The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

When Russia Finally Protested – Over a Condo

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December 24, 2025



Larisa Dolina and President Vladimir Putin. **Mikhail Metzel / TASS**

This article was originally published on Mikhail Zygar's Substack, The Last Pioneer.

On Dec. 16, the Russian Supreme Court issued what was perhaps the most widely discussed ruling in its history. More than 170,000 people watched the court hearing live. And the session ended in a surprising way: Larisa Dolina — the most talked-about figure in Russia over the past month, a well-known pop singer and the most hated person in the country — lost the case. Yet the court case concerned nothing more than the property rights to her apartment.

In the public discourse, this everyday domestic issue turned out to be far more important than the ongoing war against Ukraine, the negotiations between Kremlin representatives and Donald Trump's team, the new sanctions, the corruption scandal in Ukraine or any other international news.

Something nearly unbelievable and virtually unprecedented happened in the country: for a brief moment, Russian civil society rebelled, reacting to the blatant injustice and arbitrariness of the Russian courts. The irony, however, is that this surge of public outrage was not directed against the authorities themselves. The target of nationwide anger became the pop diva Larisa Dolina.

To begin with, one must explain who Larisa Dolina is. She is 70 years old and one of the most recognizable singers in Russia. For many years, she has belonged to the musical establishment. She has not produced any new hits for a long time, but state officials have consistently treated her with favor, awarding her honorary titles and inviting her to perform regularly. She is especially beloved by the older generation: Dolina is often hired to perform at private events, including those organized by state officials and security agencies.

Since 2003, Larisa Dolina has been a member of the ruling party, United Russia. She has always supported President Vladimir Putin without reservation, performed at every concert backing the Russian authorities and their policies, openly supports the war against Ukraine and publicly condemns the "traitors" who have left Russia in recent years, including some of her own colleagues.

By all accounts, Dolina is one of the key figures in the official cultural hierarchy, a pillar of the regime. She is sometimes called "Putin's favorite singer," though this is, of course, something of an exaggeration. Still, she unquestionably belongs to the group of artists without whom virtually no major propaganda event takes place.

The current story began back in the autumn of 2024. Larisa Dolina received a phone call from scammers posing as officers of the FSB. Dolina, who had been closely connected to the authorities for many years, was convinced that she was indeed speaking to members of the security services. She trusted them unconditionally.

The callers told her that certain fraudsters were planning to steal her apartment. To prevent this threat, they said, she needed to quickly sell the apartment and immediately transfer the proceeds to a "verified" account. Dolina followed all the instructions. She sold her apartment for 112 million rubles ($1.43 million) to a 34-year-old Muscovite, Polina Lurye, a single mother who had no idea that the singer was not acting of her own free will but was following the orders of people pretending to be FSB officers.

Dolina told the buyer that she had decided to sell the property because it felt too small for her. She immediately transferred all the proceeds to the scammers — and only later realized she had been deceived. Once she understood what had happened, she promptly activated her real connections within the state apparatus in an attempt to recover what she had lost.

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After losing both her apartment and her money, Larisa Dolina took the matter to court — and in September of this year, she won. The court ruled that at the time of the transaction, she had been under the influence of fraudsters and declared the purchase agreement null and void. Moreover, the court ordered the buyer, Polina Lurye, to return the apartment to Dolina, while refusing to return Lurye's money. In effect, the buyer was told to pursue the fraudsters herself

and try to recover the funds that Dolina had voluntarily transferred to them.

This ruling became an example of absolutely unprecedented judicial arbitrariness. The only person punished was the completely innocent buyer, who lost both her apartment and the money she had paid.

The verdict sparked enormous public outrage. First, nearly all real estate transactions in Moscow effectively came to a halt, as it became clear that a dangerous precedent had been set. From that moment on, no one could be sure that their purchased property was truly protected by law; any seller could claim to have acted under the influence of scammers and attempt to reclaim their home through the courts.

But the main target of public anger became Dolina herself. It was obvious that such an outrageous decision was only possible because of her influential patrons within the government. The internet filled with clips from her old interviews. For example, in the early 2000s, responding to questions from teenagers on a talk show, Dolina declared — with marked arrogance — that traffic police officers had no right to stop her car: she possessed a special permit that allowed her driver to violate traffic rules if she was running late for a concert.

The social media campaign against Larisa Dolina became unprecedented. It was perhaps the first genuine surge of public protest in Russia since the beginning of the war against Ukraine. Notably, the protest did not arise for political reasons but solely because of a housing dispute — an issue that affects every Russian. And it suddenly revealed the obvious: in the face of a corrupt court, absolutely anyone can be vulnerable. The total helplessness of an innocent person in a situation where an influential figure with ties to the security services stands against them proved to be a trauma to which no one could remain indifferent.

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The wave of indignation swept across the Russian-language internet and led to the mass cancellation of Dolina's concerts. Advertisers terminated their contracts with her one after another, and concert venues deleted announcements of her upcoming performances. In effect, a real form of cancel culture emerged for the first time in modern Russian history. And the overwhelming majority of the public supported the "cancellation" of Dolina — without the slightest sympathy for an artist known for her patriotism and her demonstrative support for Putin.

The culmination of the scandal came with her appearance on Channel One two weeks ago. Dolina entered a talk-show studio and announced that she had made a "difficult personal decision" and would, after all, return the money for the apartment to Polina Lurye, because she wanted to be "honest with herself." Considering that she had previously won not only the initial trial but also the appellate and cassation courts, such a gesture was clearly not part of her original plan. She was forced to change her behavior solely under the pressure of public outrage.

Yet the final word in the case was delivered not by the singer but by the Supreme Court. Under

public pressure, it suddenly ruled in favor of Polina Lurye, overturned all lower-court decisions and authorized Dolina's forcible eviction from the apartment. The fact that a Putin-era court can shift its position under public pressure is, of course, astonishing.

This is an extremely revealing precedent because it shows which pressure points in Russian society today are the most sensitive. It turned out that society is capable of rallying only around an issue that does not appear political and therefore carries no risk of punishment for protest. Yet behind this surge of outrage lies a deep, almost total mistrust of state institutions — the courts, the security agencies, the entire system of power. These institutions are perceived as openly hostile, serving only a narrow caste of the privileged.

And this is precisely why this small victory for society proved so inspiring for many Russians. It offered a rare sense that even under current conditions, resistance to arbitrariness is possible — even if only in a domestic, "non-political" matter. Most Russians continue to live in a state of enforced self-deception, pretending that the war does not exist and focusing on everyday concerns. But the story of Larisa Dolina suddenly revealed that beneath this familiar apathy lies a powerful reservoir of mistrust and resentment toward the state — and that this reservoir can ignite even over one seemingly private apartment.

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