to believe that things will improve.

I have neither the money nor the interest to emigrate. Escaping to Europe sounds good on the one hand, but cowardly on the other. Of course, if I am threatened with a prison sentence, it would make more sense to leave. It would be great if the world were more flexible, and those who are against the war could leave and live their own lives peacefully, while in Russia all the war supporters could remain with their letter "Z". But such is not the case. Actually, I am sorry for the people who go around displaying the "Z" sign. It is not their fault that they grew up in conditions in which it is impossible to understand what is really happening. If I knew how to open the eyes of these war supporters, I would do it. For now, I have my pathetic attempts for change, but if even one war supporter changes his mind and sees things differently after viewing my performance, then I will be very satisfied. And I am ready to sit three years in prison if still more will change their minds.

Denis Vtulkin

Entrepreneur, 41

Samara

Interview recorded in August 2022

February 20 is my birthday, and we celebrated it for several days. When the partying ended, it was very difficult to take in the new reality. I simply could not believe that everything had changed. I felt despair. I wanted to gather my belongings and leave the country the next day. Then I realized that all of my friends, acquaintances and relatives support what Russia is doing in Ukraine. They easily gave up their world view for the payoff of propaganda. Because of this, I became so offended at them and many of my countrymen, that I felt absolutely confused.

I tried arguing and trying to prove my arguments. I know that these people are normal and decent, but it's obvious that the propaganda's strength is so great that their views won't be changed in a few days. It's as though they have some kind of shroud over their eyes when they discuss "NATO bases", and ask "Where have you been for the past eight years?" In the end, after some time, I decided that I was not going to change anyone's mind and took a philosophical approach to their views. During the May holidays I went out on the street on roller skates with a Ukrainian flag around my shoulders. I bought fabric in the store and sewed the two

pieces together. On May 1, I roller skated along the banks of the Volga, and on the 9th I skated around the square where the parade was taking place. Neither time were there any unoccupied police about. They were all assigned to patrol specific places. When they did see me from afar, they would try to lure me over, but I would simply turn around and skate away. And for that reason, they didn't arrest me.

About ten days later my wife and I went to the parking lot next to the Samara Arena stadium. I was going to teach her how to roller skate. Officers of the State Inspectorate for Road Vehicle Safety approached us. They claimed that I was driving a vehicle without a license, and that I had been caught running red lights on street cameras. I answered that I was presently roller skating, and not driving a car, and my vehicle was parked right over there. At that point some officers from the post patrol service pulled up and suggested that I go with them to the police station. I asked why, and they answered, "You were roller skating with a Ukrainian flag draped around yourself." At the end of it all, they had me lying face down on the pavement, after which they took me to the station. They fined me for disobeying a police officer. Later they said that the Ukrainian flag was a "Nazi symbol", and something to that effect was also written up in the protocol. I told them that the state flag of Ukraine represented no such thing.

The court fined me twice 45,000 rubles each for two different protocols connected with my rollerskating with a Ukrainian flag draped across me, and the second for 4,000 rubles for disobeying the orders of a police officer.

In the past, I have had my driver's license taken away, and I have debts to court bailiffs for which they took away

my car. Because of all this, I served three nights in a police station. During one of these nights, they led me to an office where the head of the Main Directorate of the Ministry for Internal Affairs, whose name I don't remember, said to me, "Do you understand why you have all these problems? Are you going to conduct any more actions?" I said that I would not, and most likely, I would leave the country. He answered, "And that's great. We will help you. But if you do anything more, then you will not leave the country."

I participated in an action in May, not based on any rational decision, but simply through an emotional outburst. It was impossible to sit quietly and observe events and not express a view. When you hear news about Deputy Alexei Gorinov or the artist Sasha Skochilenko, then things are becoming frightening. They inspire great fear. I am fortunate that I live in the provinces. Samara does not have quite the police ogres that are found in Moscow and St. Petersburg. By now in either of those two cities, I would have been sentenced to prison.

At present I have neither the desire nor the motivation to conduct any protest actions. And it's not because I am afraid, but because of my family and friends. They are good people, but a bit short-sighted in political terms and in imagining how society should function. Moreover, there is not great support for political action. Fewer people are going out less than they did to demonstrations organized by Alexei Navalny. The result is such that you serve your conscience well, but you end up serving several years in prison for no good reason.

