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Russia/Ukraine

Against Putin's War in Ukraine

- Debate - 2022 - Ukraine -

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Spectre's Ashley Smith talked to Russian socialist Ilya Budraitskis, author of [*Dissident Among Dissidents: Ideology, Politics and the Left in Post-Soviet Russia*](#).

What are conditions like in Russia amidst the war and sanctions? What is the popular reaction to all of this? How does this break down by class and region?

The public mood has changed since the beginning of the war. In its first days, most of the people were very disappointed about it. The society was really divided and confused as there was no consensus built in advance for how people should react to it.

Despite the fact that the mobilizations against the war were not massive, they were visible and had an impact. There were some thousands of people who turned out in protests across the country. But they were harshly repressed.

Now it seems a new consensus of support for the war has developed. That's what the opinion polls indicate. Of course, you cannot trust them, but it does appear that people in the majority are accepting the propaganda from Putin's regime. There is still a minority of the population, maybe twenty to thirty percent, who strongly oppose the war.

I think the support for the war is partially rooted in a psychological predisposition to believe in the state's propaganda. People find themselves in a totally unexpected situation, something that they were not prepared for, so they opt for the most comfortable way of understanding it, which is to accept what the government is saying rather than adopt a radical position of opposition to it.

They also believe the government's claim that the war will all be over soon, and things will return to normal. This is a reassuring illusion. Who knows how they will react when they realize that nothing will ever be the same again in Russia?

The current consensus could turn dramatically in the coming months. The impact of the sanctions is severe. Hundreds of thousands of workers have lost their jobs. Young people in the big cities, who were employed by transnational corporations that have shut down, are now suddenly out of work. Industrial workers in transnational auto companies like Volkswagen have lost their jobs.

Inflation has also dramatically increased. It has had a differential impact on the country's various classes and class fractions. Before the war, social inequality was quite severe within the big cities, and also between regions. The country's poor had gotten used to surviving on the bare minimum. For them, inflation will exacerbate their poverty, but it will not introduce radically new conditions.

The middle classes, however, have been thrust into an entirely new situation. They cannot afford now to live in the way they are used to. This will destabilize their political worldview; especially as the long term nature of the economic crisis becomes apparent to them. So, no one should mistake the current consensus for a stable political condition.

What is the state of antiwar organizing? How much has government repression driven it off the streets? Has news of the disastrous nature of the war and heavy Russian casualties reached families of soldiers? Are

there any signs of dissent within the military?

The antiwar movement was immediately confronted with repression. The government moved quickly to destroy it. In the first week of the war, police arrested some fifteen thousand people. They detained them for as long as twenty days. They forced them to pay quite high fines.

The government targeted students in particular. It compelled the universities to discipline students who were involved in the protests. They went so far as to expel some of them.

They shut down all independent media. They detained and fined the reporter who protested on the evening news. They even went after people for just making posts on social media. Some of them were detained.

The government were so brutal because they did not want the antiwar movement to reach the broader population. Unfortunately, for now, they have been successful in repressing and isolating the antiwar opposition.

The twenty to thirty percent that are against the war are concentrated in the liberal and far left groups, feminists, and young people. The generational divide is particularly pronounced. I know this from personal experience as well as on social media. It has sharply divided families with parents going so far as to call their children traitors for opposing the war.

The impact of the war on soldiers and their families is quite complicated. In the beginning, the government promised that they would not call up conscripts. But it was lying. Many of the soldiers they have deployed were conscripts that they forced to sign a professional contract with the military. So, most of the soldiers are in reality conscripts sent to kill and die for Putin's imperial project.

Like all armies, the Russian one is divided by class and region. It reflects the inequalities of society. So, young people from the middle classes in the big cities like most Moscow and St Petersburg tend not to be in the army. They enter the universities and avoid military service.

The people who do enter the army as professionals and especially conscripts tend to come from poor families in smaller, provincial cities. It is a way for them to get jobs. Many hope that their time in the army will translate into a career.

