

The Myth of the Three Percent, or Why You Don't Have to Be a Hero?

Many believe a dictatorship falls once 3.5% of the population takes to the streets. Even Erica Chenoweth, whose research gave rise to the figure, now calls protest size an unreliable predictor of success. The outcome is decided by whether the army and police agree to shoot, and in Russia they will.

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In October 2025, the 1st Western District Military Court in St. Petersburg sentenced seventeen-year-old schoolgirl Eva Bagrova to four years in prison. Her “crime” was putting up photographs of members of the “Russian Volunteer Corps” at her school. She was sixteen at the time of her arrest and in the eighth grade.

At the hearing before the Appellate Military (!) Court on 22 January 2026, the girl testified that after her arrest the security forces had interrogated her with no legal guardian or defense lawyer present and, under intense psychological pressure, had coerced a confession out of her. Eva’s defense pointed out that no one had managed to prove that her act constituted the “justification of terrorism” (Article 205.2(1) of the Russian Criminal Code) or the “facilitation of terrorist activity” (Article 205.1 of the Criminal Code) with which she was charged, and asked the court, on those grounds, not to impose a custodial sentence, as one plainly disproportionate to a childish prank involving some photos printed off on a printer. The court upheld the sentence — four years in a penal colony!

Around the same time as Eva, another young woman fell into the hands of Putin’s enforcers — eighteen-year-old Diana Loginova, a student at the Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatory, better known by her stage name “Naoko.” Her band, “Stop Time,” performed songs by Noize MC and Monetochka on Nevsky Prospect — artists whom Putin’s Ministry of Justice has declared “foreign agents.” Diana was put through so-called revolving-door detention. This is the term human-rights advocates use for a sadistic tactic of the Russian security forces, deployed against innocent people who cannot immediately be charged with anything serious: holding a person in custody indefinitely through an unbroken chain of arrests, re-detaining them the moment they walk out of the detention center after serving each successive short sentence.

Diana, however, got lucky. After her third arrest, either they forgot to re-arrest her yet again or simply hadn't had time to invent another charge, but thanks to this glitch in the revolving door she managed at some point to break free and reunite with her mother. Within a few days the two of them were in Yerevan, and from there they moved on to Europe. Once beyond the reach of Putin's security services, Diana gave a much-talked-about interview to Yury Dud and performed at several major concerts. By fleeing Russia she, unlike Eva, will not be sitting in a Putin prison, and will most likely accomplish a great deal in her new home, given her talent, her popularity, and her remarkable personal qualities.

These were the stories of two ordinary Russian girls. The same age. And evidently like-minded. Each did what she sincerely believed was right. Each, in all likelihood, believed that her voice mattered and that Russia needed it. Each of them, probably, like all of us, had the sense that if only enough people were suddenly to take a firm stand, Putin's criminal regime would at last waver. That sense is fed by the posts that flash across social media so often, citing authoritative academic studies which supposedly show that a successful revolution requires no more than 3.5% of the population.

The 3.5% Illusion, or Why Percentages Don't Defeat a Dictatorship?

The authors of such posts usually offer two lists of countries by way of example. The first contains Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia, Tunisia, and others. These are the success stories. The people took to the streets — and the regime fell! The second list typically includes Belarus, Venezuela, Russia, Iran, Burma, and others. There, too, people came out — but achieved nothing.

The explanation for the difference in outcomes usually comes down to the number of protesters. There supposedly exists a scientifically established threshold of 3.5% of a country's population. If more than that share takes to the streets, the dictatorship cannot survive. And this, we are told, is no mere personal opinion but the conclusion of serious academic research. The reference is to the scholarly article "Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict," published in 2008 by the Harvard political scientists Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth. It is this article that many public intellectuals cite today in the endless debates over whether protest is worth the trouble. The problem is that the picture most of them present is not exactly wrong, but in its oversimplified form it is often distorted beyond recognition.

As is so often the case, the findings of Stephan and Chenoweth's study are not as simple or as clear-cut as some journalists make them out to be. By boiling scholarly arguments down into slogans and discarding the methodological nuances, bad-faith commentators turn 3.5% into a magic number, a kind of enchanted threshold beyond which the revolution's victory is automatically guaranteed.

