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Interview / Audio

# Phone-a-Friend / Звонок другу: Hopelessness as a Tool of Politicizing Queerness in Today's Russia. Interview with Philosopher and Activist Kolya Nakhshunov

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# Phone-a-Friend / Звонок другу: Hopelessness as a Tool of Politicizing Queerness in Today's Russia. Interview with Philosopher and Activist Kolya Nakhshunov

Pasha Tretyakova and Kolya Nakhshunov

Two friends and scholars talk about hope in the context of Russia, touching on Russian history of thought and the contemporary struggles for queer rights. Pasha wonders how to go on. Kolya talks about how the absence of hope opens up the possibility for political action. Together, they think about what being queer in Russia today entails — and how one can find community in the midst of dark times.

This is an audio conversation with a transcript for accessibility.

**Keywords:** community, hopelessness, queerness, resistance, Russia, Silver Century

You can listen to the audio of the conversation between Pasha and Kolya here

This piece is intended as an audio piece first and foremost. We provide a supplementary transcript for accessibility and referencing purposes.

**[transcript]**

**Pasha:** Hi, this is *The February Journal*. I'm Pasha Tretyakova, a researcher of Russia and editor of *The February Journal*.

I'm here with my friend Nikolai Nakhshunov, Kolya, a philosopher, author, and activist based in Russia. We're here to talk about hope and not having any. Kolya, I'm not going to ask you "*как дела?*" which is Russian for "how are things?" I'm going to ask you "how are you?" They mean the same thing, but their language connotations are very different. So how are you?

**Kolya:** Hi Pasha, thank you for calling. I'm fine, it's quite a formal answer, but I'm fine, and you?

**Pasha:** Yeah, I would say I am well. I'm always kind of caught in that question in knowing that I have a lot of things to be very thankful for, but sometimes I don't feel very good about them.

**Kolya:** You know, today in Russia, I can say for the last three years, when asking "how are you?" or "what's going on?" they usually add "I hope you're okay today, and I hope all is well in these circumstances." And I can say that I am okay. I'm a terrible one. But anyway, thank you nonetheless for this question. Even one question is quite supportive.

**Pasha:** The English language question does not necessarily invite a real answer, but it still shows solicitude, and I think that that does count for something. But I think there's also the question of what do we hope for when we ask that? Do we hope to hear something positive, or are we okay with not hearing something positive? Andrei Zavadski, one of my fellow editors here at *February*, remarks that admitting to not doing well is a sign of close friendship. And that's one of the things that is transversive, and it's one of the things that you and I both look at, how friendship and intimacy can surpass some of the walls that violence builds. But I think it's still hard to answer, and it's hard to work up the courage to ask, to really ask. I think we are taught to brood on emotions more than process them, which I blame Russian novels for. And I think a lot of people do this — there's a certain valuing of the process of brooding rather than sharing. It is something that can really anchor you down. But I do hope for solidarity and hope for being able to show up in some form of sincerity. What do you hope for?

**Kolya:** I can support you, support this thesis. To hope, first of all, it is a process. It is an emotional process, and I can't answer if it is easy to hope or it is hard to hope. Because in different epochs, in different contexts, hope, as I know, it's a particular activity. A particular activity of creating of an image of a particular future. Hope which is really close to utopia in political imagination, why not. But hope, the feeling of hope is not close to my own views. It's not my cup of tea, because hope... Here, I'm quite close to Hannah Arendt and her writings about freedom, especially on humanity in dark times. Where she writes about hope as a positive equivalent of fear, because in fear one shrinks back from reality. And in hope, the soul overlaps reality. It breaks the real circumstances. It helps us to forget about the reality.

