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FEAR, UNFREEDOM, AND MIGRATION INTENTIONS UNDER WAR AND A REPRESSIVE REGIME

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ANALYTICAL BRIEF

Dominant international and media narratives routinely frame Russian society as a monolithic bloc characterized by uniform, unyielding public loyalty to the regime. This perspective heavily relies on mass public opinion data collected under conditions of severe state repression, where public dissent can result in criminal penalties of up to ten years. Yet this framing overlooks a key structural reality: official polls capture only what citizens deem safe to express, not their genuine convictions or behavioral intentions.

This brief challenges that assumption directly. The apparent monolith is not evidence of consent but an artifact of coercion: the absence of visible protest or mass departure reflects a structural trap in which fear, repression, family obligations, financial barriers, and shrinking exit routes force critically minded citizens into outward compliance while masking deep internal fragmentation.

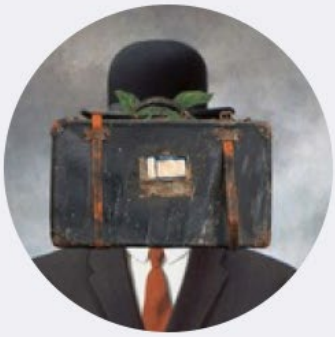
To test this thesis, the study departs from conventional mass survey methodologies in favor of a tailored mixed-method approach. By combining a targeted quantitative survey with a qualitative analysis of open-ended statements from critically minded citizens inside the Russian Federation, we gain access to a segment of society that is not captured by official polling. Instead of measuring the proportions of particular ideological attitudes, we identify and reconstruct the specific structural mechanisms through which the authoritarian state governs citizens' behavior in wartime. Through this qualitative lens, we demonstrate how fear is not a uniform experience, but a socially distributed phenomenon shaped by everyday constraints, family obligations, and material dependence.

These insights reach far beyond the Russian case, offering a template for analyzing the internal dynamics of any repressive society. Because the mechanisms of civic control, informational monopolization, and state coercion function similarly across modern autocracies, mapping how citizens navigate them from within offers a framework for anticipating systemic shifts in any authoritarian landscape. This lens is particularly urgent in today's global environment, amid widespread democratic backsliding and the consolidation of competitive authoritarian regimes. By identifying the gap between forced obedience and internal fears, this approach equips policymakers to assess autocracies' vulnerabilities.

WHAT THE STUDY SHOWS

Our methodology is designed to study Russia from the inside while avoiding the pitfalls of mass surveys. Rather than aiming for broad, superficial representativeness, it deliberately prioritizes a sample of critically minded individuals using a mixed-method approach developed for studying closed societies “from the inside.” This allows the study to capture the sentiments of otherwise “invisible” segments of society—those experiencing intense internal conflict and those structurally excluded or self-censored in official surveys.

The pilot study leveraged the Telegram channel “Emigriceps” (approx. 71,000 subscribers)—a specialized service-informational platform focusing on migration logistics, visa regulations, and legal restrictions affecting Russian citizens. Respondents were recruited via a series of targeted posts. To increase validity and mitigate respondent fear, the survey was entirely anonymous and strictly omitted the collection of any personally identifiable information (PII). As a result, a dataset of 1,930 questionnaire responses was compiled. Crucially for the study’s domestic focus, 742 of these respondents were residing within the Russian Federation at the time of participation.



Эмигрицепс

71.044 подписчика

Notably, the sample in this research is not representative of Russian society as a whole—it consists of critically minded citizens and subscribers of the “Emigriceps” channel; that is, those who have either already left the country or are considering such a possibility. However, it is precisely this non-representativeness that makes the data valuable. We gained access to the segment of society that is invisible in official polls—those who cannot speak out openly and who live in a state of internal conflict. This study is not about “what percentage is for the war” (there are virtually no such people in our sample), but about the mechanisms through which an authoritarian regime manages the behavior of its citizens under conditions of repression and war.

To scale these findings and ensure academic triangulation, the research will introduce

advanced qualitative and quantitative layers:

- **In-Depth Interviews:** A comprehensive series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with both domestic Russian residents and regional expert sociologists will be conducted to provide deep narrative context to the structured data.
- **Engaging Independent Media:** An expanded mass quantitative survey will be deployed across prominent independent media platforms to broaden the analytical scope.
- **Accessing Hard-to-Reach Groups:** To reach deeply isolated and particularly vulnerable groups—such as individuals inside war zones—the study will utilize anonymous, encrypted video chats. This tailored approach will effectively bypass the psychological barriers of traditional research setups, capturing insights from vital demographics who would otherwise completely decline formal interview engagement.