Yet even Chenoweth herself, in her later work, openly acknowledges that the relationship between the size of a civil protest and its success is in fact far more complex than it had once seemed even to her. In her article (with co-authors) “A Dynamic Model of Nonviolent Resistance Strategy” — Chenoweth, E., Hocking, A., & Marks, Z. (2022). A dynamic model of nonviolent resistance strategy. PLoS ONE, 17(7) — it is stated outright that “campaign size is a more unreliable predictor of success than was previously believed.” Note the wording: not “*an important factor among others*” but, specifically, “*an unreliable predictor*.” For some reason, this crucial caveat very rarely makes it into the popular retellings of her discovery.

Thus, in the eighteen years since the original 3.5% study was published, political scientists have acquired new and more precise data. Moreover, a number of other scholars (Aurel Croissant and Philipp Lutscher among them) have since significantly broadened, deepened, and methodologically advanced this field of knowledge.

So what, in reality, determines whether a dictatorship falls or holds? Why do the conditions of present-day Russia make mass protest there almost certainly futile? And what does all of this mean for us personally — for the decisions you and I make, for our civic conscience, for our one and only life?

Don’t Look at the Numbers, or When the Mathematics of Protest Breaks Down?

Building on the ideas of their 2008 study, Chenoweth and Stephan published a book in 2011, “Why Civil Resistance Works.” In it they analyzed more than three hundred protest campaigns around the world between 1900 and 2006: revolutions, uprisings, independence movements, and the like. The research question was posed simply: which methods of protest work better — violent or peaceful?

The central finding looked encouraging for advocates of nonviolent methods. Peaceful campaigns succeeded in roughly 53% of cases, whereas armed ones did so in only 26%. It was an interesting argument for its time, and it deservedly drew attention. But it was a different finding that truly went viral. The researchers calculated that not a single protest campaign in their sample had managed to mobilize more than 3.5% of a country’s population into sustained participation had ever failed.

The figure “3.5%” proved to be the perfect meme. It is concrete, memorable, and — most important of all — incredibly inspiring. For Russia that comes to about five million people: a lot, but theoretically attainable. And so, in the popular imagination, this simple and appealing formula was born: rack up 3.5% — and claim the dictator’s scalp! But the problem, as always, is simply that this claim bears only the most distant relation to what the Harvard political scientists actually concluded.

First of all, what Chenoweth documented in her study was not causation but *correlation*: successful campaigns tended, as a rule, to be large-scale ones. Nothing more, and nothing less. The fact that all the survivors of a plane crash turned out to have been wearing their seatbelts, for instance, in no way implies that a seatbelt guarantees survival in every crash. In the same way, the sheer scale of a protest may have been not the cause of the demonstrators' success but a symptom of it — or an incidental manifestation of entirely different processes that fell outside the researchers' field of view.

That same year, 2011, the events of the “Arab Spring” reached Bahrain — a small island kingdom in the Persian Gulf. By various estimates, up to seven percent of the population took to the streets — twice the “magic threshold.” The protesters demanded a constitutional monarchy and equal rights for the Shia majority. The Bahraini protests were swiftly crushed with the help of Saudi troops, brought onto the island at the royal family's request. Hundreds were arrested and dozens killed. No revolution came.

Twenty years earlier, in 1991, major uprisings against Saddam Hussein broke out across Iraq following the country's defeat in the war over Kuwait. More than a million people took part — over eight percent of the country's population at the time. The regime responded with mass killings and even used combat helicopters against civilians. The dead numbered in the thousands. After that, Saddam Hussein remained in power for another twelve years.

There are also the opposite examples. Mongolia, 1989–1990, for one. A country with a population of just over two million made a peaceful transition from a one-party communist system to democracy. The protests were exceedingly modest: fewer than one percent of the population took to the streets. Nevertheless, the authorities entered into negotiations with the demonstrators and agreed to multiparty elections. The transformation of the regime not only took place but did so almost without bloodshed.