When the police officers took me to the station in May, I thought the court would sentence me to 10–15 years in

prison. I had no lawyer in court. No one explained anything to me. I had only managed to read up a bit on legal procedures on the internet. I thought it was good that they didn't sentence me to prison, because the three nights I spent earlier at the police stations convinced me that time in prison would pose a serious challenge. Nevertheless, I am very glad that I went out and protested during the May holidays. At that time, I did not understand how serious the situation in Russia was. I simply wanted to say, "What are you doing, you disgusting rats?" I followed my conscience, but there's no sense in making a martyr of myself.

All of my family and friends say to me something like, "Don't rock the boat. Live normally." And I am in a kind of bubble. There are no people around me who do not support the war. Well, maybe one or two do. I simply have no one to connect to in a psychological sense. It seems to me that the attitude of any person to any war should be categorical opposition. I find it paradoxical that people around me walk around like zombies and do not see where the good is and where the bad is. My stance towards the war has not changed. The only difference is that at first I experienced confusion and surprise, and now I do not.

On the other hand, I think that this war has hastened some kind of climax, or end. If earlier it seemed that this Putinesque swamp was going to last a long time, it now seems that its end is near. It may last several more years, and the people who were fooled by the propaganda will join the protestors. Perhaps economic factors will bring them around. Generally, though, I think the end of this regime is approaching due to this war, and that is after all something good.

Nail Fatkullin

Professor, teacher, theoretical physicist, 67

Kazan, Republic of Tatarstan

Interview recorded in May 2022

On February 24, I thought that the authorities had crossed the boundaries of acceptable behavior. They were committing their own suicide and putting the country at risk. A few days after the 24th, I signed an open letter by academics and scientific journalists condemning the war, containing the following words, among others: “We find it bitter to realize our country, along with other republics of the former USSR, having had a decisive contribution to the victory over Nazism, now has become the instigator of a new war on the European continent.”

On May 9 I myself was the initiator of an anti-war appeal, having realized the monstrous scope of the catastrophe, and the possibility of thousands of dead and crippled, and millions of refugees. This is a terrible misfortune. To remain silent was becoming completely indecent. I wrote the following: “Russia has become an outcast nation. The vast majority of the economically developed world has turned against us. The politics of Putinism have made us into the enemies of civilization. For a very long time to come, we and our children will have to face shame and make excuses for what is happening today in Ukraine. This is all being carried out supposedly with our agreement, in our name and

absolutely on our account, because this war is financed by the state budget, which is formed on the basis of the taxes we pay. (...) I demand the rapid cessation of military action in Ukraine and the exit of Russian troops back beyond the internationally-recognized borders of Ukraine.” I sent my appeal to my colleagues at Kazan Federal University.

Three or four of my colleagues responded to the letter and said they supported my appeal. Four or five expressed a negative view toward it, and about 10–15, whom I met on the street, simply wrung their hands. I did not discuss my appeal with my students. They all know that I am anti-Putin, but I cut off just about any attempts to discuss political issues. On May 16, the acting public prosecutor of Kazan issued a warning to me on the “inadmissibility of violating the law.” In it, he wrote that “in the current conditions of socio-economic tension, and taking into consideration the number of people actively protesting against the introduction of the armed forces of the Russian Federation in its special operation on Ukrainian territory, the dissemination of such letters can have negative consequences, including the potential to provoke the organization of non-sanctioned public actions.”

On May 20, I received an email informing me that the university’s performance review committee had not recommended my promotion to the position of Department of Physics Professor of Physics and Molecular Systems. In the secretariat they explained to me, “Academic metrics were not the question. The questions concerned political statements and their ethical inappropriateness for someone employed in the educational sphere.”

On May 26, a meeting of the Academy Council of Kazan Federal University took a vote in which the majority

(38 versus 28) adopted the decision that for the next five years, I would not be considered for selection for the position of Department of Physics, Professor for Physics and Molecular Systems. The Academic Council considered my behavior unethical for a Kazan University professor. Their objections were raised exclusively in connection with my open appeal. It basically boiled down to this: unethical, political expression addressed to the government, or something like that. In other words, there is no problem with my academic or teaching qualifications.

