nova·nevėdoma



Why I don't go to Russia

nova-nevedoma.com/why-i-dont-go-to-russia/



The Motherland hears I've never properly pondered what it would be like, what it would mean for me and cost me to write and publish an anti-war, anti-totalitarian, blatantly anti-government, book if I were still in Russia. The truth is, I would likely not do it at all. I feel somewhat privileged and even lucky, but not in a sense of bold achievement or good fortune akin winning a lottery, but in a sense of holding in a special position, wherein "special" means that the position provides relative safety and an opportunity to speak against the regime without fear of prosecution. After all, I'm in the UK, far away from that regime, Russian police won't knock on my door in the morning, won't put me in prison, won't torture me and won't send me to fight in their war. They won't even read this or any anti-state statement I've put online over the past, almost three years, including my book. I'm a little man to them, though it wouldn't, as we well know, stop them from ruining my life for some words put online or in print. To wield an opportunity to speak and to exert it comes as a personal moral duty, even though it's fortified not by bravery but by recklessness in my case. I still have family in Russia and although they are safe, I sometimes feel my actions could somehow have consequences for them. In essence, it's irrational, but that's what the terrorist regime wants—to instil terror in you.

I don't feel that fear often, so I consider myself rather reckless than brave, for bravery, in my language game at least, involves courage to overcome that fear. Perhaps I don't ponder the potential and theoretical legal consequences of my actions, for I feel safe, geographically at least, to act. I did small things, not as much as I could of course—many

people whom I know personally do way more than I do and I respect and acknowledge that—but still I joined protests, donated to good causes in early days, published 'illegal' statements online, etc. because I wasn't in Russia and that wasn't a dangerous thing to do. Again, being there, I would probably choose safety and I'm fine to admit it. I don't want to judge anyone who made the same decision, for it's a personal choice. "Martyrdom" is not a wholesale good and not a default behaviour you should expect from a normal person. Nobody wants to go to fucking gulag.

Once upon a time, which was a few days ago, in a land far, far away, which was in London, England, that sense of unfair and lucky position sprang again in my brain with quite surreal aftereffects. My dear wife and I held a stall at the Anarchist book fair with my book "Deleted Scenes from the Bestselling Utopian Novel". For a good half a day we had to talk of Russian propaganda, totalitarianism, and police violence to complete strangers and why they must buy the book (of course they must). That said, we managed to sell some copies and even to stock a few in a real bookshop (more on that some time later), which I consider a great success. See, the whole book situation is still surreal to me but that event propelled it to a new level due to the sheer impossibility of such an event were we in Russia. "Huh," I asked my wife, "how many years in prison would I get?" This is an ironic question that many probably ask themselves, though some already have sentences waiting for them when they come back. Today, I want to attempt to answer that question for myself and analyse the book for "legality" in my

homeland were it miraculously published there in Russian.

I don't want to come as self-important and exaggerate qualities of my work by saying that "it would be illegal and banned in Russia, therefore you should buy it!" I consider it's rather vulgar and tasteless to speak about such things in the subjunctive mood—using "ifs" and "maybes" and "woulds", because it doesn't add any points to it, not for me. Well, of course it "would" be illegal, and I must admit sometimes there appears a weird feeling as "if" I've done something truly contrarian and non-conformist that gives me confidence, a feeling of claiming agency and power, of making a statement, in a way, but I'm not officially a dissident, not an "extremist", not a "foreign agent", as Russian government could kindly mark me as, and there's not much at stake for me. For a little man in a faraway place, the risk is only hypothetical, but that is exactly the point I want to make by writing this. My goal is to once again remind of the cost of losing one's freedom of speech and to create more awareness that even for a little man or woman out there, however absurd it should be in the XXI century, there still exists a real risk of prison, torture, and even death, for speaking out, even in a satirical, fictional way, sometimes even if you write "stop the war" covering all letters with asterisks.