The three cases described above clearly demonstrate that there is in fact no connection at all between the number of dissenters and the outcome of a protest. This means that we are looking for the answers to our questions in the wrong place. Where, then, should we shift our gaze from the crowded streets in order to better understand who — or what — really determines whether an authoritarian regime falls as a result of civil protest or not?

Not the Squares but the Barracks, or Who Decides the Outcome of Protests?

Picture a game of chess. For most of the game the board is crowded with pieces. You have many moves available, and each one opens up new possibilities. But toward the end of the game few pieces remain on the board — and then the outcome depends not on how many pawns were captured earlier, but on the arrangement of the pieces still in play. Chess players call this phase the *endgame*.

The German political scientist Aurel Croissant has proposed a similar metaphor for the final stage of the confrontation between a dictatorship and mass protest: the “dictator’s endgame.” When demonstrations reach a threatening scale, when water cannon and batons no longer do the job and the demonstrators show no intention of dispersing, the dictator resorts to force. At that moment the outcome of the standoff is decided not by the protesters but by the generals of the army, the police, the security services, and so on.

Broadly speaking, the leadership of the security forces has three options:

- carry out the order and suppress the protest by force — in which case the regime survives;
- refuse to shoot, or even openly go over to the side of the rebels — in which case the regime falls;
- seize the moment and take power themselves — in which case the regime will, of course, formally change, but obviously not to the demonstrators’ benefit.

Whichever option the men in uniform choose, the dictator’s fate at that moment lies in their hands. The people with placards, meanwhile, are no more than a backdrop to the processes unfolding within the ruling elite.

Drawing on Chenoweth and Stephan’s data, Philipp Lutscher cites a statistic that should sober up the revolutionary romantics inspired by the 3.5% meme: nonviolent uprisings are forty-six times more likely to succeed if the security apparatus goes over to the protesters’ side. Let us stress: not forty-six percent — forty-six times! It follows directly that if the security forces do not go over to the protesters, the uprising’s chances of success drop by that same factor of forty-six! In other words, the behavior of the security forces is not one factor among many. It is, in essence, the single factor in a protest’s success, one that vastly outweighs all the others combined.

The question that logically follows is this: in which cases do the security forces fire on their own people, and in which do they stay in the barracks? And this is where it gets most interesting — and most disheartening for those who sincerely believe in the power of popular unity and who, like Gorky’s Danko, earnestly expect to light the way to a better future for their compatriots with their own blazing hearts.

The decisions made by the senior and mid-level leadership of the security forces, in any country and any society, are not a matter of morality, ideology, or any other civic sentiment. For anyone inside the system it is always a purely cold calculation: which course of action will maximize his chances of survival — of holding on to power, influence, bureaucratic weight, embezzled money, his position and career prospects, his personal safety, and so on?

Croissant identifies four factors that shape this calculation.

- *Mechanisms of control over the army.* If the dictator has built a system in which the key posts are

held by people personally beholden to him (relatives, men from his home region, friends, former classmates, and the like), then their fate becomes inseparably bound up with the fate of the regime. Croissant calls this “ascriptive selection” — that is, promotion based on personal loyalty rather than professional competence. For generals of this kind, the dictator’s fall means losing not merely a post but absolutely everything. And so, in carrying out an order to suppress an uprising, they are defending not so much the regime itself as their own privileges and their place within it.

- *The character of the protest.* The broader the protest movement, the more problems it creates for the security forces. If the soldiers receiving the order to shoot see their own relatives, friends, former schoolmates, and other acquaintances in the crowd, they may refuse to obey. A narrow or local protest that poses no great force is another matter. Such a protest is far easier to portray as alien and hostile to society, and it is far easier to find enough men willing to suppress it.
- *Historical legacy.* If the security leadership has been implicated in the regime’s crimes (in repression, torture, abductions, for example), it has a clear idea of what awaits it should power change hands. A tribunal? Prison? A firing squad? For such people, loyalty to the dictator becomes, among other things, a matter of plain survival — not because they believe in the dictator’s nobility or rightness, but simply because they fear reprisals from the insurgents. The more blood there is on the generals’ hands, therefore, the more reliable their loyalty to the autocrat.
- *The internal cohesion of the security apparatus.* To go over to the people’s side or to mount a coup, the military must, at the very least, act in concert. This obviously requires a baseline of trust among commanders, a shared understanding of the situation, a capacity for coordination, and so forth. But if the army is fragmented, riddled with internal conflicts and mutual suspicion, it will be capable of nothing beyond the obedient execution of orders from above — including criminal ones.