In such a way, the Academic Council has devised its contemporary credo: “All professors and instructors of the university must unequivocally approve of any decision of the government, unequivocally approve of any decision of the president, and in any way possible express their support and admiration of him. If they do not do so, they do not have the right to work at the university.” As a theoretical physicist who understands the random nature of the world, I did not exclude the possibility of any consequence as a result of my appeal. However, I did think that the university would not react so directly.

How come other instructors do not go out into public to protest the military action? It’s all in the absence of a secure wage and secure job, in other words, people are afraid. Here at the university the faculty is reviewed every five years, and the university administration can organize your termination. In Germany, for example, if you achieve the rank of professor, in principle you cannot be terminated. Then you retire and receive 70–80% of your base pay. I am 68 years old, and I was planning to go on full retirement in a few years, but we have this system with its 5-year reviews. No matter

how well you have performed your job, the administration can arrange it so that the Academic Council will vote to terminate you, and that's it.

When I was a graduate student, I had the opportunity to emigrate. There were masses of job offers at that time. I thought that the USSR was not a leading country by far, but we were no worse than Turkey or Argentina. In those countries a professor earns about \$2,000 per month, and a pension of \$1,000. I am a person interested in science; money is not particularly important to me. I thought that by the time I reach retirement age, that Russia would be on the level of Turkey or Argentina, but I made a serious mistake. Non-linear equalization has occurred, and unfortunately things have turned out differently. We have no growth here in Russia, but rather degradation, something which I did not consider.

So, if I were a professor in Germany, I would be retiring now just like my German colleagues. Currently my salary is 14,100 rubles. So, there you go, I will begin my new life as a Russian pensioner³².

³² In June 2022, the Vakhitovsky District Court of Kazan fined Fatkullin 15,000 rubles under the article on “discrediting the army” for his anti-war letter.

Elena Baybekova

Mathematics teacher, 45
Astrakhan

Interview recorded in April 2022

On February 22 — still prior to the outbreak of war — I went out to the Train Station Square in Astrakhan to form my own protest. I stood with a placard reading: “PUTIN = WAR = CRISIS = DEGRADATION = INTERNATIONAL ENMITY.” I saw how a passerby took offense at my sign and called for the police patrol, so I moved to a neighboring street. The police did not find me there, but later on they showed up at my home and wanted to hand me a summons, but I did not open the door. A few days later, they returned. Another passerby called a police squad, having seen that on my balcony, blue and yellow towels were drying. That was the day the police took me to the station.

My trial lasted literally three minutes. I was sentenced to five days’ imprisonment for “disobeying the police”. They threw me into a cell with a bunch of alcoholics who constantly smoked. I immediately announced a hunger strike, but only on the third day did I manage to officially announce it in writing. Then the doctors began to visit me, examining me for the prosecutor’s office. None of them made any particular efforts to examine me. They didn’t ask how I was feeling, but rather they kept pulling out my cell mates in order to ask them all about me.

These were not the most pleasant five days, and it wasn't even the hunger or the smoke smell. The conditions were awful. Prison presented a form of psychological torture. Certainly, a big part was the dim, dim lights that were painted over red so that barely any light came from them. In the end, my 5-day sentence ended, and I left the prison. It turns out that my guilty conviction made me a malicious slacker. I can't say how much the school directors liked me before this incident, but this incident for them turned out to be the last straw.

I found out about my termination from school from the secretary when I went in for a reference. The school director likes to take care of his own dirty business via other school officials. I already had a disciplinary record at that time. Once I was several hours late for work. The entire previous night I had been on a bus. I had gone to another town to visit my father's grave at the cemetery on the fifth anniversary of his death. The next morning I returned, slept in a bit and went to school still before lunch. I did this during school holidays, so I did not miss one class. Formally, teachers should be in school on such days, but many teachers do not show up for work and do not face any consequences. My case was very different. My late arrival was considered an unexcused absence. The next day I was called into the director's office and was terminated for a "one-time, gross violation of employee obligations".

I already had strained relations with the director after my arrest for my anti-war protest. When I returned to work, the director summoned me to his office and issued me a reprimand for my absence during the five days of my prison sentence. That is, I was in special detention for administrative

arrest, but this was considered an unexcused absence, as if I was guilty. It's obvious that this was when they decided to terminate me.