Moscow,Russia - 31 January 2021, Protester detained by riot police (OMON) during rally for free Alexey Navalny on Komsomoskaya square
Photo: Gregory Stein / Shutterstock.com

THE MYTHS AND REALITY

1. Myth: “The regime holds everyone through a single fear—everyone fears repression and war in the same way”

Reality

An analysis of 20 types of fear showed that anxiety under war and a repressive regime is not organized around one general fear, but around **four independent dimensions**, each tied to different aspects of everyday life and different social roles.

The first dimension is linked to the experience of unfreedom as a shrinking space of life. Its core is the fear of living in a cage: both in a physical sense, when a person fears losing the freedom to move and make choices, and in an informational sense, when access to truth, independent sources, and connection with the outside world disappears. This is not an abstract political fear, but a daily experience of an increasingly narrow, controlled, and enclosed reality.

The second dimension is linked to responsibility for loved ones. This is not so much fear for oneself as fear for those one cares for: children, elderly parents, partners, or dependent family members. It is a fear embedded in one’s social role — as a parent, a son or daughter, a caregiver, or a provider. This type of anxiety often becomes the factor that prevents people from acting abruptly, quickly, or riskily.

The third dimension consists of fears related to material survival. This is basic anxiety about money, housing, medical care, relocation, job loss, and the impossibility of planning for the future. Here fear is not ideological but concrete: whether a person will be able to survive, move their family, pay for treatment, or start life over.

The fourth dimension — the personal-existential — is the most intimate: it concerns the meaning of one’s own life, including fear of unfulfillment, loneliness, and a stolen future. War is experienced here as a personal catastrophe: the inability to plan even six months ahead and the feeling that life is being wasted in circumstances one did not choose.

Taken together, these findings show that society under a repressive system cannot be described as a mass of people reacting uniformly to violence and war. Fear is structured, socially distributed, and tied not only to politics as such, but also to obligations, dependencies, and the constraints of everyday life.

> *“The biggest anxiety... is because of the fact that in order to end up in prison, all one needs is to be smart, honest, kind, and brave. And that a social selection for opportunists and conformists is taking place, while children are being raised as approval-seeking machines.”*

“The situation in the country is frightening. It is scary to leave too… There are elderly parents here; it is frightening to abandon them. And there is a boy — it is frightening to leave him here to be devoured by the military machine.”

“I am a professional translator… I just shrug my shoulders: what country would need me with this language? My stumbling block is the ability to find work.”

“A deep, persistent depression from the realization that there is no future. Ahead lies only darkness.”

2. Myth: “If people are not leaving en masse, it means they have come to terms with the situation”

Reality

An analysis of the relationship between fears and migration intentions reveals a much more complex picture.

The most intense political fears—fear of war, repression, loss of access to information, and disconnection from the outside world — are **strongly associated with the desire to leave.** This means that those who are most sensitive to the political context have not “accepted what is happening”; on the contrary, they are more likely than others to want to leave the country.

At the same time, these same fears are **weakly associated with the actual likelihood of departure**. In other words, the desire to leave exists, but it does not always translate into concrete action, planning, or the practical ability to leave.

This is an important conclusion: the absence of a mass exodus does not mean consent. Between the inner decision — “I want to leave” — and actual departure lies a layer of structural constraints: family obligations, financial barriers, bureaucracy, professional limitations, visa restrictions, and psychological exhaustion.

“Children need to be saved from propaganda and obscurantism, and leaving with the whole family is even more frightening, because one does not want to drag the children into what amounts to a tent.”

“I sent my child to study in Europe, hoping they would stay there. And this fact intensifies anxieties and fears such as: I won’t be able to support them during their studies, they won’t be granted a visa, the borders will close.”

“I am frightened for my partner, that they may be conscripted into the war... And what weighs on me most is that my partner and I have no money to even afford tickets. You are simply surviving.”

“The window of opportunity is shrinking. Please help. Tell me what I can do?”