After the war, and even before it started, the government introduced a range of repressive laws aimed at smothering dissent of any kind [1, 2, 3, ...]. The chilling reality is that these laws are vague and can be interpreted and used widely against not only opposition leaders but ordinary people, too. Thus, people of all degrees of political

involvement are arrested and imprisoned for public statements, “likes”, and even private conversations. OVD-info, an organisation that monitors and advocates for human rights in Russia and aims to help political prisoners, has many articles and statistics about thousands of such cases; I can’t possibly list all of them here, even though I want to.

Publishing my book in Russia would potentially violate numerous laws; again, I doubt I can list all of them, so I’ll do that for the most “popular” ones, those that often become reasons for arrest.

The book’s premise itself could be considered as “spreading ‘fake news’ about the Russian military”. The fictional war between Novo Tsarstvo and Slobodna Zembla, mirroring the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the satirical depiction of Novo Tsarstvo’s “peacekeeping operation” directly contradict the Kremlin’s official narrative. Article 207.3 of the Criminal Code criminalises the public dissemination of deliberately false information about the use of the Russian armed forces. Calling the war a “war” and talking about Russian war crimes can count as spreading misinformation and could lead to up to 15 years in prison and a fine of 5 million rubles.

Similar to that, negative portrayal of Novo Tsarsto’s military and its actions, including the depiction of soldiers committing atrocities, challenges the image of Russian military as “a heroic force”, which, according to Article 280.3, is counted as “discreditation” of the Russian armed forces and may result in fines, forced labour, or imprisonment for up to 5 years. As the law’s definition is broad enough, any anti-war

sentiment could be considered “discrediting”.

The book dehumanises and insults law enforcement by portraying the police and military as pig-headed demons, has scenes of violence commited by the police and against them by the protagonist. Article 319 criminalises public insult of a representative of authority while carrying out their “official duties” (it may also include torture, apparently), and may lead to fines or correctional labour for up to 1 year. The satirical portrayal of the Tsar (guess who that is), as a tyrannical and power-hungry leader, can easily be constructed as an insult and disrespect for the authorities as well.

The combination of the book’s themes — the criticism of the war, the portrayal of the Novo Tsarstvo regime as dystopian, the dehumanisation of police, the depiction of violence against a law enforcement officer — creates “a highly charged and potentially inflammatory message” and can be considered as “extremism”. Such as, Article 282 of the Criminal Code, has a broad definition of it, encompassing actions aimed at inciting hatred or hostility, as well as violence. Due to the article’s vagueness, anything can be considered as “extremism”, any online posts included—that’s how this article has become one of the most commonly applied methods of silencing dissent. It is punished by the penalty, or compulsory labour up to 5 years with deprivation of the right to hold the certain posts or to engage in the certain activities for the term up to 3 years, or imprisonment for the term from 3 up to 6 years.

The book's critical stance and me having "foreign connections" could lead to my designation as a "foreign agent". This also imposes stringent legal limitations and obligations, including mandatory registration and reporting of activities, along with severe penalties for non-compliance, such as fines or imprisonment.

The list might be incomplete, but I want to stop here—I already feel like I'm doing someone else's job (вечер в хату, товарищ майор!). It's difficult to predict the exact consequences that I would face, given the wide latitude in how the authorities interpret and apply the laws. Given the overlapping nature of the charges, I could be labelled as a criminal and an enemy of the state, or arrested, or imprisoned, or have my property confiscated (only if I had any), but in any case, my life would be "altered", to put it mildly.

Nevertheless, these laws are used not only to punish specific actions but also to discourage any form of criticism or dissent. They demonstrate a selective manipulation of the legal system and are designed to protect the state rather than ensure justice, especially when it comes to the war in Ukraine. Being in Russia is a real risk for anyone, whether you're low-profile or high-profile, especially for men when it comes to mobilisation, and this risk, however small it might often seem, is always asymmetrical.

Having my book published and writing this post obviously doesn't reduce it. In no way it makes me better than anyone else—that's not and shouldn't be the point of writing such a book. I have few opportunities

to affect the downward-spiralling tragedy, but speak about it publicly, whether it's non-fiction or fiction, is one of them that I don't want to lose. It's the least I can do, at least for myself, at least now.

