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Playing God in Putin's Russia

In Russia, denunciations are on the rise. Society is stoically accepting the relapse into Stalinism

The rhetorical question 'I wonder who wrote four million denunciations?' posed by exiled writer Sergei Dovlatov (1941–1990) about Stalinist repression sounds frighteningly relevant in today's Russia. Denunciations have always existed in every society. With the start of the so-called special military operation, however, a veritable boom in mutual reporting has developed in Russia, described by Russian journalist Alexander Plyushchev as a 'competition in denunciation'. Everyone denounces everyone else: State Duma deputies denounce journalists, teachers their students, parents their children's teachers, believers their priests, students their professors, patients their doctors. Spectators denounce actors and vice versa, 'vigilant citizens' their fellow citizens.

Almost every day, Russian exile media report on new cases of denunciations ranging from the absurd to the horrific. A young woman was reported because her earrings were the colours of the Ukrainian flag, and another because she had herself photographed wearing a yellow jacket against a blue sky. These cases would be almost amusing if they did not sometimes have serious criminal law consequences for those affected. For example, criminal proceedings were initiated against paediatrician Nadezhda Buyanova for spreading fake news about the Russian army. The doctor supposedly made inappropriate comments about a patient's husband who had died in Ukraine, and the patient immediately reported her. The police then searched the 67-year-old doctor's apartment, damaged her furniture and even removed wallpaper.

A certain Yuri Samoylov was also detained by a Moscow court for 14 days for distributing 'extremist materials': a subway passenger had reported him, claiming to have seen something on his smartphone that supposedly 'discredited' the Russian army. Just a few stops later, Samoylov was arrested by the police.

Professional informers

In Russian, informers are contemptuously called '*Stukači*' ('knockers'), a term from prison jargon. In Putin's Russia, there are a whole series of professional 'knockers' who go about their work with pleasure. One informer became well-known when she entered into correspondence with the anthropologist Alexandra Arkhipova. She calls herself Anna Korobkova and has made 1 300 reports to the authorities during the war, eight of them against Arkhipova. Korobkova sees herself as a 'professional, unpaid informer' and proudly declares that she reports to the authorities not only 'foreign agents' but also anti-war graffiti in public places. She explains her motivation by saying that in the event of Russia's defeat, she does not want her taxes used to pay reparations to Ukraine.

While Korobkova hides behind her anonymity (some speculate she may be a troll), many others are denouncing totally openly. Like Ekaterina Mizulina, head of the so-called Safe Internet League, which advocates Internet censorship. As a result of her work, dozens of Russian artists, bloggers and TikTokers have been declared 'foreign agents' since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. In April 2022, Mizulina, whose mother is a senator, called on the Prosecutor General's Office to investigate Wikipedia for the criminal offense of spreading false information about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Thanks to the 'cyber-knocker', as journalists like to call her, concerts are cancelled, criminal proceedings are opened and lives are ruined.

The alarming problem is not Mizulina herself, but the fact that such informants exercise real power and act as decision-makers over people's fates.

The self-proclaimed patriot is an internet star, especially popular with young Russians. Reels with her on TikTok are viewed millions of times. With messages like 'a streamer from Krasnodar who discredited the army in her live streams was arrested. She apologizes for her actions', Mizulina runs her Telegram channel, which has around 700 000 followers. Since the beginning of the year, she has been touring Russia and appearing at universities. A video went viral on Russian social networks in which, during a performance in Yekaterinburg, she threatened a student with criminal proceedings for 'discrediting the army' because he had questioned the necessity of military service.

However, the alarming problem is not Mizulina herself, but the fact that such informants exercise real power and act as decision-makers over people's fates. They only have to reprimand someone — and the person

immediately humbly apologises. They write to the Prosecutor General's Office — which immediately takes action.

An overflow of complaints

In Stalinist times, denunciation was positively encouraged. In 1937, Stalin declared that 'every party member, every honest non-party member, every citizen of the USSR has not only the right but the duty to report on any abuses he notices.' In this context, the number in the famous Dovlatov quote is not confirmed as there are no studies on how many denunciations actually took place. But even if the writer was right, the number of four million would not be particularly high in a country with a population of 162 million. Denunciation during the Great Terror was a kind of 'information backcloth', with Soviet newspapers constantly publishing articles exposing 'enemies of the people'.

Nor do we know how far the number of reports has increased since 24 February 2022. The latest data from Russian media regulator *Roskomnadzor* are from the first half of 2022, when 144 835 'citizen complaints' were registered — 25.5 per cent more than in the same period in 2021. According to *Roskomnadzor*, most of these 'citizen inquiries' involved the 'spread of fake news' about the actions of the Russian army or 'pro-Ukrainian propaganda'. But can the increasingly poisonous atmosphere even be represented by such figures?

In any case, the flow of complaints to law enforcement agencies is now so great that Duma deputies from the 'New People' party have introduced a bill to punish serial denunciations. The party's chairman, Vladislav Davankov, proposed calling the law the 'Mizulina Law'. She has proven, Davankov maintains, that it is time to put an end to the waves of complaints, as he wrote in his Telegram channel. The text of the bill was submitted to the government in February. However, nothing has been heard of it since.

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According to a survey conducted by *Novaya Gazeta* in April this year, 38 per cent of Russians have a very negative attitude towards informing, 17 per cent are indifferent and only five per cent support it. The figures seem to be more reassuring than alarming. However, the authors of the study point out that among students, only 24 per cent have a strongly negative attitude towards informing and 41 per cent are indifferent to it. There are several explanations for this. For example, the young

> generation, accustomed to constantly writing online reviews about various products and services, tends not to think about the consequences of informing.

However, *Novaya Gazeta* highlights another aspect: 'Almost all respondents tend to consider adaptation to the requirements of the times to be a perfectly acceptable norm of behaviour.' In Russian society, which was already highly fragmented before the war, an atmosphere of suspicion and fear is increasingly developing. As in Soviet times, people think carefully about whom they can say what to and where. Many are choosing the path of adaptation.

One thing is certain: the state is playing a major role in the new era of denunciation. The adoption of more and more laws restricting freedom of speech and allowing the prosecution of alleged fake news about the army is creating a climate of fear and mistrust in society. As was the case almost 90 years ago, the search for 'internal enemies' has begun, and those in power are making denunciation a social norm. And just as it was then, denunciation is a tool of political repression. Dovlatov himself answered his own question about the authors of the millions of denunciations: 'They were written by ordinary Soviet people. Does this mean that the Russians are a nation of informers and spies? Not at all. They were just tendencies of the historical moment.' His sad conclusion seems to be being confirmed again today.



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