“Either they will create an iron curtain, or they will make it impossible to access information on how and where to find work abroad... so there is a risk of being stuck here for life.”

3. Myth: “Those who wanted to leave have already left; the rest have accepted the situation and support the regime”

Reality

The typology of migration intentions paints a far more dramatic picture.

Nearly half of the sample is in a state that can be described as **“great stuckness”** (which can be understood as enforced immobility): a combination of a **maximum desire to leave** and a **minimum ability to do so**.

This condition should not be interpreted as passivity or loyalty. On the contrary, it reflects active frustration: people clearly understand the seriousness of the situation, are internally ready for change, and want to act, yet find themselves blocked by objective circumstances.

This group is especially important for understanding the social dynamics inside the country. It is neither a “stable support base” for the regime nor a zone of psychological adaptation. It is a group marked by enforced immobility, where critical awareness, high anxiety, and a lack of resources for exit come together.

The gap between the desire to leave and the actual departure is not a sign of weakness or conformism, but a predictable structural result. Albert Hirschman’s classic **“Exit, Voice, and Loyalty”** model shows: when both channels — ”**exit**” (emigration) and “**voice**” (protest) — are consistently blocked, people are forced to remain in a state of outward loyalty regardless of their internal convictions. This is exactly what we are observing: nearly half of the sample wants to leave but cannot. These people are not the pillars of the regime—they are its **hostages**.

Importantly, the trap works both ways. Some of those who did leave were forced to return due to blocked bank cards, residence permit denials, and the inability to find work. A sense of “double trap” arises: fear, family obligations, and a lack of funds hold people back inside the country, while outside, the closed doors of host countries hold

them back as well. This creates a particular disillusionment — not in the idea of emigration itself, but in its achievability; and the disillusionment with the countries from which support was expected is felt most acutely.

This is precisely why the policy of collective restrictions can prove counterproductive: rather than weakening the regime, it can drive critical citizens back into Russia and provide the authorities with propaganda resources.

The question is not whether Russians can exert a decisive influence on the current situation — historical experience provides mixed answers on that score. The key question is what will happen during a future political transition. If, by that time, critical citizens have been driven back inside the country, demoralized, and integrated into the existing system, it will be much more difficult to achieve meaningful democratic reforms.

> *“Both Russia and Europe constantly put spokes in the wheels, but Europe hurts more, because adequate treatment was expected from those countries.”*
>
> *“For our family, the growing hostility toward ordinary Russians… forced us to return, subjecting ourselves to daily fear.”*
>
> *“What keeps us in Russia: loans and a mortgage, an elderly mother, children studying in good schools and lyceums.”*
>
> *“It is hard to leap beyond one’s means. Professional skills and income are not enough to uproot myself and my sons.”*
>
> *“The strongest desire is to leave this terrible country, which I hate… I hope that one day I will be able to leave, but right now I do not understand how — it is a combination of reasons.”*

4. Myth: “People in Russia do not care—they do not seek information and are satisfied with propaganda”

Reality

The study shows the opposite.

Fear of losing access to free information and connection with the outside world is **one of the highest in the study: 8.81 out of 10**. This means that for a significant share of respondents, access to independent information is not a secondary issue but one of the key needs of life and one of the central sources of anxiety.

Moreover, this fear serves as an important marker distinguishing critically minded

citizens from those who have withdrawn into apoliticism or remained loyal to the regime. In other words, the need for truth, for an alternative picture of reality, and for informational connection to the outside world has not disappeared. On the contrary, it remains one of the most important lines of inner resistance.

> *"I just spent half an hour trying to connect to a VPN—I have five different ones, and none of them worked. Zero access to information. And it's not just about news—my work depends on content. Life in Russia deprives a person of absolutely everything."*

> *"Right now I am VERY afraid of losing connection with the normal world, because news, WhatsApp, Instagram are being blocked (you can still use VPNs for now, but they are often blocked too—you have to constantly search for a working one)."*

> *"Another fear is that they will either impose an iron curtain or make it impossible to access information on how and where to find jobs abroad, so there is a risk of being stuck here for life."*

> *"There are no prospects here for driven and intelligent young people. Before, one could count on remote work for a foreign company, for example. But now, with such an obvious trend toward internet isolation, there will be simply nothing left to do in Russia."*

> *"Simply put, everything I say can be used against me."*

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study fundamentally challenge the conventional, monolithic interpretation of public sentiment within Russia. The outward appearance of social cohesion and passive conformity is not an indicator of systemic ideological alignment or genuine regime loyalty; rather, it is the direct structural consequence of a highly effective, dual-layered containment trap. Critically minded citizens inside the country find themselves simultaneously paralyzed by the internal machinery of state repression and isolated by the external architecture of international restrictions.