A lot of the other forces deployed were police units from the National Guard that were integrated into the army to patrol occupied cities. These are usually deployed to repress protest in Russia. Putin deployed them with the expectation that he would secure a quick victory and they would be mainly ensuring order through policing the population.

All of this was of course a fantasy. But he believed it. As a result, the generals and military forces were told they would be welcomed as liberators. Neither the generals nor the soldiers expected or were prepared to confront the Ukrainian resistance.

The conscripts were not prepared for the war. So, they were demoralized. Many tried to escape, some deserted, others were captured by Ukrainian forces. There are some reports of rank-and-file soldiers refusing to obey orders and attacking their commanders. Some in the National Guard have objected to deployment. Just recently, twelve guardsmen claimed that their contracts did not include foreign service. The state fired them from the Guard and got them fired from their regular jobs.

Nevertheless, the Russian state has managed to censor the reality of the war, preventing the population from learning about the casualties. They did the same in previous when they ordered their forces to support Russian separatists in Ukraine in 2014 as well as in Syria to back Bashar al-Assad's war on his people.

Officially, they claimed at the beginning of March that five hundred people had died. Two weeks ago, they increased that to thirteen hundred people. These are, of course, lies. Ukraine has probably exaggerated the losses, stating that fifteen thousand Russian soldiers have died. The U.S. has estimated that some seven thousand, which I suspect that is closer to the mark. This is an enormous number of people who have lost their lives in just a month of this invasion.

The situation in Donbas in these so-called people's republics is not much better. These are under the full control of Russia. The government tried to mobilize every man in between eighteen and sixty-five years old to fight. It is hard to believe that they will do so willingly. Eventually the realities of this horrific imperialist war and the devastating economic impact will disrupt the pro-war consensus.

Let's step back and discuss the reasons for Putin launching the war, something that surprised many commentators, including on the left. Why did he decide to launch it now? What are the key determinants? Was it NATO, imperial ambitions, paranoia about color revolutions, or domestic political calculations?

It's a combination of all these reasons. One of the lessons of this whole situation is that we must take Putin's statements seriously. He laid out his rationale very clearly. These include NATO. He declared that if he did not launch the war now, Ukraine would join it in the coming years.

He also stated in a long article last year and in his speeches that Ukraine is by its very existence anti-Russian. The Maidan uprising in 2014 was the turning point in his thinking. He viewed it as a threat to the Russian state.

He is a deeply counter-revolutionary leader; he is against any revolution from below, whether it be the October revolution of 1917, the so-called color revolutions, or the Arab Spring. He opposes any and all movements from below against state power.

He views them all, especially when it comes to Russia and the post-Soviet states, as Western conspiracies of regime change. He feared that the Maidan uprising in Ukraine would serve as an example for other uprisings in other post-Soviet states as well as Russia.

He wants to rebuild Russia's former empire that was lost with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which he views as Russia's greatest geopolitical catastrophe. He views the post-Soviet states as illegitimate products of this catastrophe and aims to redress it by reimposing Russian rule.

When it comes to Ukraine, his view is even more extreme. He views it as the artificial creation of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, which he holds in contempt. He believes their revolution and their recognition of the right of oppressed nations to self-determination is a threat to the Russian state.

Sadly, Putin's Russian chauvinism has deep roots in mass consciousness in the country. That's why the regime's war propaganda finds purchase in the majority of the population.

What will be the results of this war be for Putin's regime, its economy and economic agreements, and geopolitical alliances? What will be its impact on its alliance with China?

The key thing to understand about the Russian economy during the last thirty years is that it has been almost entirely oriented on Western markets. So, sanctions from the U.S., Europe, and their allies are devastating. It's hard to understand how Russia's economy will function without close ties especially with the European Union, and Germany in particular.

Their role is much more important to Russia's economy than China. The Russian economic, political, and cultural elites are all oriented to Europe. They have their property in Europe. Their ideological reference points are European, even if they are negative toward Europe. But their key geopolitical alliance is with China.