According to Croissant’s conclusions, these four conditions form a matrix that predicts the behavior of the security bloc far more accurately than the number of dissenters on some notional central square ever could.

Another scholar, Philipp Lutscher, adds one further layer to Croissant’s matrix — the *architecture* of the security apparatus. His research yields a largely counterintuitive result. One would think that the fewer security agencies there are, the easier it should be for the dictator to control them. One army, one center of decision-making — a clear and intelligible vertical chain of command. But Lutscher found that the relationship between the number of security structures and their loyalty to the dictator can be illustrated by a U-shaped curve.

If the army is wholly monolithic — a single, indivisible structure under unified command — it can go over to the people as a whole, which poses a direct threat to the dictator. Yet

the diametrically opposite situation does not guarantee the usurper complete security either. If there are too many security agencies, problems of coordination arise. They begin competing too fiercely for resources and spheres of influence, they stop trusting one another — and in the end they prove incapable of organizing effective repressive pressure on society. What is more, in a critical situation some of them may go over to the protest and, having won popular support, even come to lead it.

The “golden mean,” for Lutscher, is exactly two directly competing agencies in each domain. In such a system, polarization reaches its maximum. Each structure watches the other and fears that if it is the first to waver, its rivals will immediately exploit the opening. Thus the costs of betrayal appear prohibitive to both sides, which is why both remain loyal to the regime to the very end.

I remember that when, as a staff member of the central apparatus of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I was preparing analytical reports for the government on the situation in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain for 2013, it greatly irritated me that I kept getting calls from the Presidential Administration telling me exactly what to write and how, so that my document would not contradict their own equivalent one, which they were preparing in parallel with me and to the very same deadline. These constant reprimands from another agency annoyed me greatly, and at the time I sincerely wondered why I had been assigned to write these reports at all, if it turned out there were already “more competent” specialists on the very same questions in the Presidential Administration who were already doing the very same work. Such duplication of civil servants’ functions struck me as the most idiotic and outrageous waste of resources. From the standpoint of the rationality and efficiency of the state apparatus, that is exactly what it was. Now, however, having read Lutscher’s work, I understand that the main purpose of that bureaucratic chaos was not at all to improve the quality of governance or the efficiency with which tasks were carried out. The duplication of duties and powers that irritated me as a rank-and-file diplomat — but that ensured competition between agencies and their mutual surveillance in the interest of keeping Putin in power — was, in fact, the very purpose for which dictators create parallel structures. Political scientists call this *coup-proofing* — “protection against a coup.”

Now, armed with this knowledge, we can understand why protests prevail in some countries and not in others. Because in some countries the structural conditions push the army toward neutrality or toward the people’s side, while in others they bind it tightly to the dictatorial regime. Certainly, the number of protesters and the intensity of their mood can influence the generals’ calculation — but only as one factor among a great many.

Exactly what that number would have to be in Russia for the security structures to begin going over to the demonstrators en masse and in an organized fashion remains an open question. How many percent of the country’s population would have to sacrifice themselves in order

to compensate the embezzling generals and officers for the volume of corruption rents to which the usurper of power grants them access? How many photographs would Eva have had to put up, or how many songs would Naoko have had to sing, for the police and the chekists to regard them in earnest as an insurmountable threat to their place in Putin's "power vertical"?

If you answer these questions honestly to yourself, you will most likely be disappointed. Simple arithmetic can sometimes be very cruel. In the "dictator's endgame," it is not the pawns that decide the outcome of the game. Only the heavy pieces do that.

To Shoot or to Refuse, or How Generals Place the Commas?

Burma, 8 August 1988. Because of the elegant date, these events would come to be called the "8888 Uprising." The streets of Rangoon (now Yangon) and other cities filled with protesters: students, workers, Buddhist monks, civil servants, and many others. Their demand was simple — democracy! The military junta led by General Ne Win, against which the demonstrators were rising, had ruled the country since 1962. By various estimates, several million people took part in the protests — substantially more than the coveted 3.5%.