And the thing that I'm really afraid of is forgetting the reality. Forgetting that the war is ongoing, that we live in a dictatorship, that the whole world, it seems, is crazy. Especially today, and of course, I feel fear. Of course, I feel hope as some primordial part of my human essence, of my feeling scenario. But I can't say that hope helps me. I can't say that hope is a tool which I want to use, which I want to practice, because I can't feel that hope, especially *feel* but also *think* that hope may make things better. I don't believe that hope can struggle against Putin. I don't believe that hope can improve the current situation. Of course, I can't hope and I can't believe that only hope, only quite idealistic feeling, can end the war or just imagine the end of the war.

**Pasha:** You said something about hope not being helpful. And I'm wondering what is the difference between hopelessness and helplessness?

**Kolya:** Thank you for asking. When you're hopeless, I think you are still free. You can still feel freedom. You can still realize your personal freedom. When you're hopeless, you still can see your face, can feel your arms, can act, politically speaking. But when you're helpless, I think you can't act. You can't even think and when you're helpless, you are in a quite terrible state. I'm afraid that hope breaks us, that hope leads us to the state of some kind of helplessness. Because when we hope, we feel really atomized. I mean, the social atomization is caused partly by hope, by hope in quite unpractical ideals. But helpless, can you a little bit elaborate?

**Pasha:** Yeah, I think something that you just said, social atomization, is interesting because it's something that I have experienced in Russian circles. Not with close friends, but in wider circles of Russians abroad, or in Russia since the beginning of the full scale invasion of Ukraine. I mean, I think that was a moment of helplessness then, and we have been learning how to become less helpless. A feeling of not knowing what can be done, and of finding tools to do something. Helplessness. When I say the word, I see the image of a child standing by their mother with their arms pulled up, like asking to be held. That is what I see when I think helpless when you just, you want help because you can't give it to yourself. And it was a scary place to be. But I like that in your thinking, you have highlighted some of the ways that we have historically dealt with a sense of helplessness, particularly through the work of Nadezhda Mandelstam. Could you talk a little bit about that?

**Kolya:** Yeah, exactly. An image of a child who cries, but when we see a child crying, we can say exactly, we can say they're helpless. They need a parent to support, to find the right way, maybe to give hope. And in this sense, hopeful and helplessness are quite close, but hopeless is... sometimes it can give us a special force, some spiritual force. And of course, Nadezhda Mandelstam, I really like the Silver Century in Russian poetry.

**Pasha:** Which is the beginning of the 20th century and the period of the Russian Revolution, which is when Nadezhda's husband, Osip Mandelstam, lived and was celebrated and then repressed. And so Nadezhda wrote a memoir of the period, which is hailed as an important artifact of the feeling of the time.

**Kolya:** Yeah, it is a pure historical document and not only historical document, but a piece of witness, but not a struggling witness, but a participative witness. I remember some lines from this book, Nadezhda asks herself a question. A question: what to do when you lose hope? Most people of the Silver Century, and I think they're quite popular and familiar for the intellectual public such as Marina Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandelstam, and of course Nadezhda Mandelstam.

And in this memoir, which is named "Nadezhda against Hope," which means hope against hope, because Nadezhda, the Russian name, translates as hope. And Nadezhda tells us that when you lose everything,

when you lose all your relatives, all your siblings, all your friends, it seems that you can't do anything. It seems that the situation is totally ruined, that the life is ended. But you still can hold, you still can cry, you still can manifest about the situation. And this performative action, I think this action is very performative because it's active and it's visible, you can see it and you can feel this whole. You can feel these nerves under your skin. And when the hope leaves you, you can still manifest. Manifest that you live, manifest that the life still goes on. And I think this manifestation, this perhaps tragic manifestation is quite active form of resistance, an active form of witnessing and not only documentation, but of acting, of transforming the regimes of visibility, regimes of feeling, emotional regimes, that you give a starting point for new emotionalities, new sensitivities. You give rise not to hope, but to an understanding that you are not alone, that people like you are not alone.

And in this sense, I find the experience of Nadezhda Mandelstam, the experience of many people of the Silver Century—they were superfluous people. A concept which is quite widespread in Russian literature, not only Russian speaking literature, but superfluous people, those who lost hope, but still can be themselves, still can feel their authenticity. And I think they still can create communities. They could create communities during totalitarian Stalin's rule, and they can still create communities of action, communities of co-feeling, co-struggling. Even today in Russia, which is quite exclusive. When I say Russia is exclusive, it's not hostile only to queer people.