I think that China perfectly understands this. While Beijing has a strategic alliance with Moscow, it considers Russia part of Europe and does not see itself and Russia as part of a Eurasian project. China and Russia do share some features in common, in particular the state's role in the economy, something typical of peripheral societies trying to leap up the value chain of global capitalism.

But, in Russia's case, these state corporations, mainly in gas and oil, are dependent on exports to Europe, a market put in jeopardy by this war. About half of Russia's budget come from oil and gas sales, the bulk of it to Europe. So, the war and being cut out of the European market puts Russia's entire political economy under threat. It's not clear how the Russian economic system as currently set up will survive.

Termination of oil and gas exports to Europe would also destabilize the relationship between the Russian state and its provinces, where much of the fossil fuels are extracted and refined. Putin had hyper-centralized this industry's revenue streams in Moscow. It grew rich while the provinces did not. People in the provinces have long complained about their money and resources being stolen by the central government.

A threat to the centralized fossil capitalist economy will intensify such sentiments. It will do the same to the national question in places like the Caucasus, who don't identify as Russian and practice Islam not Russian Orthodox Christianity. The war itself is already exacerbating their grievance; they are overrepresented in the army, fighting and dying for a regime that they resent.

In the cases of other provinces whose governments retain control of their oil and gas industry, it could lead them to cut deals independently of Russia with Europe. So, the war could completely destabilize Russia as a nation state.

It will have similar repercussions with its international alliances, especially its one with China. While Putin no doubt informed Xi Jinping of his determination to launch this war, it was clearly not part of some strategy developed by the two states.

The decision to go to war was made by Putin and his narrow group of political advisors. I'm sure that Xi was told what Putin believed—that the war would be quick. So, he had no expectation that it would become a protracted battle with enormous economic and geopolitical consequences.

Ukraine simply did not rank as a priority for Xi. If you look at the joint statement that Putin and Xi issued during the Olympics, it stressed that their different values than the West and their common interests in a multipolar world order. While it mentions China's issues like Taiwan, it does not even mention Ukraine.

So, however much China knew in advance, this war puts it in a contradictory situation. On the one hand, it must support Russia as its strategic partner. On the other, it fears disruption of economic ties with Europe and the U.S.

That's why China has tried to balance between political support for Russia and calls for some kind of settlement to prevent the premature rupture of its economic relationship with the West. This balance will be hard to maintain.

Thus, the imperial rivalries between the U.S., Russia, and China will disrupt the structures and relationships of global capitalism developed since the 1990s.

The Biden administration is attempting to frame these rivalries as a contest between the so-called democratic West and its authoritarian opponents—Russia and China. It sounds a lot like Samuel Huntington's argument that this inter-imperial conflict is driven by clash of civilizations. What's the problem with that framework?

When Samuel Huntington put forth this view, he contended that the divisions between states were not the result of history and politics but expressed essential differences. Some states were democratic by their very nature and others were authoritarian. These were unchanging characteristics.

It is a profoundly reactionary position but one very deeply rooted in Cold War ideology. And it's now getting a new hearing not just in the U.S. but also in Russia and China, who share an essentialist way of thinking about geopolitical rivalries.

U.S. Cold War thinkers like George F. Kennan argued that the Soviet Union was undemocratic, not because of its political history, but that it was Russian. And Russia was destined to produce an autocracy, regardless of its political regime, whether Tsarist or Communist. They contrasted that with the US's supposed predisposition to democracy.

That is the deep roots of Joe Biden's idea about the global contest between democracy and authoritarianism. Is the U.S. government was really interested in democratization of Russia? I think not. For the last thirty years, they supported undemocratic regimes in Russia and in all the post-Soviet countries that served the geopolitical and economic interests of Washington.

That's why it counts several many autocracies like Saudi Arabia in its current list of allies. This is part of its long history of backing dictatorships in the Twentieth century to serve its imperial interests. It was happy to overthrow democracies when they challenge its interests. So, all of Biden's talk of democracy versus autocracy is a thin disguise for rallying forces in support of U.S. imperialism.

