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Russia's women rise up

Thousands of Russians were drafted for the war in Ukraine. But discontent amongst women at home is growing. Can the protest be dangerous for Putin?

Fifteen months ago, Vladimir Putin signed a decree on a partial mobilisation for the war in Ukraine. The exact number of those mobilised is unclear and the figures vary widely. But one thing is certain: hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers have remained at the front in Ukraine without interruption since — with no prospect of leave. Meanwhile, the criminals recruited for the war are released after six months of participation in the so-called 'special military operation'. In their efforts to secure the return of their husbands, many wives of those mobilised joined forces in August 2023 to form the Telegram channel Way Home, which already had over 38 000 subscribers in December.

On 7 November, the women attempted to demonstrate in Moscow for the first time. However, the city administration banned the action, citing 'restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic'. They therefore joined a Communist Party rally to mark the anniversary of the October Revolution, which was surprisingly not banned. Around 30 women held placards reading 'Give the children back their fathers'. One activist told a journalist: 'we are living in hell. They have taken people into slavery.' It took less than five minutes for the rally to be broken up by the police. The women then tried to organise protests across the country on social networks. But the demonstrations were not authorised.

Calling out Putin publicly

The propaganda machine quickly recognised them as a threat to the regime and began to systematically discredit them. Russian chief propagandist Vladimir Solovyov claimed that the Telegram channel Way Home was 'organised by foreign intelligence services', and the channel was marked with a 'fake' patch on 30 November. The activists are also directly threatened by security forces. There have been several cases in which the police have sought them out to warn of the 'inadmissibility of extremist activities'.

Nevertheless, the women are not giving up and are looking for new forms of protest. At the end of November, they organised a flash mob by sticking stickers on their cars with inscriptions such as 'Bring back my husband' or 'I'm fed up'. The text used the letters of the Latin alphabet Z and V, which have come to symbolise war in Russia and are used by pro-war patriots. At the beginning of December, the activists published a video in which they read out a manifesto demanding the withdrawal of their husbands, brothers, sons and fathers from the war zone. They wore white headscarves.

The operators of the Way Home channel remain anonymous.

The participants in the Way Home movement waited eagerly for Putin's annual press conference on 14 December and sent him masses of questions. Some of them were even broadcast on a large screen: 'when will the mobilised people be released? Why should 300 000 people serve the whole country?' Putin ignored them, however. When asked whether there would be a new mobilisation, he said: 'why do we need a mobilisation? There is no need for it at the moment.' In plain language: there will be no rotation.

One of the of the women's supporters in their struggle is Olga Zukanova, head of the Council of Wives and Mothers. However, she doubts that the wives of the mobilised men can form a real political movement. Because they are 'completely apolitical'. It is also unclear how many women there are, where they live and whether the followers of their Telegram channel actually share her demands. The operators of the Way Home channel remain anonymous.

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Many liberal members of the opposition criticise the coordinators of Way Home. By calling for rotation at the front, they implicitly agreed that others should be sent to war instead of their men. And this is precisely the weak point of their protest — they can hardly win any sympathisers in Russian society this way. Opposition politician and YouTube blogger Maxim Kaz, on the other hand, calls the position of the mothers and wives of those mobilised 'impeccable'. They are right, he says, because there is no justification for the war to which their loved ones were sent.

The dissatisfaction among the women of the mobilised soldiers is undoubtedly one of the most important issues in the upcoming

presidential election campaign. The Kremlin fears possible mass protests. Their example could set a precedent. For example, a single rally of the Way Home movement was allowed to take place in Novosibirsk, not in the street but in a cultural centre. There were more police there than participants, whose IDs and posters were checked at the entrance. According to the exile newspaper *Vyorstka*, the presidential administration has instructed regional officials to 'stifle protests by relatives of the mobilised with money'. They must not turn into a nationwide struggle.

Local authorities' tactic is to promise the women that they will pass on their complaints 'to the top' in the hope that this will calm them down for a while. However, the main strategy is intimidation. Criminal proceedings have already been initiated against Zukanova for 'incitement to denial of civic duties'. The aim is to silence the activists. But she warns: 'if you overstretch a spring, it can bounce.'

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Maxim Kaz even compared the protesting women with the mothers from the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who searched for their missing children during the military dictatorship (1976 to 1983). Their protest was one of the factors that ultimately brought down the junta. They, too, were apolitical housewives. Their symbol was also a white headscarf. And the role of symbolism in politics should not be underestimated, political scientist Ekaterina Schulmann points out. The women in white headscarves could not topple the regime in Russia, but they are causing it great difficulties by demanding what they have a right to, says Schulmann.

'We will only give in when our men are safe at home', warn the movement's coordinators in their manifesto. Olga Zukanova is not giving up either: 'the women must unite, speak out at a federal level and demand a solution from the president. If they get their men back, others will demand the same.'



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