Putin's Russia is really hostile to every difference, to every authenticity. It states the regime, the structure of power. It states unification, unification of style of thinking, unification of behaving, unification of everything. And in this way, any uniqueness, any authenticity, it is a crime. I can't say that it is illegal, but when the system, the system of repressive power finds you in some sense attractive, behaving abnormally, they find the legal grounds, some laws or norms that you've broken and they capture you and put you on the table of repression.

**Pasha:** That's an interesting way to put it, because there is this feeling that the state operates kind of like a floodlight in the darkness and you don't know what it's going to pick up on and it can be super random, in some sense. As in, a clerical mistake or somebody saw something... and then it can also not pick up on something, but once it does, it really tries to hold it in that light of preparation of ... as in on a table, on a surgical kind of a table, and unpick it. And we see that happening to NGOs, all kinds of initiatives. It just gets harder and harder to do any kind of work that is not directly sanctioned by the government.

And now that we've been to the past a little bit and have returned to the present, I want to ask about the future because in this issue of The February Journal, edited by Isabel Bredenbröker, '"Hope"' to Solve Some "Problems" Here? Investigations into the Agentive Potential of Ambiguous Terms,' we're thinking about hope as a future-oriented political practice. So my question for you is, when there is an absence and a loss of hope, where does that point us? What direction? Can we still look to the future?

**Kolya:** Honestly speaking, I don't know. But I don't know the exact translation of the phrase '*дорогу осилит идущий.*' Is there any equivalence in English, maybe you know?

**Pasha:** Yeah, the literal translation would be 'the one who is walking is the one who will manage the road.' I can't think of anything right now of an English language equivalent, but that's a good phrase.

**Kolya:** I believe in this, sincerely. Hope gives kind of foggy ideals, very foggy and we can't see them clearly. Another good example is Bolsheviks, because Bolsheviks are also a product of an epoch ... of an epoch of the late Russian Empire, as well as the Silver Century is a product of this historical epoch. Bolsheviks were very hopeful people. They hope in communism, they hope in a type of ideology that will make everyone really happy, happy and joyful. But on the one hand, we can see Bolsheviks with their Gulag state, with their totalitarianism. And on the other hand, we can see people without hope, people of the Silver Century, people of the Dark Times. And these people are much closer for me. I mean Mandelstams, Tsvetaeva, Ahmatova, Gumilyov, and many others. Their hopelessness, their authentic feelings, their believing in the moment right now, their true adventurism. It gave them and now it gives us not a hope, but a responsibility. A responsibility for the future, because everything we do, everything we create can influence what will be tomorrow.

And this responsibility, it's hard for me to say—is it personal or civic responsibility? But a responsibility not only for the polity, not only for the political community, but a responsibility for our close ones, for our significant others, for our parents, for our friends. Responsibility for those who we truly love. I can say that losing hope is not scary, but on a personal level. Because you still are among these close people. And with these people you can create and use spaces. And use spaces out-of-placeness, because these people and you aren't in these repressive regimes. Of course physically we're still in Russia—I'm still in Russia—but you create spiritual realms in which you can still laugh, you can still create political projects, you can still fight for rights, you can still write articles and create texts. You can still create creativity in its very sense, creativity as a natality of creating something new. It's still possible. It's still possible on the personal level or in some semi-public or subaltern public level, but it's still possible. If you choose this particular responsibility for your community, for your identity, you should understand that all official publicities, all official public practices are quite far from you. They are not with you and you are not with them. Because repressive official publicity is about repressive visibilities, repressive regimes of how the state and the authorities see, feel or dictate you how to feel.