So, if we reject Huntington's framework, how should we understand Putin's regime? What is its nature, politics, and ideology? Do you consider it an imperialist power? How much is its continued rule put in jeopardy by its failures in this war?

Russia is definitely an imperialist power. We need to understand that imperialism is not just a purely economically determined logic of capitalism. There is another dimension of imperialism, which David Harvey calls a territorial logic. Russia is subject to both, and they are deeply intertwined.

Russian state corporations like Gazprom are profoundly connected to this territorial logic. They need to secure territory for extraction and political deals with states for shipment of its oil and gas through pipelines. Russia's state and fossil capital, and their logics of territorial and economic imperialism, are so deeply integrated that it is unclear which was the instrument of the other.

Putin fused these in his regime. But it is a mistake to see his regime as simply state capitalist. While he concentrated

fossil capital in the hands of the state because it was both profitable and strategically significant, he privatized almost everything else, especially social welfare provision like healthcare.

Ideologically, Putin's regime has evolved over the last twenty years. In its first decade, it was mostly apolitical and technocratic in nature, establishing the foundations of its particular combination of state capitalism and neoliberalism. In its second decade, it developed into a much more ideologically nationalist and authoritarian form.

This was largely in response to the democracy protests in Russia against Putin's return to power in the 2012 election. The 2014 Maidan uprising intensified Putin's turn to anti-revolutionary nationalism. He began to argue that the state must defend itself against regime change. He used these ideas to justify the annexation of Crimea and the so-called people's republics in Donbas.

He also began to cultivate the idea of a Russian world, which put into question the very existence of all the post-Soviet states, not just Ukraine. This concept contends that Russia's borders ought to be those of its old empire and extend to any post-Soviet states with large Russian speaking populations. He views all the Russian speakers in these as hostages to be rescued by Russian intervention and annexation.

That's why I opposed the annexation of Crimea, despite the fact that most of the population welcomed it. It set a precedent of seizure of other countries. Once that logic is accepted, it is hard to argue against further Russian expansionism. It set Putin on a course to attempt what we are witnessing today—the conquest and subordination of Ukraine as a Russian semi-colony.

During this last decade, Putin also began to trumpet so-called traditional values. He resurrected a trend of Nineteenth century conservative Russian thinking that cast the West as introducing ideas that threatened a divinely ordained human nature. For Putin, the Russian state was the last redoubt defending traditional Christian values, especially the family.

That led him to launch a propaganda crusade against LGBT people, feminism, and liberalism. This crusade is not a marginal project but central to his entire state and ideological project. He hoped to use these so-called traditional values to cohere his supporters and provide an answer to their despair and sense of emptiness amidst the inequalities of neoliberal Russia.

In many ways, Putin followed the script of the Republican far right in the U.S. His advisers closely studied the Republican Party and its strategies of "cultural wars" pursued by the likes of Ronald Reagan and others. That was the ideological basis of the strange bromance between Trump and Putin.

The regime has faced waves of opposition over the last decade. What is the pattern and composition of these protests, especially the most recent one spearheaded by Alexei Navalny?

Navalny forged a liberal opposition to Putin over the last decade. Its political nature has changed during that period. He became so successful, despite the fact that his movement was a minority, because he tapped into the politicization of young people.

He changed the nature of the previous pro-Western liberal ideas in Russia. Navalny realized Russian liberalism from 1990s, which advocated free market shock therapy, was a disaster. He distanced himself from such neoliberalism to demand democratic reforms against regime. This appealed to the middle classes.

Later, he expanded his criticism of the regime by calling attention to social and economic equality. He exposed

Putin's wealth, his palace, the corrupt and rich state bureaucracy, and the oligarchs and their links with the regime.

He kept repeating the point that it was obscene for them to live in such luxury in a poor country with tens of millions of Russians living near or under the poverty line. Navalny's populist combination of liberal ideas about democracy with criticism of social equality struck a chord with radicalizing young people and workers.

