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As Ukraine Conflict Drags On, Russians Continue to Snitch on Each Other for Anti-War Views

By Anastasia Kalugina

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Street scene in Moscow. **Yaroslav Chingaev / Moskva News Agency**

The My Denunciation app did its job almost too well.

The satirical app, created by an anonymous exiled Russian IT specialist, aimed to trick the public into submitting denunciations through its system. In doing so, the app would ostensibly prevent these reports from reaching law enforcement — and highlight the growing problem of denunciations in Russian society.

My Denunciation, whose design mimics the state services portal where Russians can file complaints, received over 5,000 reports since its launch in January 2023.

Many of these reports condemned denunciation in any form. But one in five were genuine attempts to report friends, family or neighbors to law enforcement.

Denunciations have seen a comeback since the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, with nearly 300,000 reports submitted to the state media watchdog in 2022 alone.

In addition to simply snitching on anti-war dissenters or those who refuse to take part in mobilization, Russians have also used denunciations to get back at noisy neighbors or absolve oneself of prosecution.

Those denounced have lost their jobs, been ostracized from their communities and even received fines or jail time due to the effective ban on anti-war dissent.

The practice of denunciations dates back to the Soviet era, when citizens were encouraged to report "enemies of the people" to the authorities.

Its present-day resurgence can be linked to, paradoxically, feelings of patriotism and widespread trust in state propaganda as well as a lack of trust in law enforcement and the government. Perhaps even more significant, however, is the ease of exploiting the political climate for personal gain.

"Whistleblowing is a companion not of authoritarian, but specifically of totalitarian regimes, where citizens are not just required to remain silent, but must actively prove their loyalty through actions, and where such behavior is socially and morally justified and encouraged," Andrei Kolesnikov, a Moscow-based political analyst with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told The Moscow Times.

"'Active' conformists have a clear understanding of their state, and the government creates a morally and institutionally comfortable environment for them."

Anthropologist Alexandra Arkhipova and her team identified over 5,500 cases where individuals faced prosecution for criticizing the Russian military, many of which were triggered by denunciations. She documented 359 instances of individuals being detained for expressing dissent in schools or churches.

These denunciations have been encouraged by the Russian government and law enforcement agencies.

Roskomnadzor last month launched an online submission form to report LGBT-related content and publications, which are illegal under Russia's laws against "LGBT propaganda."

"We receive reports and complaints, we monitor them, and then ... an expert decision is made," Roskomnadzor said, adding that violating content will be ordered to be taken down.

In August 2023, Yaroslav Levchenko, a fisherman in the Kamchatka region, was arrested after being assaulted by a colleague, who reported his anti-war views to the police in an attempt to avoid prosecution for the assault.

The previous month, Levchenko was struck on the head with a bottle while attempting to break up a drunken fight on a ship and hospitalized for his injuries.

When Levchenko filed a police report after receiving medical treatment, he was surprised to discover that he had already been accused by his colleagues of not supporting the war and

sympathizing with Ukraine.

"Yaroslav was categorically against the war. He passionately despises everything happening in Russia. Like any normal person," his friend Fyodor Kazansky said. "I know he was planning to leave the country. For that, he worked and wanted to save money. Of course, he could have talked to his colleagues about his views. When you're a sailor and spend six months at sea with a crew, it's hard to conceal your thoughts. ... But this has no relevance to the fight."

According to the court documents, the colleague who assaulted Levchenko testified as a witness. He told the court that Levchenko had expressed his opposition to the war in Ukraine — while glossing over the fact that he'd been assaulted. Levchenko was then placed in pre-trial detention.

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Kazansky told The Moscow Times that Levchenko had been urged by his lawyer to plead guilty.

"I recently received a letter from Yaroslav. He wrote that his lawyer had suggested admitting guilt several times. So [the lawyer] is pro-Putin. We're trying to raise money and hire another lawyer, but the situation is tough. There's simply no one to stand up for Yaroslav."

Levchenko's colleagues hardly wrote the denunciations because they wanted to "protect" the country from opposition views.

For them, and other Russians who complain to the police about their peers, the goal is instead to get back at those who are, for instance, noisy at night.

Arkhipova recently published a screenshot of a conversation between neighbors in which one resident wrote: "Tonight, the TV was blaring all night again. I'm warning you that I'll call the police at night. And so they don't feel like ignoring the call, I'll say that someone in the building is blasting Ukrainian songs at full volume. Then, it's your problem..."

Some denunciations purposely include mentions of Ukraine as a means of catching the attention of police, Arkhipova explained.

Although President Vladimir Putin has advised against "canceling" Ukrainian culture, it is widely understood that even playing Ukrainian music could attract the attention of the police.

"When people are not sure about their state, when they believe that everything is corrupt, that the police will not understand and look for the truth, then, in this case, people begin to privatize repressive mechanisms of the state and use them," Arkhipova said.

The trend has even made its way to schools, where children who have grown up under Putin's rule may not fully grasp the consequences of their actions.

Penza schoolteacher Irina Gent was reported by one of her students after she said in class that Russia shelled a maternity hospital in Mariupol and wanted to overthrow Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. She was fired and handed a suspended sentence in court.

Gent is not the only educator to have faced such consequences. Independent news outlet Sirena reported that, since the start of the war, at least 53 teachers and professors have faced administrative or criminal proceedings for anti-war comments and activities.

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In some cases, children themselves have become victims of denunciations.

In one recent incident at a Moscow school, a nine-year-old boy was reported to the Federal Security Service (FSB) after he sang a Ukrainian song in class.

"His classmate told his parents about it and they wrote the report directly to the FSB," his teacher told The Moscow Times. "The next day, the boy's parents were called into school. Fortunately, punishments for the child, parents, and teachers were avoided, thanks to the school director, who had connections with the FSB."

Denunciations for real or perceived anti-war statements or displays of the Ukrainian flag continue to grow more common.

In May, a Moscow resident reported her 83-year-old neighbor after noticing what she thought was a Ukrainian flag in her apartment window. In reality, the elderly woman was growing flowers and had simply shaded her plants with two pieces of cardboard that happened to be yellow and blue.

In another instance, in June, a St. Petersburg lawyer denounced a traffic policeman after he noticed bags of dirt on the portrait of Putin customarily hung in the offices of civil servants.

In July, a Russian man who saw his sister reading a Ukrainian news outlet reported her, accusing her of possibly having been recruited by the Ukrainian special services.

According to expert Kolesnikov, this desire to write denunciations can also be explained by the atmosphere of fear that has taken hold across Russia.

"From a moral point of view, this is just an inverted morality, an anthropological catastrophe."

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