The regime's response was brutal. On 18 September, alongside the protesters, the army took to the streets. The soldiers opened fire to kill, leaving thousands dead. Within a week the protests were completely crushed. The junta remained in power.

For a quarter of a century, General Ne Win had built his repressive apparatus consistently and meticulously. His entire officer corps had been carefully selected on the principle of personal devotion. It was never the most capable who were promoted, but solely the most loyal — together with those tied to the command by bonds of kinship or shared origin. For all these people the regime was not an abstract political construct but a thoroughly concrete business and the direct source of their well-being. For each of them the overthrow of Ne Win would have meant not merely swapping the portrait above the desk but personal catastrophe — the ruin of the lives and welfare of their entire families. And so, in savagely cutting down the demonstrators, they were defending not Ne Win but their own posts and sources of enrichment.

Nor should it be forgotten that by 1988 the Burmese military already had a rich history of repression behind it: the suppression of ethnic uprisings, political assassinations, abductions, and torture. The generals understood that to let the demonstrators win would mean standing trial the very next day. There is one more factor that is mentioned less often: when the time came to disperse the protests in Rangoon, the command transferred in military units drawn mainly from remote regions. The soldiers who actually fired on the demonstrators were not residents of the capital. Not one of them saw classmates, neighbors, or relatives in the crowd. To them these were complete strangers. In the end, every factor in Croissant's

model worked unambiguously in favor of the army's loyalty — and no millions of people in the streets changed anything.

From Asia let us move to another continent — East Germany, a year later: the autumn of 1989. Another country thoroughly weary of dictatorship. On Mondays, people gather in Leipzig. First hundreds, then thousands, then tens of thousands. All of them demand freedom. Coming out of St. Nicholas Church, they march through the streets with a simple slogan: “Wir sind das Volk!” (“We are the people!”).

On 9 October the tension reaches its peak. At one point some seventy thousand people crowd the streets of Leipzig — an unprecedented event for a city of half a million. Erich Honecker's regime prepares a forcible crackdown. Troops, police, and Stasi men are massed in the city. Hospitals take in extra supplies of donor blood.

At last the fateful order is given to the troops — and nothing happens. The army stays in the barracks. The police do not intervene. The demonstrators stroll calmly through the streets and go on chanting anti-government slogans. A month later the Berlin Wall fell.

Why did the East German security forces fail to carry out the order? First, unlike in Burma, where Ne Win ruled single-handedly and personally controlled his army, power in the GDR belonged to the ruling party, not to a single individual. As a result, control over the National People's Army (NVA) was institutional — that is, bureaucratic and indirect. The army's generals owed Erich Honecker personally nothing whatsoever.

A second difference: the GDR's army had never put down internal protests. The 1953 uprising, for instance, though brutally crushed, was crushed by foreign (Soviet) troops. Formally, the NVA was not even created until after those events, only in 1956. In the end the officer corps had neither “blood on its hands” nor “skeletons in the closet” — in other words, no reason to fear a tribunal.

No less important was who stood in the squares. The Leipzig demonstrations were neither an isolated student revolt nor the action of a narrow group of marginal figures. This was the broadest cross-section of ordinary citizens: engineers, teachers, doctors, workers and their families, and so on — people, in other words, practically indistinguishable from those serving in the army and the police. For the soldiers, therefore, to carry out a criminal order would have meant shooting their own close friends and neighbors. In the end the long-standing communist dictatorship in East Germany fell ingloriously, leaving behind nothing but the incurable traumas in the psyche of Vladimir Putin.

Out of the whole spectrum of widely varied cases described in the scholarly literature, I deliberately chose these two as direct opposites of each other. Unlike in Burma, in East Germany all four factors in Croissant's model clearly worked against the loyalty of the security forces.

And now, I suspect, we are all interested in the central question — what about Russia?

The Russian Endgame, or Why Putin's Generals Will Not Hesitate?