So to resist, you should find your place. You should find your place in the space where the placeness is impossible in the very sense. Different examples of such outside-of-placeness, we can find again in literature, because the concept of Howl, the concept of howl, or *voj* in Russian, isn't unique for Nadezhda Mandelstam. It's also quite acquainted for those who

know American literature, especially Ginsberg. His *Howl* is a classic of Beatnik literature. And I think that Ginsberg's Martyrs,[1] those who struggled but still loved each other, still create new intimacies. This is a space, it is a starting point of new order, of a future. It's not an ideological future, it's not an ideology, it's not an utopia, but it is a life. It is a new form of life in which we are not foreigners for each other, we are friends, good friends and lovers. And I think this future is not an ideological future, it's our common future as a humanity, because I said a lot about human authenticity, about special traits of a human character. This authenticity is really important, because the true authenticity of a person is love, it's love, it's loving each other.

**Pasha:** I really like how you position the out-of-placeness, because that is definitely... I don't live in Russia full time right now, but I have in the last couple of years. And even upon visits that out-of-placeness that I feel really scares me often, because it does feel like a void that you can keep falling through. And it has made that fear manifest in different ways. I have felt disidentification, which is something that José Muñoz talks about as both the desire to see and the inability to see. And so that feeling of unsafeness, it can just really penetrate very far into what you are able to even recognize.

**Kolya:** Sometimes you find out that in this state, the state of out-of-placeness, you're not alone. For example—

**Pasha:** Right, that's what I want to ask about. How do we find each other in there? And in your work, you talk about how queerness links to friendship. But I think in the context of fear, it can be harder to find each other in the dark or to show up authentically. So I was wondering how you see that ambiguity of interpersonal relationships becoming a space for something that can be safe.

**Kolya:** I believe, I really believe, I think maybe not only believe, but I *know* that love and friendship is some kind of eternal phenomenon. It's impossible not to say about epochs and not to say about history, because we are speaking about the future and futures and about imagination and about who. Because all of these concepts are quite related to history, the history of humanity. And love and friendship as a phenomena of closeness, of intimacy. We can find them in everything and everywhere. And for every queer person in Russia, it's an unimaginable experience when we read books and articles of Irina Roldugina, Dan Healey's articles and Rustam Alexander's books about queer people in the USSR.

And we find that even in that totalitarian regime with criminal punishment for same-sex relationships and with the pathologization of homosexuality, queer people still could find places, still could find languages of communication, of meeting, of co-feeling. Maybe it's one more idealistic example and very romantic, but it will be unjust if I don't share this example. The film and the book 'Жар-птица,' 'Firebird,' I know that in London it's quite

popular play and a book and a film about two soldiers in the USSR army who felt a mutual love, homosexual love. And they could create a place in their Soviet flat, place of love, place of mutual understanding and mutual romantic feeling. This story had a really dramatic ending and you can read it, you can watch this film. I won't give spoilers, but it's really inspiring. It's really inspiring when you see people in repressive, much more repressive order and much more repressive fields than today.

But today we still can politicize each other. We still can find languages, we still can find means of communication, we still can find the types of environment in which we can see each other, speak with each other and to share ideas, to share not hope, but share beliefs, beliefs, perspectives, creating future for each other. I really like to say that everything that we do ... me, for example, I still participate in Russian academic life. I still write texts in Russian on queer problematics and LGBTQ+ problematics. I still try to cultivate some kind of political thinking among Russian queers abroad and in Russia. I always repeat that I feel responsible, but I feel responsible for those people with whom I am, for those queers, for those political resistant people, for resistant groups of students. I don't feel responsible for authorities, for example, for loyal professors, loyal to Putin's regime.

So this is liminal, of course it's liminal, it's liminal place of co-responsibility is linked with co-feeling and co-acting, is the place where we can see each other purely, see the soul of each other. This practice of... maybe Foucault would call it asceticism and I can agree with it because it is co-asceticism when you see each other and try to improve the force of each other. Force of the soul, force of political agency, force of being those who you are. It's really important because when you are alone—and this is the fantastic ending of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*—when you feel alone, it's the scary thing because when you feel alone, you can't act, you can't create future today and you can't feel responsible because there is none to feel responsible for — you are alone. And we should by all our forces, by all our thoughts and reflections resist this political loneliness. It's hardly possible to name it political because it's unpolitical in its essence, but it's loneliness. It's totalitarian loneliness which today is really probable, but we should resist. I don't hope—I believe in it.