When the primary mechanisms of civic agency, both "voice" (internal protest) and "exit" (emigration), are consistently obstructed, individuals are forced into a state of acute frustration and outward compliance. This "great stuckness" does not signify a stable support base for the regime; it represents a captive population held hostage by concrete, everyday constraints, including acute financial barriers, legal isolation, and deep-seated family caregiving obligations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Lower the Barriers to Exit for Critically Minded Citizens

International policy should avoid unintentionally reinforcing the Kremlin's containment strategy through collective restrictions that trap anti-war and critically minded citizens inside Russia. International strategies should reduce the legal, financial, and bureaucratic costs of exit through flexible humanitarian corridors, recognition of professional qualifications, and pathways built for families rather than individuals alone.

2. Design Migration Policy Around Social and Family Constraints

Programs aimed at single specialists, such as IT professionals, ignore the caregiving obligations that anchor most people in place. Mechanisms should allow relocation with dependent children and elderly parents, and should account for gender-inclusive support, in particular, the burden of heavier care and lower exit probability that women face ("the double bind"). Many remain not out of loyalty, but because of «anchoring fears»—responsibility for children and elderly parents.

Moscow, Russia - 01.31.2021 : Rally in support of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny
Photo: NCKAHDEP / Shutterstock.com

3. Break through the Information Blockade

The demand for independent information ranks among the strongest fears recorded in the study, at 8.81 out of 10, and functions as a core line of inner resistance. Policymakers should fund and sustain censorship-circumvention tools and reliable VPNs, support secure communication platforms that reduce the fear of digital surveillance and persecution, and maintain independent media outreach, which reaches even members of the security services who cannot leave due to confiscated passports.

4. Decouple the Kremlin's image from the Population it Represses

Public and diplomatic messaging should dismantle the myth of unanimous internal support, the regime's most potent domestic propaganda asset. Highlighting the conflict and diversity within Russian society, supporting horizontal communication networks, and articulating a constructive vision of a post-transition future strip the regime of the illusion of a unified majority and counter the sense of being locked in from both sides that pushes critics back toward the state.

5. Obtain Data on the Invisible Segments of Society

Official mass surveys capture only what citizens consider «safe» to express. Policymakers should prioritize qualitative and mixed-method research that reaches the population invisible to official polling and should treat dissent among state employees as an early indicator of elite fragmentation and possible transition.

SUMMARY FOR POLICYMAKERS

The absence of mass protest or mass exodus from Russia should not be interpreted as consent to the regime's actions or support for its policies. Many critically minded citizens find themselves in a structural trap shaped by fear, isolation, and a lack of viable alternatives, including family obligations, financial constraints, visa barriers, and shrinking access to independent information. Their outward passivity often reflects enforced immobility rather than loyalty.

For the international community, the strategic task is not to treat Russian society as a monolithic bloc of regime supporters, but to identify and support the segments whose internal opposition remains constrained by structural circumstances. Policy should focus on reducing the "cost of exit" for those who have already rejected the regime internally, preserving access to independent information and dismantling the myth of unanimous support for the Kremlin. Ultimately, this is also about preparing for a future moment of political transition. If the international community continues to ignore the latent tension within Russian society, it risks permanently alienating and demoralizing the very people who may be necessary for bringing meaningful systemic change. By viewing this group not as a homogeneous mass, but as potential actors constrained by fear and circumstance, policymakers can transform enforced immobility into a point of long-term strategic engagement against the Kremlin's consolidation of authoritarian control. This would weaken one of the Kremlin's most powerful instruments of control: the illusion that people interested in freedom and democracy no longer exist in Russia.

"Policy should focus on lowering the "exit cost" for those already internally opposed to the regime, preserving access to information, and challenging the myth of unanimous support. This will weaken one of the Kremlin's most powerful instruments of control: the illusion that people interested in freedom and democracy no longer exist in Russia."

Washington, DC
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