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Russia's Silent Majority Are Victims Too

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Muskovites celebrating the New Year on Teatralnaya Square. **Yevgeny Messman/TASS**

Victimhood can be a tricky thing. Nobody doubts that ordinary Ukrainians are victims of this war. Russia's political opposition, in exile, prison or dead, are also viewed as victims. But what of the country's silent majority? What of the millions who stayed in Russia, kept their heads down and focused on living their ordinary lives, rather than the war and the online space it occupied?

Many things have changed in Russia since 2022. But one of the main constants has been the average Russian citizen's desire for peace and ending the war. The majority have not been militantly opposed to or cheering the war effort on. Instead, they have been focused on living in the present, trying to salvage what remains of normality and longing for its imminent return – what some are calling the silent majority.

They are not happy with the war or satisfied with the current situation and have few ways of expressing that. Many do feel guilt on a certain (very private) level.

One thing hard not to notice in Russia throughout the conflict is how that silent majority has simply hunkered down and carried on. The war is very much in the background now. When I leave my building every morning, the same middle-aged man is defrosting his car, mothers are walking with strollers and children are heading to the local school.

When you eavesdrop on their conversations or stop to say hello, they sound normal – not like indoctrinated quasi-fascists, as some scholars are suggesting. They sound like any other school child whose teacher is just trying to get through the copious material thrown at them by the school director. The mothers just want their children to grow up in safety and comfort. Cheering on an expensive war pushing up the price of baby food is hardly a means of achieving that.

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The war may come to an end in 2025. Negotiations are likelier than at any point since early 2022. And make no mistake, a peace agreement is inevitable. When the war ends, however, on whatever terms, Russia and its population of 146 million will still be there. It will not disappear or suddenly go away. The man defrosting his car as I write these words is not likely to have a huge epiphany when it does. His life has hardly changed since 2022. The increased number of women publicly wearing hijabs in our city is not doing so as a passive sign of resistance.

By living here, watching life unfold how it does, the more one cannot help but think something that many in the West will find unpopular. The war is not their fault. Tens of millions of innocent Russians are victims too. Their freedoms have been curtailed, their movements and opportunities restricted. Did they deserve that by virtue of where they were born? A classic liberal would argue not.

Like millions across the world, the average Russian is just trying to feed and raise their families, and get through the month. Many colleagues in academia have questioned from the comforts of the West, their tenured positions and with nothing to lose why many Russians do nothing to oppose the regime. What they neglect when arguing from their moral high ground is that those people I spoke of earlier do have a lot to lose being critical online. They have about as much power to topple the regime and change its course on the war, as the average Westerner does.

There will be blame to go around. Russian officials and the security apparatus, who carried out the decisions to invade Ukraine and suppress its own population, are obvious contenders. On the Ukrainian side, President Volodymyr Zelensky and his generals will have to answer for decisions they made. Kyiv's Western allies clearly could have done more to support Ukraine, yet did not.

Russia's silent majority will not want to be blamed and they must not be. They personally did not harm anybody or choose the war. Unlike routine acts of everyday life, the war was not their personal fault or responsibility. Collective guilt is too controversial; thousands protested, millions left and staying silent was, in its own way, an act of defiance by refusing to enter the discourse. Guilt by association is also not a tenable position. Not every Soviet citizen

was responsible for the Stalinist Terror. Not every Russian citizen can be responsible for the war, especially not on the basis that they refused to cheer on Ukraine and their own country's defeat.

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Blaming those who are faultless will only cause resentment where there was none to begin with. In the long term, it will not make the world safer or more peaceful. Then comes one of liberal democracy's sore spots that Ukraine, Georgia and even Moldova will have to reckon with on its European journeys: those people in the silent majority will still have a right to have an opinion – as will the pro-Russian segments of their populations. Dismissing these views or people will not make them, nor those in power, more rational.

If the West were serious, it would try to reach out to Russia's silent majority, who can be won over. The Russian population at large do not hold the same positions as those in and around the Kremlin currently. Most of the population wants Russia to be an open, peaceful country, especially to the West. Make no mistake, westerners, their companies, money and popular culture will be welcomed back with open arms one day. Moreover, this part of Russian society will want to be welcomed back, too. Not doing so only will push the Kremlin into a closer alliance with the likes of China and North Korea.

Moreover, it is absolutely naive to assume that Russia's social and economic problems will be fixed automatically by the sudden absence of Putin and the return of democracy. Although it stands a much better chance, we have been here before and there is no guarantee of success. Democracy will need to involve this silent majority beyond Moscow and the big cities – felt on the local level – seen to be actually working and fixing the people's problems. If not, that silent majority will simply resign themselves, remaining disillusioned and ambivalent.

Gleb Pavlovsky once predicted what the end of the Putin regime would look like: it would collapse in a day and be replaced by something exactly the same. He may be proven right. If he is, that is the fault of those in power, not Russian society.

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