

Russians Are Terrified and Have Nowhere to Turn

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Mr. Krasilshchik runs Helpdesk.media, a website that offers advice and support to people affected by the actions of the Russian government.

“Hello, I have a pregnant wife and a mortgage. My wife is panicking, and I have no money to go abroad. How can I escape the draft?”

This is a message we received at [Helpdesk.media](#), a website I and other journalists set up in June to help people — with information, legal advice and psychological support — affected by the actions of the Russian government. The writer, after completing his mandatory military service seven years ago, was being drafted into the war in Ukraine. The Russian government was not interested in who will pay the mortgage or take care of his pregnant wife. It simply wanted more fodder for its war.

In the days since Vladimir Putin announced a “[partial mobilization](#),” clearing the way for hundreds of thousands of men to be conscripted into his failing war effort, we’ve fielded tens of thousands of messages like these. Some were plaintive; others were defiant. Some were simply defeated. Along with Russians desperately trying to board flights, crossing borders or attacking recruitment centers, they testified to the same desire: to avoid the draft.

The truth is, they probably can’t. While presented as a limited measure affecting only those who previously served in the army, in practice, the government has free rein to conscript as many people as it wants. The initial number of 300,000, for example, already seems an [enormous undercount](#). In the face of a monstrous regime hellbent on war and widespread international isolation, Russians are caught in a disaster. And judging from the response so far, they are terrified.

Such terror is at odds with the mass support the war supposedly enjoys. But the actual level of support is clearly significantly lower than that trumpeted by the Kremlin-controlled media. There are, tellingly, very few people eager to go to war — something made viscerally clear by the [shooting of a recruitment officer](#) in Siberia on Monday. Enthusiasm is thin on the ground: Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of a private military company and a businessman close to Mr. Putin, has resorted to [recruiting from prisons](#).

For regular citizens who want to escape that hellish fate, there simply aren’t many options. Some people have crossed into Belarus, but we are already getting information that the Belarusian authorities, complicit with Mr. Putin, are planning to seize men from Russia. If not Belarus, where? Just days before the start of the mobilization, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Poland imposed an [entry ban](#) on almost all Russians. Last week, the [Baltic States declared](#) that this decision will not change, at least for now.

The thousand-mile border with Ukraine is, of course, closed. The Finnish authorities are still letting Russians in, but one needs a passport and a [Schengen visa](#) — something held by just a million Russians. Finland is planning to [close the border](#), too. What remains open is Georgia, where the queue at the border crossing is more than 24 hours long and people are occasionally denied entry without any obvious reason. There are also destinations as far-flung as Norway, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Mongolia. Getting to any, by foot, bike or car, is a daunting undertaking with no assurance of success.

Airplane tickets to the few destinations still available to Russians, after the bulk of European airspace was closed off in February, are almost sold out. You want to fly to neighboring Kazakhstan? Here's a ticket, with two layovers, for \$20,000. Want to go to Armenia? No tickets left. Or to Georgia? Russia used to have daily direct flights to Tbilisi before the conflict in 2008, but now you cannot fly there, either.

The terrible truth is that Russians have become outcasts. Many countries have already [imposed residency restrictions](#) on them, and there are fewer and fewer possibilities of obtaining [legal status](#), a work permit or even [a bank account](#). No one is waiting to welcome fleeing Russians. In any case, it's unclear how long the Russian authorities will allow people to leave the country. Some regional military authorities have already [issued orders](#) forbidding men who are subject to mobilization — that is, nearly all men — to leave their towns and cities.

People observing this horror from outside Russia are asking: Why don't Russians protest? Well, many are. The first evening after the announcement was made, the Russian police detained over [a thousand demonstrators](#) in more than 30 cities across the country. Some protesters were severely beaten up. This is bravery beyond the imagining of those who have never experienced life in a dictatorship.

As for overthrowing Mr. Putin, likewise urged on Russians, I doubt you will find anyone who can tell you how to do it. The main opposition politician, Aleksei Navalny, is behind bars; protest is effectively outlawed; and even mild antiwar statements can land Russians in prison with a hefty sentence. I, for one, am facing [criminal charges](#) for writing on Instagram that the massacre in Bucha, Ukraine, was perpetrated by the Russian Army. For Russians, there is no visible route to a better future.

We have a saying in Russia, "to bomb Voronezh." Voronezh is a Russian city not too far from the Ukrainian border, but the phrase does not refer to bombings by Ukraine. It refers to the Russian authorities' perverse habit of retaliating against their own citizens in response to the actions of other governments. On Sept. 21, Mr. Putin added perhaps the most egregious example to the list. Thwarted by Ukraine's resistance, he chose to punish Russian citizens for his failure.

Capital punishment may be forbidden in Russia. But for Mr. Putin's decision, many people will pay with their lives.