**Pasha:** I love that. You were making me emotional actually. But before we drop off, I want to think about the positionality of queer people in Russia a little more. On one hand, Russians hold enough power to command international attention and empathy, somewhat inconsistently. You, Kolya, recently spoke to Judith Butler about queerness in Russia and that is no small feat. There is attention or there can be. There is space for that. And on the other hand, there is a very real sense of unsafety that people live with day to day. And so I'm wondering what this privilege of visibility and attention affords in the reality where it doesn't enact a lot of change on the world around you. And I guess you're still left with hopelessness at the end of the day.

**Kolya:** Maybe you know that many gays in Russia, they still try to participate in techno raves and go to clubs, special gay clubs for feel free, for dance, for drinking, for... hanging with each other, for hooking up. And when they come to these clubs, it's some points that were shared by my friends. They come to these raves and clubs and try to feel hope. Try to feel hope that today, maybe today, the police officers, the police guards wouldn't come to this club and wouldn't oppress all of the staff and all of the people in this club. And this is a good example of bad hope, parallel with bad faith by Sartre. I'm not afraid, but I'm really upset that it's a quite widespread orienter. But I'm really upset and I can say that I'm depressed. But Judith Butler, you mentioned a talk with them, and Judith Butler told me and told us that a tactical defeat maybe is not the end of the whole process. It means that the loss of political thinking, which is a characteristic of the current situation with queer people in Russia, the loss not of hope, but loss of political action and loss of trying to be in your own way. It's not an end. It's a good point to reflect about yourself, about your means of transforming the reality, about your strength, because we are really strong. And I'm really inspired by all queer people who are currently in Russia and try to resist. I'm impressed by everyone who are abroad and inspired by queer people in Russia, because it is a kind of responsibility. Responsibility for those who are not close to you physically, but in some virtual space, we are still in one community. Not long ago I met Katya Gordeeva, a Russian-speaking journalist, antiwar, and her interviews are quite widespread, not only among Russian-speaking persons. And Katya told me a really inspiring thing: that she doesn't feel hopeful, that she isn't a hopeful person, but she's sure that the future will start, that the future will begin, and the future begins right now.

It's not evident reflection, but I can say I believe and I'm sure that future is today, not tomorrow, only because we are creators of this day. The future is not an ideological concept. The future is not utopia or dystopia. The future is us. And our possibility of acting, our possibility of refuting from the oppressive reality, all of this gives us our own future, and we are responsible for it. So we can stand with this ideal, and this ideal is life-giving. I believe in it, and I can say yes, I'm sure you, too.

**Pasha:** I think this is a great place to end. Thank you, Kolya, for this talk.

**Kolya:** Thank you, Pasha.

**Pasha:** And well, be responsible.

**Kolya:** You too, promise me.

**Pasha:** *Веди себя хорошо!* Behave. And I will talk to you later.

**Kolya:** Thank you. See you.

**Pasha:** See you.

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1. Ginsberg A (2008, reprint edition) *The Book of Martyrdom and Artifice: First Journals and Poems: 1937–1952*. New York, Grand Central Publishing.

**Authors' bio**

Nikolai (Kolya) Nakhshunov (he/they) is an independent humanities researcher, philosopher and queer activist, MA in Political Science from the University of Manchester and MSSES (Shaninka). Kolya currently teaches at several universities, writes, and is the editor of the journal New Literary Observer. His main research interests are contemporary phenomenology and the philosophy of emotions, through which he examines the public sphere and civil society in Russia, political repression and the LGBTQIA movement. He is a permanent resident of Russia.

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