

---

## Silence Matters: Self-Censorship and War in Russia

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 824

January 2023

Guzel Yusupova<sup>1</sup>  
*Carleton University*

It is hard to imagine that Russian polls and surveys could paint authentic images of viewpoints during wartime. When Russians are asked if they support the war – whether by an independent or state sociological agency – open articulation of anti-war sentiments can lead to significant fines or imprisonment, so answers are guarded. This condition casts shadows over discernments of mass support or indifference.

Arguably, some Russian [polls](#) became instrumental for governmental legitimation by [showing](#) Russians [widely accepted](#) the invasion. Some [showed](#) the rising popularity of President Vladimir Putin, while [others](#) demonstrated his popularity was not dependent on anything at all (not even high food inflation, economic stagnation, inferior military planning, or geopolitical failure). This manifested public support [serves](#) Putin's goal to stay in power, despite his terrific miscalculations on February 24. Other probes [revealed](#) that up to 20 percent of Russians might be openly against the war – an important group of brave citizens, significant considering the heavy propaganda and potential imprisonment for [anti-war](#) remarks.

Most observers mention three groups of Russians: those who support the war, the few who are openly against it (the size of this group is usually estimated by pollsters), and those who are indifferent. I argue that it is important to consider that reluctance to answer polls can come not just from indifference but also from fear, and therefore we need to look at the silent ones more closely – the ordinary people who are accused of indifference rather than the activists. But how to approach them in a war context? A qualitative-leaning approach can thus offer further meaning. Participant observation, in-depth interviews, and autoethnography<sup>2</sup> can offer valuable hidden views and processes in repressive societies such as Russia's. Even if precise estimates are naturally elusive, my sense is that selective social memory and self-censorship remain robust in Russia.

---

<sup>1</sup> Guzel Yusupova is Visiting Professor at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Autoethnography is research connecting personal experiences to wider cultural, political, and social meanings.

## The Politics of Fear

For Russian officialdom, the results of polls tend to be instruments of propaganda serving to maintain political order, yet social scientists in Russia and abroad continue to use them often. In political science, generally, quantitative methods are considered legitimate, while qualitative research often lacks legitimacy. This domination of quantitative research results in regular reliance on compromised opinion polls. Evaluations of regime support are heavily based on polls despite accompanying reservations about their inadequacy as a method for studying a society at war. Other methods can be useful, such as hearing and collecting narratives via fieldwork.

Russian studies' long neglect of ethnographic methods [could](#) be a reason why this war was so unexpected to many. In a highly repressive context such as Russia, these methods may be more useful due to their holistic and context-oriented orientation, [offering](#) a good understanding of how the relationships between people and authorities work. They can explain, for example, why citizens might not be interested in answering pollsters or why they are being hesitant to reveal their preferences even in private in social media communication. Russia's "politics of fear" had been present long before the war and has touched everyone. Ordinary people, too, are experiencing the effect of repression, although in a somewhat indirect way. This has entailed the suppression of any significant mobilization, widespread social media surveillance, and public awareness of it.

It has never been just political activists who are affected by state coercion. As Andrey Semenov at Moscow's Higher School of Economics brilliantly [explains](#), there is no visible Russian collective mobilization against the war because of the "divide between two cultures of protest." Importantly, censorship and self-censorship are mundane practices of ordinary Russians, too, because of repressive and vague legislation that can put anyone in danger simply by mistake. Most of those people whom social scientists call "politically ambivalent" are ambivalent precisely because of the perceived danger of being interested in politics. It is fear and danger, not ignorance, that rule Russia.

A significant part of Russian society appears unable to express their attitudes, but this does not mean indifference. Preference falsification literature [suggests](#) that people lie about their opinions even in liberal democracies. This should not be downplayed when it comes to Russia. In my [previous research](#) on how repression works in pre-war Russia in the case of ethnic minorities' mobilization for support of native languages, I [found](#) that fieldwork observations and occasional conversations with research participants can tell much about the narratives that research participants create during the formal process of interviewing and how repressive context shapes their perception of potential danger coming from the state in their everyday life.

It is commonly acknowledged that Russians do not massively protest because speaking against the war is criminalized, and protesters are often severely beaten. However, the

repressive nature of the regime and its brutality, as well as censorship and self-censorship, were already in action. The atomized nature of Russian society is a prominent trait many scholars have [highlighted](#). This atomization is also a reason for the many small (even often solo) anti-war protests and partisan tactics that stay unnoticed by observers. In Russia's atmosphere of fear, people act individually so others will not report them and protect their relatives and friends. Acts of defiance have existed in various ways, from sending anti-war postcards to all fellow building residents to writing repetitive anti-war private messages on social media networks (a prime example has been on Odnoklassniki). Unfortunately, due to this purposeful (for security reasons) atomization of anti-war protests, these acts are rarely united into coordinated movements and therefore stay invisible to a broader audience, but they are still meaningful for targeted communities.

### **Stories of Depression and Repression**

A significant number of people do not express any opinions publicly or in opinion polls.<sup>3</sup> Analysts usually count them as those less interested in politics or those who lost their interest and returned to their "normal life" after the first few weeks of the war. My own ethnographical observations during March and June 2022 in two big cities and a small town in Russia have let me see that every Russian citizen is primarily interested in how the war is going on and the effects of sanctions. Various changes in mundane life may be tectonic and might be invisible from the outside, but they are sensed well in daily life. The fact that people do not talk about it with acquaintances does not eliminate the fact that the ripples of this tectonic shift are sensed by all who stand on that shaky ground.