Mikhail Shishkin, a contemporary Russian novelist, is an active opponent of Putin's regime. In his essays, published in leading global media outlets (WSJ, The Guardian, Le Monde, and others), he elucidates Russia and its aggression against Ukraine to the Western reader through the prism of the country's history and his own family's story. You can read his "letter to an unknown Ukrainian" or interview with him in English, or his essay or his interview about silence in Russian. He left the country in 1995 and has been living in Switzerland since then. Back in 2004, in his interview about writing in emigration he said:

> "Russian literature is not merely a form of language's existence, but a means for non-totalitarian consciousness to persist in Russia. It has wedged itself into the fissure between a bark of command and a groan of suffering. Its language is a defence, an islet of words upon which human dignity must be preserved. This is my struggle, my war." I love this quote; it's incredibly comforting and inspiring at the same time. Despite all that I've published so far being in English, I consider myself a Russian writer, at least partially, and I hope my work and my book are that spark of non-totalitarian consciousness which can elucidate some portion of truth to you, my dear reader.

Thank you for your time! ”Deleted Scenes” is my best and most personal work to date. Although I originally started it as a sublimation, its true purpose manifests only when someone reads it.

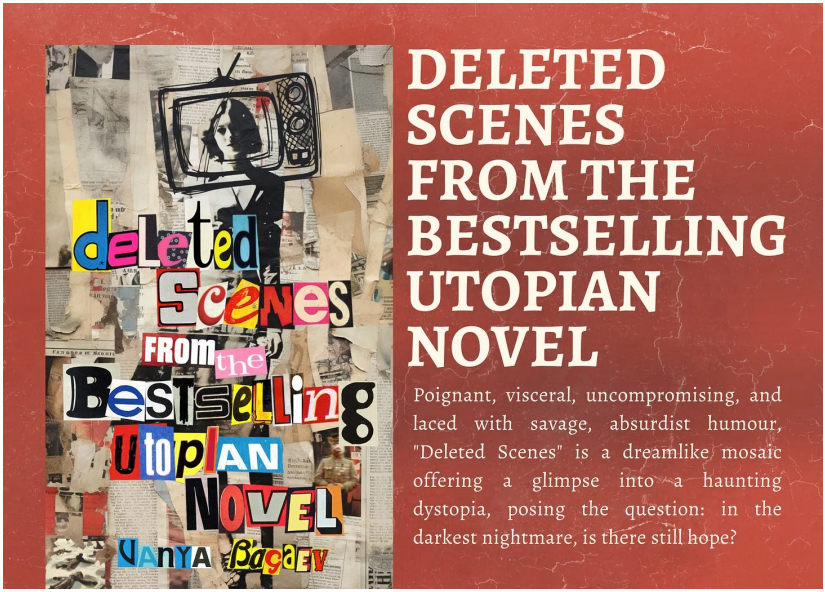
Should you be interested, the book is available worldwide as softcover, hardcover, or ebook at all major retailers, including Amazon, Waterstones (UK), Foyles (UK), Barnes & Noble (US), Hugendubel (DE), Kobo (ebook).

If you want to read the book but have any trouble getting hold of a copy, including financial, please reach out to me. I'll do my best to help!

To get a taste of the book, you can read one of the stories, “Dream”, for free on this website.

Here's a recent review by M. E. Rothwell to pique more interest:

> Haunting and thought-provoking



Bagaev's "Deleted Scenes from the Bestselling Utopian Novel" is a haunting and thought-provoking collection of interconnected stories that explore the dark underbelly of a supposedly perfect society. With vivid prose and surreal imagery, the author crafts a chilling portrayal of life under an oppressive regime. Each vignette offers a unique perspective on themes of freedom, identity, and the human spirit's resilience in the face of tyranny. Bagaev's writing is both beautiful and unsettling, drawing readers into a world that feels eerily familiar yet disturbingly alien. This book will linger in your mind long after you've turned the final page, challenging your perceptions of utopia and the cost of societal perfection.

nova·nevédoma

A literary locus and samizdat press
for original fictions and translations.

nova-nevedoma.com



scan to subscribe

Find us on Substack

blog.nova-nevedoma.com