

Anti-war demonstrations continue in Russia, despite mass repression

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13 March 2022

Anti-war protests are continuing in Russia, despite aggressive police repression and a battery of new laws criminalizing opposition to the war in Ukraine. According to the Russian-language human rights project *OVD-Info*, which receives funding from the European Commission, 668 people had been detained in 36 cities as of the end of the day yesterday.

The previous weekend saw around 10 times as many detentions in twice as many cities. Since the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, *OVD-Info* has documented more than 14,000 arrests of anti-war demonstrators within Russia, with more than 170 people remaining in custody. Many others have been released but face pending legal actions on the basis of a slew of new laws and regulations that dramatically restrict free speech, as well as limit access to some of the most popular social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

One new restriction prohibits any speech or conduct that would “distort the purpose, role and tasks of the Russian Armed Forces, as well as other units during special military and other operations.” The maximum penalty under the expanded new laws, which attaches to any person convicted of knowingly spreading “false fakes,” is a prison sentence of 15 years. The vague language of the law, together with the severe punishment for its violation, opens the door to arbitrary persecution of any expression of dissent relating to the war.

While the anti-war demonstrations have largely been rooted in sections of youth and the middle class, and are politically dominated by the pro-US liberal opposition, they reflect, if in a very limited and distorted sense, anti-war sentiments that are widely and deeply felt throughout the population. The crackdown by the Putin regime is not least of all aimed at

intimidating the many workers who have not joined the demonstrations, and at preempting the emergence of a genuine anti-war movement within the working class.

The Kremlin has now banned major social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, where many videos and statements opposing the war were shared and watched by millions. Instagram will be blocked starting March 15.

In one short video that has been viewed nearly 10 million times, police in St. Petersburg detained a well-known artist and survivor of the Siege of Leningrad, Yelena Osipova, 77, who was carrying two large hand-made signs calling for the elimination of nuclear weapons worldwide.

Banners at demonstrations have read, “No to war, please,” and “We are for peace.” In videos posted on social media, anti-war protesters chant “Shame,” “Ukraine is not our enemy,” and “Putin, withdraw the troops.” A common chant, which can be heard in the background of Osipova’s arrest, is the simple three-syllable “No to War” (*nyet voinye*), which has also seen widespread use as a social media hashtag (#????????).

A number of audio recordings purporting to capture the verbal and physical abuse of detained anti-war demonstrators circulated widely on Russian-language social media platforms over the past week, gathering hundreds of thousands of interactions across multiple platforms.

In one, dated March 6, 26-year-old feminist activist Alexandra Kaluzhskikh is verbally and physically abused during an interrogation at a police station in Brateyevo, a suburb of Moscow, after attending a rally at Komsomolskaya Square. In another, 22-year-old Marina Morozova confronts an interrogator who douses her with water, kicks her in the arm, and waves a pistol in front of her face.

The tabloid *Komsomolskya Pravda*, which is aligned with the Russian Communist Party, published an article claiming that the recordings are “fake,” warning that anyone distributing them can be subject to prosecution under the newly expanded laws against spreading “fakes.”

The recordings have been published and amplified in sections of the Russian media aligned with the right-wing, pro-western opposition within Russia, including imprisoned “opposition leader” Alexei Navalny. This includes platforms like *Novaya Gazeta*, whose co-founder and editor-in-chief dedicated a recent Nobel Prize to Navalny, and *Mediazona*, a project founded by two members of the punk band Pussy Riot, which has received substantial support from Western politicians.

The reported abuse of anti-war demonstrators at the Brateyevo police station have also been carried in the pro-NATO western media, where they have been used to underscore the authoritarian character of Russia, contrasting it to its allegedly “democratic” adversaries. Notwithstanding their hypocritical expressions of sympathy for the anti-war protesters persecuted by Moscow, there is no doubt that a genuine anti-war movement in the West, when it emerges, will face similarly brutal repression.



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