Just a few weeks before February 24, on a sunny Sunday morning, I went with friends to the countryside near a provincial Russian city. I took the public bus and heard the following announcement: "Be careful! Do not be misled by foreign agents or act on provocations. Do not believe anyone who calls for protests or any other public actions." People are being warned on public transportation to keep a low profile and be aware of external and internal enemies (even those who just listen to the West). Such mundane reminders have become unavoidable for the Russian people, affecting their attitudes toward each other and the West. The hidden message is: stay silent.

A few months later, I wondered what my friends and contacts in Russia were thinking about the war because, from their social media profiles, it was apparent that they were living their ordinary lives – discussing cats and plants, rather than their country falling into an abyss. It turned out they were actually terrified and cried often. I heard stories about depression, suicidal thoughts, and mental breakdowns. When I went to visit a

---

<sup>3</sup> Decent studies have been performed. Researchers at [PS Lab](#) asked people about their general understandings of the conflict and rationale of being pro- or anti-war. Several media articles dedicated to vivid descriptions of people's attitudes to the war have been published by [Meduza](#) and [Open Democracy](#). Most of these data are analyzed with a focus on people's opinions that they have expressed during the process of the interview.

friend who recently had a child, immediately when I entered her house, I was told that Putin had stolen their moment of happiness. Such strong words surprised me because, on her social media pages, I saw happy photos and no hints of disliking the war.

In another conversation, a man who works in local government says he cries (over the war) only silently because there are surveillance cameras in his office. A former activist expressed his anxiety that people around him keep expecting his open protest or at least some visible sign of his oppositional position, but he keeps silent because the lives and health of too many people close to him depend on him. Another person working in a branch of a national cultural agency said that managers in Moscow presumed staff had anti-war positions and urged them all to keep silent; otherwise, they all would lose their jobs. There was no discussion about being against or for the war; it was initially assumed that everyone was against it. Another city dweller confessed that in the first two months of the war, his apartment became a refuge for those shocked by the news. Almost every evening, people gathered to discuss the war and how to react. He said, "I think a hundred people suddenly paid me a visit over the last few months. All were devastated, even those who previously voted for Putin." Needless to say, he has not posted anything about his guests or his views on his social media pages. Kitchen-talk has returned.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Paradoxes of Memory Politics**

One of the prominent traits of the repressive Russian context is randomness. However, ordinary people are well aware of these acts of repression. Moreover, Russians have the [expectation](#) that repression in the future will become harsher, and what is legal today might be easily illegal tomorrow. One possible explanation for this exaggeration can be the effect of communicative memory vs. cultural memory.

Scholars often write that the "inconvenient historical memory" of the Stalin era is downplayed in Russian culture, and the narrative of the Great Patriotic war is highlighted instead. This is true. However, we also have to take into account the existence of communicative memory, a concept [introduced](#) by Jan Assman at the University of Heidelberg. Those who lived under Joseph Stalin have not yet all died. Their children rule Russia now. They are grandparents of the generation raised in the 1990s. One might not know if their grandparents were repressed or why some of them disappeared, but one certainly knows that it is better not to discuss it and instead to stay out of politics. This is not because everything is fine, but often because there is common sense that this knowledge can backfire harshly ("even the walls have ears"). Why did brave Ukrainians, with those same experiences, overcome those fears (of terror), but Russians have not? The slowly growing nature of repression over the past two decades has resulted in the return of powerful and recognizable aspects of totalitarian rule in Russia today: enemies of the

---

<sup>4</sup> I heard that some aspects of partisanship toward Ukraine have become visible; for example, Yandex Music's random choice option automatically adds much more Ukrainian artists than it did before the war, at least as of April and May of last year.

nations, traitors, and the omnipresence of security services and awareness of state surveillance. We all have our memories of oppressive times, even without having lived in the Stalin era. I heard many mentions of “1937 is back.” These small symbolic labels that come back into our lives from the darkest past keep us from being able to look into the future. The fear of the past paralyzes, especially when it is so present.

This past summer, on a bicycle trip, I came across a monument to victims of Stalinist repression hidden in the middle of a nature preserve along the shore of the Volga river. It was dedicated to the many political prisoners killed at a Gulag camp once located here. Very few around seemed to know about the existence of the camp, although most (of us) grew up in the area. We did not know anything about the camp or how many were murdered there or any details, but we definitely knew it was a terrifying place and better not to end up “there,” which was right here, now closer than before. This is how the selectiveness of social memory is shaped today: we forget, but we remember.

## Conclusion

Not just political activists but ordinary people in Russia have been deeply repressed and, therefore, unable to express their true attitudes. Individual memory is selective, but social memory is too. This selectiveness helps the repressive machine in Russia keep going. The overall atmosphere of fear works even more effectively for keeping people silent than direct repression. It is therefore important to take silenced people into account and not underrate them. As a scholarly community, we can reveal these nuanced views, painting a more granular picture of Russia for those not familiar with authoritarian contexts of how Russians’ inactive positions are shaped and why. It is also important not to underestimate the strength and varieties of repression because they often have covert effects, and silencing the anti-war sentiments of ordinary people is one of them.