The other element of Navalny's approach was his friendly game with the Communist Party. Despite the loyalty of the Communist leadership to the Kremlin, the party remains the only legal opposition force in the country now. Navalny advocated tactical voting for them instead of Putin's party, United Russia.

Navalny's supporters accepted this approach without illusions in the Communists. They voted for the party in order to oppose Putin. As a result, some members of the Communist Party changed their perception of Navalny in recent years.

This does not mean that Navalny became left wing or that he wanted to transform the Communist Party. It meant that Navalny understood that the left must be an important and necessary part of the democratization of the country.

This is a positive development. I think that it's possible that in some post-Putin Russia, the left could regroup in a broad left party with the healthy elements of the Communist Party, activists from the Navalny movement, and antiwar militants. Especially as the current pro-war consensus gets disrupted by the harsh reality, there will be a growing space for a resurgent democratic and egalitarian movement and party.

Finally, let's turn to the international left. Some sections of it have treated Russia as part of the so-called axis of resistance to US imperialism and justified in its war in Ukraine as defensive. Others reduce the war to an inter-imperial one and deny Ukraine's right to self-determination and oppose its right to secure arms in self-defense. What's wrong with these positions? In place of these, what should the international left do and argue amidst this war?

I absolutely don't understand the argument that Russia is in any kind of way an alternative to the U.S. and the neoliberal order it has superintended. Putin's regime is profoundly reactionary. Its political objections to the current order are those of Donald Trump in the U.S. Imagine living in a country ruled by Trump for twenty years.

That is no alternative to the global capitalism! Donald Trump was quite critical of globalization, but on nationalist and capitalist grounds, and those are not solution to the problems of anyone anywhere. Putin offers no alternative but authoritarian, imperial nationalism.

The idea that Russia provides an alternative to U.S. imperialism is equally suspect. It might have been possible to argue that the Soviet Union offered an alternative to U.S. dominated capitalism and imperialism. It provided some support for liberation struggles. But that is in the past.

Putin's Russia today offers no progressive model attractive to any genuine movement for liberation anywhere in the world. It is not attractive for any country in the post-Soviet region. It's not attractive for the people of Ukraine. And it's certainly not attractive for people in the U.S. or in Western Europe.

I also disagree with those on the left that reduce the war in Ukraine to just an inter-imperialist conflict between the U.S./NATO and Russia. The main problem is that this concept is based on the denial of the subjectivity and agency of oppressed countries. That's Putin's approach. It treats such countries as mere pawns without any interests and

capacities of their own in a struggle for liberation.

Moreover, it mimics Putin's notion that there are only a few true nations with genuine historical legitimacy and real security concerns like the U.S., China, Germany, and Russia. The rest he sees as fake countries. They're not subjects of history, but objects of history and geopolitics, the tools of someone else. For Putin, these are the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine among others.

This way of thinking is exactly the ideology of imperialism at the beginning of Twentieth century. The left must reject such thinking. In the beginning of the Twentieth century, the international left was much clearer about how to combine opposition to all imperialisms with recognition of the right of oppressed nations to self-determination.

They recognized the subjectivity, agency, and right to self-determination of weaker and oppressed nations, even those led by non-socialist forces. They are much more progressive than the so-called security concerns of any imperialist powers. The left really needs to go back and read Lenin's writings on the national question.

I think the Left needs to return today to an internationalism which has largely been lost today. The international solidarity of the oppressed is incompatible with the pseudo-"anti-imperialist" attitude of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." The long-standing justification of Putin by part of the American left, and the repetition of Kremlin propaganda points about the "Nazi" regime in Kiev, has undermined the credibility of many Ukrainian and Russian activists.

Today, the left in the US should focus on the fact that the US government is also responsible for this war—including by refusing to give Ukraine clear security guarantees. It should also demand that Biden cancel Ukraine's foreign debts and accept Ukrainian refugees. Until that happens, all the anti-Putin rhetoric of the US government looks like pure cynicism.

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Source [Spectre](#).

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