Nato, a Moscow student and the young people's struggle against the war: “There is no more room for indifference"

Being a 22-year-old philosophy student in Moscow, and seeing things differently from the Establishment's way of thinking is sensitive, risky business in 2022. To the extent that the young woman whom we met and interviewed via a live stream link, asked us not to mention her surname or publish a picture of her. The girl's name is quite ironical, given the time and place she lives in: her name is Nato, a not uncommon Georgian name, since her father is Georgian, while her mother is Russian. “I'm just a student, no one knows me and normally I remain silent, so no one will notice me." But it is necessary to protect her safety, and we gladly comply. That girl represents hope. Nato has lively eyes, a cheerful face, large glasses that will not stay in place. She answers our questions with great openness from her small book-laden room. She reflects at length before speaking, her voice cracking every now and then. Nato's life changed after February 24: "I stopped going out since the outbreak of the war. I only go to university. I don't go to clubs, parties, because me and my friends are all being closely monitored." Nato speaks about her sense of isolation and the need to be cautious about her whereabouts, "because I'm afraid that someone might report me with charges of disloyalty." The biggest turning point in her life occurred seven years ago, in February 2015, when Boris Nemtsov, one of the opposition leaders, was killed in the centre of Moscow: "At that moment I understood that I needed to be involved and that something had to be done to ensure the establishment of a democratic Russia. I was 14 years-old and I felt that the society I was living in was not a normal one." The systematic deterioration of democracy continued, the areas of freedom became increasingly smaller, while Nato felt a growing sense of "responsibility, as a young person, to fight for democracy in our country." She used to think she might leave "a year or two and then return with new insights and knowledge on the best practices of an efficient and democratic society. Now that feeling has almost become a matter of urgency. She says that once she finishes her philosophy studies she will have to decide whether to pursue further education in philosophy, "'because I like it so much", or go on to study political science. However, it will have to be in Europe: "'Education in Russia is controlled by the government in many ways today, and I don't think that studying here would be a good idea." However, Nato says she is not alone. I trustfully ask whether the possibility that one day there will be a rebellion against the war and against Putin also in Russia lies with young people like herself. But her answer is disappointing: "I don't think young people are any different from the preceding generation. Young people are more informed, but maybe this only leads them to be more liberal. Many young people approve of the war and they believe Russian State propaganda just like the adults." According to Nato, the dividing line between those who approve of the war and those who don't is not one between generations, nor does it involve education levels, in fact it concerns "the way of thinking and self-perception: people who are used to logical thinking, those who normally analyse the information they receive, and act responsibly, are against the war. Conversely, those whose decisions are determined by emotions, by what the majority wants, those who need to feel they are part of a whole, support not so much the war per se but the government, since they feel they are being ignored by the rest of the world and feel the need to support Russia because it is the only thing they have." She continues: "Many learned people support the war, and this is a mystery to me, because the war has had devastating consequences for Russia as well as for the rest of the world. However, I understand that they base their opinions on something that is more ontological than self-interest. I obviously disagree, but I understand that it stems from the legacy of a deep-rooted sense of loyalty." An estimated 30 percent of anti-war activists are still living in Russia, while another 5 million have left the country, including many friends of Nato, especially young men. The dissidents "represent the dynamic and politically-engaged part of Russia. Those are the people I admire and look up to," Nato says. This is when her voice starts trembling. Nato is actively involved herself: she volunteers at a special home for children who were victims of the Russian and Ukrainian armed

forces' operations in the Donbass; she contributes to one of the Telegram channels of Ilya Krasilshchik (founder of the Meduza news outlet); and she openly expresses her political views on social media channels, although, she points out, "my social media accounts are private and only accessed by people I know in person." The Russian police are not the only opponents of anti-war and anti-regime activists, there are also many suspicious people who duck into "the ideology of loyalty", Nato explains: "many people think that activists have personal interests and are not loyal, that they are betraying their homeland. This is a very irrational thought", but it is one that jeopardises the opposition, and the same would happen if it were more numerous: "We have the example of Belarus: many people took to the streets, they protested, they were beaten by the police, but nothing changed. And the situation in Russia is much worse. Our opposition leader is in prison, all activists are abroad and all the police officers work for the government and their hands are tied, as there is nothing they can do to oppose the government." According to Nato, the only potential solutions may come "from within the circle of Russian authorities or maybe from outside Russia, in the case of a Ukrainian victory. If not, Russian society stands no chance of moving towards a democratic revolution." The origin of this drift is clear: "Putin succeeded in creating this situation because the population made it possible for him to shape this state of affairs. People were not ready for the global community, they had no sense of identity, we lacked a tradition whereby we chose and decided our own destiny. There was always someone who represented us and gave us something in return. Putin managed to make the democratic revolution in Russia impossible. But I think there will be no more victories for him." In the meantime, life in Moscow continues almost as before: "everything has become slightly more expensive, but for now, there has been relatively small impact on everyday life. Certainly there is a shortage of components for manufacturing aircraft and vehicles", Nato says. In other Russian cities, the general sentiment was different right from the start, not least because of the widespread use of patriotic symbolism. However, there are some cracks: for example, you can perceive the suffering of many people who understand that something terrible is happening: "Ukraine is a nation that is very close to Russia, and the Russians see the Ukrainians as human beings who have our same feelings. Even the Russians who support the war in Ukraine realise that their nation did something horrible in a country that is so close to ours. It's a terrifying thought. Even the unperturbed Moscow is starting to crack. At first, government authorities "succeeded in conveying the misconception that nothing was actually happening." Now the mayor of Moscow announced that the funds that were meant to be spent on the forthcoming festivities in the capital will be used to cover the needs of the army and the war: "so now everyone realises that we are at war with Ukraine and no one can ignore the elephant in the room any longer. There used to be some room for indifference, now there is none."

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