I undoubtedly had irritated the school directors during the past three years when I worked at the school. As soon as I arrived, I ended the practice of receiving presents from parents. I announced that I would not accept any gifts on Women's Day, March 8, or for Teachers' Day. In schools it's always the practice that parents bring in large gift packages for teachers, who receive them gladly. It seemed to me that someone should end this unpleasant practice, but of course, my stance angered some people.

I was always trying to do something. During summer vacation, I could not sit idly by; I needed to do something constructive. One summer, I wrote 30 letters to potential sponsors in search of financial contributions for new furniture for the teachers' lounge, because the furniture we had looked like it had survived an atomic blast — 40 years without any repair. I bought seven quality chairs so the female teachers would not tear their nylons on them. The entire teaching staff looked at me like a fool; only two or three thanked me. I also bought some flower pots — another story. The children didn't have a ball to play soccer with; they were kicking around wooden geometric figurines. I went to the local Ministry of Sport and explained the situation. They then brought us a bunch of soccer balls as well as two new ping pong tables and paddles. Many teachers don't know how to work the system for such items, which is why I have irritated them all of this time.

Any initiative is punishable, which is why no one rocks the boat by asking uncomfortable questions, and why no

one thinks independently. Literally several hours before my termination, the teachers council met, where the director informed all teachers that they would see their March pay reduced because of reduced financing to the school. What kind of reaction do you think occurred? There are 56 teachers on staff, and not one of them took offense or asked any questions. It was the opposite — they sat passively and acted as if they were grateful that the school was going to pay them anything at all. Thank you for your generosity! I am amazed at how mentally burned out so many people are and how they lack all dignity.

I wasn't always a school teacher. For many years I ran my own business, an educational center. We ran a Montessori school which teaches children through freedom. Unfortunately, in Russia, such kind of work is difficult to perform, and in the end, we had to close the center and I went to work in a school. I chose to teach mathematics because it gives the feeling of stability and you have a sense of the ground beneath your feet. I wanted to teach mathematics so that I would not lose my mind over what was happening in our country.

So here the school director summons me and says, "We've received a complaint that you have been discussing the political situation in Russia." I work with the more advanced classes, and the children naturally ask what I think, for instance, of Vladimir Putin or Alexei Navalny. I have, however, not allowed myself to discuss such topics within the walls of the school. All such discussions with the kids I have nipped in the bud straight away. And I answered the director, "You undoubtedly don't believe that I exercise no internal limits on myself. You, people without a conscience,

have a hard time understanding that, but any of the students will confirm this.”

In our school, as in others, special lessons have been conducted on the topic of what is happening in Ukraine. A few of the teachers have told me how these classes went. In essence, various teachers chose what officially approved material they were going to teach. One young history teacher who understands the entire situation tried to cut some corners and skip over the most radical and anti-academic topics. But another history teacher, a raving Stalinist with a bust of Josef Stalin in his office, believes in the most warped version of history and the current situation that we see on television. During his discussions he literally foamed at the mouth as he tried to prove to the children that all Ukrainians are fascists.

This is especially sad if you think about the role of the teacher in society. Long before I began to picket on the street, I thought that I could not simply just go out on the street and make a public proclamation. I didn't know that I had that in me. And then suddenly I began to do that. Sometime in 2017, I began to stage protests for various reasons. I always kept quiet about my views in school, but on the street I began to talk. One day, some people asked me why I did that. I answered, “I think that a teacher more than anyone else should be honest with himself, his or her pupils, colleagues, and parents, and speak uncomfortable truths. And if I won't express my view, then who will? From whom can we expect honesty if not from a teacher?”

Now I am inclined to think that many teachers believe the official version of events in Ukraine and in the authorities' methods of dealing with Ukraine. Recently I found a piece of paper with the word “Dumbass Ukies” written on it, along

with a few other censored words. The kids wrote just what they thought about Ukrainians, so what is going on inside the heads of the adults? Well, not in everyone's heads. After my termination a few parents and students wrote or called me and offered words of support. When I was in the special detention center, two teachers wrote to me that they fully supported me, but were unable themselves to take a stand the way I did. But that was two, only two, out of a staff of 56 teachers.



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