
The Russia that does not stand with Putin. Andronick Arutyunov: “Russians should be given the opportunity to be informed, democracy is important”

"I previously faced the risk of arrest because of my work in the trade union, and now I face arrest also for my anti-war stance. Professor **Andronick Arutyunov**, associate professor at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, lecturer at the Free University of Moscow and co-chairman of independent trade union movement 'University Solidarity', speaks without mincing his words. Within days of the outbreak of the war against Ukraine, an anti-war statement appeared on the website of the union born in 2013. "Many of our colleagues told us it was too soft, that we should have come out stronger. On the other hand, those who consider us enemies of humanity did not appreciate it. It was challenging to draft that text given the political situation today, but telling the truth is among the prime responsibilities of academia." There have been no repercussions since the release of the statement, not until now, but they surely "have read it and must have thought that it was nothing new, since our union has never shown much loyalty to the government." Since February 24, 2022, in addition to his normal job, Professor Arutyunov has been involved in efforts to help colleagues and students facing problems with the Russian government. "On a formal level not much has changed since that day," he tells SIR, "but much has changed on the ground." **Some academics have left the country, others have been suspended: what is the situation? Are there any updated figures available?** Many talented teachers and students have left; many have remained. I don't think we have any data at the moment. Unlike universities in the rest of the world, salaries for university staff in Russia is very low (200-300 dollars). In addition, universities are home to those who have nowhere else to work. The latter are certainly pro-government. But there are good lecturers, they manage to access funding, have multiple assignments and commitments and they dislike current Russian politics. *If the government were to change one day, there would also have to be a renewal in the area of academic education, because a country as large as Russia cannot thrive without successful higher education.* Universities are also places for students who want to avoid military service or don't know what else to do. But I also have students who have been arrested and imprisoned for 30 days, some have been fined for their positions on the war. **What could stop the war? What are your hopes?** I don't know how it will end, but I am sure that Russia will not win this war. I know that there is nothing I can do to stop it, but I can work for the future of the country and for the future of its academic institutions. I am also confident that when the war ends Ukraine will stand good chances to make a new start, to rebuild the country and make it strong. By contrast, I see no chance for our citizens, teachers, students in Russia, for the future. We are bound to face enormous problems, on top of those we already have. The Russians will have to pay for the war. As for academic research, the future is bleak. However, I do believe that our colleagues abroad will not part with Russian academics. They will ask us what we think about the war, and rightly so, but they will continue a dialogue with those who opposed the war. That's the only possibility, if not, we will die. That's our appeal to our colleagues abroad: do not isolate us. **Russian intelligence officers are contacting and interrogating the relatives of those who have left the country to make them come back. Are you aware of this?** I'll answer with a joke: a boy at school says he received a letter from his uncle in Britain asking him to come and help him. His schoolmates suggest that the uncle return to Russia to be helped. "My uncle is blind, not dumb," the boy replies. The moral of the story is that if someone has left the country, FSB interrogations are a good reason not to return to Russia. **Why aren't you leaving?** I don't like the Russian government, but I do like the country where I was born. I feel that I must work for Russia and its future by staying here. I can't say that I feel safe here, but I think I am safe enough at the moment. Besides, my parents are here and I wouldn't feel comfortable leaving them. However, should the situation change, I would consider it. *The future of Russian universities has to be changed by remaining here. It cannot be done from Poland or the Czech Republic.*

*Certainly those who are abroad can help, but someone has to be here. Furthermore, many of my students cannot leave the country. So we need someone to help them, to talk to them. For example, last weekend, we met to watch a film about Anna Harendt and exchange views. There were about thirty of us. It was very helpful and meaningful. **What are your thoughts about May 9?** I'm not interested in official government celebrations. I doubt the president will say anything interesting. It will be a working day. But that day 70 years ago was very important for the USSR. So many lessons we failed to understand, but we will have to learn and teach those lessons. Ukraine has learned many lessons and that is good; we have not. For example, it has understood the importance of electing its President, the importance of democracy. **If those lessons have not been learned for 70 years, how can they be learned now?** I think it's very important to offer Russians the means to be informed. A lot of people are informed via TV, so we need to change it, because there is no media freedom in Russia. Take Navalny's documentaries on corruption, for example. In the West, such a thing would cause a stir, but here it led to the arrest of the documentaries' filmmakers. *There is only one place in Russia where free information can be found, and that's the internet, but without VPN access certain media outlets are not available, only government fairy tales. Also school education has to be changed, since teachers propagate a negative image of Russian reality (such as the fact that Ukrainians are Nazis).* Other opinions on the world must be allowed, because otherwise, after twenty years of conveying the message that Ukrainians are Russia-hating enemies, some things are bound to happen. We also need to change numerous laws. The de-nazification process that took place in Germany after World War II must take place also in Russia. **A new bill amending and toughening provisions relating to so-called 'foreign agents' is pending discussion: will it become impossible for people like Navalny to even consider entering politics?** Unless radical changes occur in the next few years, Russia will have no future. **But how was it possible for Vladimir Putin to determine the country's destiny to such an extent?** I don't think that this government is a government of the people. In fact, it is a force that has occupied Russia. I have been an observer of Russian elections for years and I witnessed that the election was unfair. Putin's political party consistently won 40 per cent of the vote, maybe even less, though official data reported otherwise. However, in reality there were no alternatives. Therefore it was a de facto take-over. It is not the Russian army that is fighting in Ukraine, it's Putin's army. The footage shows that they came from very poor areas of Russia, and they are a hoard of bandits. The war with Ukraine began in 2014, but Putin initiated a cold war with Russia in 2001, shutting down news media, killing opponents. What happened on February 24, 2022 was that Europe and the US started to realise what was happening. Obviously it is our problem and we have failed to counter it effectively. Europe is not the one who can bring about a change in Russia, we must do it ourselves. Of course gas and oil should no longer be bought from the Russian Federation, as Navalny has been asking for years, because it is purchased from murderers. The problem is obviously Russia, not Ukraine.*

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