The first of Croissant's four factors is the mechanisms of control over the security structures. In Russia these are deeply personalized. Putin has ruled for more than a quarter of a century, and in that time he has built a system in which every key post is held by people who owe everything to him personally. These are not professionals and technocrats who earned their places on merit. These are people whose careers, wealth, and safety are guaranteed solely by their good personal relations with Putin.

The second factor is the history of repression. Here the picture is, predictably, even bleaker. The Russian security forces are implicated in the regime's numerous crimes against its own citizens at every level without exception. Torture in the penal colonies, the fabrication of criminal cases, the murder of opposition figures, and a great deal more besides — not to mention the now-routine corruption, abuse of authority, and other official malfeasance.

The third factor is the notorious architecture of the security apparatus. In this respect Russia is almost a textbook case of "coup-proofing": the army, Rosgvardia, the FSB, the FSO, the SVR, the MVD, the Investigative Committee, the Prosecutor General's Office... Clearly this is not a spontaneous proliferation of bureaucratic entities but a carefully thought-out "system of checks and balances." Each agency partly duplicates the functions of another, keeps an eye on its neighbors, and all the while does not forget to compete fiercely with them for resources and influence.

The fourth factor is the character of the Russian opposition. On this front, I am afraid, there is even less good news. The protests of the past fifteen years — 2011–2012, 2017–2018, 2021 — for all their undeniable civic significance, nonetheless remained fairly limited by every measure. They were predominantly metropolitan — Moscow, St. Petersburg, and a few other large cities. Predominantly young and educated — students and the urban middle class. This made the work of discrediting them considerably easier for Putin's propaganda. We all remember the "liberals," the "fifth column," the "State Department agents," and the other propaganda clichés.

Can anything change inside Russia today? Are there signs of a split in the elite? The short answer is: not yet. What is more, one cannot shake the feeling that the worse the situation becomes, the more tightly Russia's officials and security men cling to Putin's regime. The war in Ukraine, the sanctions, international isolation — all of this, it seems, not only fails to weaken the dependence of Putin's inner circle on the Kremlin but, on the contrary, intensifies it. Fleeing while keeping one's capital has become all but impossible. So too has staying put and waiting it out: civic neutrality is equated outright with treason. Nor is any alternative to Putin discernible within the system — no potential successors have been pointedly appointed, and all the other figures on the Kremlin's political stage are either too weak or too dangerous for the rest.

The last thing I want is to instill pessimism in those who share my views. My aim is to look at the situation soberly and to give it an objective analysis. At the same time, it is hard to deny that the conditions which made civil protests succeed in other countries are objectively absent in Putin's Russia today. This by no means implies that the regime of the Kremlin dwarf is eternal. Apart from revolution, there are a great many other reasons why dictatorships collapse: the death of the leader, economic collapse, military defeat, and even, in the end, a chance confluence of circumstances. But for you and me it means something else — that neither mass protest nor, still less, individual protest will change anything in Russia today. The only change you will achieve by drawing the attention of Putin's enforcers will concern your own fate alone — and you will not like it at all.

The Right Not to Be a Hero, or Why Personal Choice Always Matters More?

If you have read this far, you have surely already asked yourself: “All right, but what, then, am I personally to do?” Let us reason honestly and without prejudice. When there is a real chance of success, self-sacrifice for the common cause looks justified and heroic. Alexander Matrosov, for example, who covered a German machine gun with his body and thereby traded his single life for the lives of his comrades-in-arms, did not die in vain, because his sacrifice objectively brought the victory over Nazism closer. But when the chances of success are close to zero, the practical rationale for self-sacrifice disappears. Imagine you are offered a chance to play a lottery. The probability of winning is one in a million. The stake is your freedom, or even your life. Any reasonable person would simply decline such a game, and would be absolutely right to do so. Not because he is a coward, but because he is assessing the situation soundly.

This does not at all mean that Eva Bagrova and Diana “Naoko” Loginova are foolish or overly naive girls. On the contrary, their acts deserve our deepest respect! They made the hardest of moral and ethical choices — one that seemed to them morally right, and one that I myself, for instance, would never have dared to make. But in paying tribute to their civic courage and the firmness of their convictions, we should not forget that this was their free choice. And that means the opposite choice — not to place one's own head voluntarily into the millstones of the system — is equally legitimate morally and cannot be condemned by anyone.

Whoever did not come out to an anti-Putin rally is no traitor to the Motherland. Whoever did not sign an anti-war letter, did not forward a friend a “foreign agent's” post, did not risk his career and freedom in some other way — is likewise no traitor. Before holding forth about betrayal of the Motherland, one ought to explain, at least to oneself, what this “Motherland” even is. A territory shaded a single color on a map? But does a patch of the earth's surface demand your sacrifice? The state? But are you obliged, at the cost of your own well-being, to help officials of the state administrative apparatus build their careers and acquire additional privileges, while you yourself have none? Putin's regime? Obviously, that's an immediate no.

The Russian people, understood in the broadest sense? But that is a hundred and forty million people utterly unknown to you, of the most varied nationalities, religious denominations, and cultures, with entirely different views, values, and ideas about how Russia — and their life within it — ought to be arranged.

Hand on heart, we must admit that the overwhelming majority of us have no idea what concrete meaning even we ourselves invest in the concept of “Motherland,” let alone what others do. It is one of those social stereotypes imposed on us since childhood that carry far more emotion than substantive meaning. We can, however, easily see who benefits from imposing this stereotype on the society under its control — Putin’s regime. For a perversely understood duty to some abstract “Motherland” can easily be converted into unquestioning civic obedience, into the payment of taxes to fund a criminal war, into military service to replenish an aggressor army, and so on.

It is therefore far more useful to ask yourself a different question: what, or whom, do I personally live and fight for? For my family? Certainly. These, after all, are living, utterly concrete people, the closest to us of all. For self-fulfillment? Quite possibly. For all of us, as individuals, are made up of our own desires, values, and aspirations — the ones we find important and necessary. It is they that drive us to move forward, to grow, and to reach new heights. A long-held dream? New projects? The list could go on forever. For each of us it will be filled not with abstract propaganda concepts but with concrete things and ideas drawn from the objective reality close to us.

And if some native of Leningrad you have never personally met, a man dreaming of conquering Ukraine, forces you to do so at the risk of your own life and threatens, should you refuse, to let you rot in prison, then you — as a normal, free, and decent human being — have every right not to obey him, and not even to resist him, but simply to leave for somewhere this fool is not. After all, to learn a foreign language over a few years, to find a job or start a business in a new place, is incomparably more effective — and, more importantly, far safer — than spending decades beating your head against the repressive apparatus of a dictatorship.

Of course, an important caveat must be made: emigration is a kind of privilege. By no means everyone has the coveted opportunity to leave Putin’s Russia. But that is a large separate conversation, one that lies beyond the scope of this article. I am merely emphasizing the general principle that, within the limits of his own possibilities, whatever they may be, any one of us has every right to choose safety — even at the cost of a compromise with a conscience that each of us understands differently.

None of us chose to be born in Russia, and none of us signed a contract obliging us to answer for the crimes of its deranged dictator. The sense of guilt before the civilized world that some Russians feel today is humanly understandable. But it must not turn into self-abasement. A guilt that demands you sacrifice yourself for a zero result is not conscience. It is a trap.

Naturally, none of us has any idea today when Putin's elites will fracture and when the man himself will at last be dragged out by the feet onto Red Square through the Kremlin's Spassky Gate. But sooner or later it is bound to happen. And our task, yours and mine, is to live to see that moment — having preserved ourselves and the ability to live by our own values. Especially if you are young and still have your whole life ahead of you. A living, free person will always be far more useful than a dead hero or a broken prisoner.

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ABOUT

I am Sergey Konyashin, a former Russian diplomat. I spent nearly a dozen years in the Russian Foreign Ministry, with postings in Yemen (2010–2013), Sudan (2014–2018) and Algeria (2019–2021), and left Russia in 2022, after Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Démarche is my independent journal on Russian policy in the Middle East and Africa: analysis from inside the system, for readers outside it. I also write for *The Moscow Times*, *Republic*, *The Insider* and other independent outlets; see konyashin.com/elsewhere for that work.

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