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Russia

# Putin is not only waging war on Ukraine, he is also destroying Russian society

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**Everywhere I hear only terrified exclamations against "those people", this brainwashed Russian people who massively support the war and the criminal acts of Putin. I read this from the pen of French journalists, I also see it too often in the words of many courageous Russians who still openly oppose the war on social networks. We are told that Russian society is in the grip of pro-war propaganda, that society has long been depoliticized by Putin's authoritarian regime, that opposition forces have been annihilated except for one thin layer of diehards who now, for the most part, have to flee their country.**

It may well be that this one-size-fits-all vision corresponds to at least part of the reality. But it may be that we do not know at all what is going on in the depths of Russian society. Analysts, researchers, and politicians have never really examined or focused on ordinary people. In all countries the working classes are always counted as what is left over, the non-essential part. But Russia, obsessed with the myth of "great Russian culture" and the underdevelopment of its "muzhiks", (=Russian peasant but here meaning all working people -Tr) has raised social contempt for its people to a level that is difficult to equal. What if the "muzhiks" simply need support to express their criticism and protest? In any case, the survival of Russian society today depends fundamentally on whether the educated and dissident middle classes find the means to renew contact with the working classes.

Because let us remember that Russia is above all the popular classes - workers, employees and small entrepreneurs earning their living in a more or less precarious way. They constitute the absolute majority of the population. It is also these social classes that provide the bulk of the soldiers sent to Ukraine, whether by deception, by force, by the need to feed their families or by conviction. However, we hear the least about them, especially since they hardly speak, at least not in a clearly audible and recognizable voice.

## **The Russian working class in the 1990s and then under Putin**

Surveys from 2018 have recorded, the emergence as a social community conscious of itself, that is to say a change not to be underestimated given how much working people, and particularly the industrial working class, had been mistreated by the ultra-liberal capitalist reforms and the frenzied anti-communism of the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall. [\[1\]](#) Let us remember: the working class was then annihilated, every man for himself and surviving on your wits were how people lived. Misery and disarray bent the spine of millions of people. The privatization or closure of their factory/mine, the dislocation of the USSR and the radical change in the dominant discourse meant working people lost all assurance, all landmarks, their very roots in any decipherable social reality. Practically no one, called themselves a worker, nor saw themselves as part of any social community, be it working class or national or any other. Most humiliated themselves by comparing themselves to "screws drawn into an inhuman mechanism", to "cattle" or "slaves".

In comparison, the first two decades of the new century offer a completely different picture. Certainly there is the establishment of Putin's authoritarian regime and the exclusion of workers voices from the public media (even if they were already absent from this space dominated by the Yeltsinian oligarchy in the 1990s). However there is also a real improvement in living conditions and a social stability which has enabled many people to regain their footing and come to terms with their life experience. There was also an intermittent populist Putin discourse, which, while caricaturing the working class, did at least make it reappear in the media sphere. Finally, there was Putin's patriotic discourse which, contrary to the Kremlin's objectives, politicized society, and, paradoxically, presented the national

community as a political object allowing even dissent. Indeed, from the mid-2000s we witnessed a proliferation of grassroots mobilizations taking up social, ecological or work issues, which testified to the expansion of self-organization across the whole country.

Consciousness also evolved, society was restructured - despite, or perhaps even thanks to the nationalist authoritarianism of the Kremlin. In any case, the vast research that I led in the years 2016-2018 showed the expansion of a self-organizing process throughout the country. We were able to clearly identify three social groups. [2 ]

## Three social groups among Russian working people

The first was not the biggest and was composed above all of people on an upward social trajectory: that of the conformists, for whom the important thing was to be able to project themselves into a large "single and united" national community. This category largely endorsed patriotic propaganda and overwhelmingly placed their faith in Putin.

The second group consisted of people who defined themselves above all by their intellectual or moral qualities and identified with the intellectual elite, against the "mass of the ignorant poor". This group of intellectuals or moralizers, although having in common the same social contempt for the working classes, split into two diametrically opposed camps: one pro-Putin supporting the patriotic project of the Kremlin orchestrating the revival of "great Russian culture", the other anti-Putin and rejecting any attachment to a nation deemed "crappy".

Finally, the third group was the largest, that of the working classes who saw themselves as a large community, that of the "working and poor people" and who valued solidarity in a critique of social inequalities and the exploitation of the majority by a minority of oligarchs who were protected by the regime and its ideology of lying patriotism.

I do not list these three groups here as an exercise in academic classification but to highlight the social structuring which has emerged from the post-communist upheavals. There are clear divisions between the bourgeoisie or the aspirants to the bourgeoisie, the educated middle classes with elitist aspirations, and the popular classes. But while we know something about the first two groups, very little information circulates on what is happening to the popular classes today that Russia is engaged in the war in Ukraine.

The first group arguably poured heart and soul into supporting Putin's military operation, while another part left Russia to maintain a sanctions-threatened standard of living. The second group, the one whose voices are loudest on social networks, is torn between pro- and anti-war positions, those who display their "shame" of being Russian against those who are more than ever proud of it. It is the points of view of these educated middle classes that are conveyed in our media, it is these same representatives opposed to the war who find themselves for a large part fleeing Russia. These are the voices that denounce the immorality of Russian society, its passivity, its lobotomization, the ease with which it adheres to the pro-war propaganda of the Kremlin.

## Working people are key to any real change

I obviously support the colleagues abandoning everything to leave, I respect their moral firmness and their courage. I regret, however, that once again, as in the 1990s, the educated middle classes, in their elitist self-identification, transmit, again and again, the same distorted and demeaning image of the working classes, those who are the

majority of people in Russia. It seems to me absolutely necessary, as indeed beautifully expressed in his "Letter to my Russian friends" Jonathan Littell, that those who see themselves as intellectual and moral elites begin at least to try to listen to and understand the working classes. [3] No lasting overthrow of the regime, no real democratization can ever take place without the support and active participation of the latter.

Working people are capable of mobilization, they have already shown it on many occasions. Let us cite, for example:

" the mobilizations of hundreds of thousands of people against the so-called "monetization of social benefits" reform in 2005,

" the massive and lasting movements of certain regions in defence of their autonomy against the "arbitrary rule of Moscow" (Kaliningrad in 2010, Khabarovsk in 2020),

" the popular rebellions of the mono-industrial cities (Pikalevo and others, in 2009),

" the movement against the pension reform (2008),

" the ecological mobilizations (notably in Shies, in 2019-2020, against a landfill for waste from Moscow).

So the problem is not the capacity for self-organization, the problem is the agenda - is it about fighting so that our lot, that of little people like us, also improves, or will we be, once again, the victims of struggles that are beyond us and whose ins and outs we do not control? The problem is also the acute distrust felt towards the liberal opposition, or even elites on all sides, perceived as contemptuous and sharing nothing of the real life experience of the "working classes". Finally, the problem also lies in what distinguishes the Russian working classes from their Western counterparts, namely a strong feeling of helplessness when it comes to issues related to national political power: what can be done in the face of oligarchy, while "they" have "the money".

This feeling of impotence has not faded, despite numerous victorious mobilizations (but with little media coverage). It even strengthened as the working classes began to understand political repression, in particular from 2021 and the incarceration of Alexei Navalny. However the war, the atmosphere of general surveillance by the forces of order, as well as the image produced by the media of unanimity around Putin further encourage people to keep their doubts and questions to themselves.

## Working people and their attitude to the war

Are the popular classes against the war? There is nothing to confirm this, given the little information we have. The critics of the majority support of the lower classes for the war are most often satisfied with polls (in times of war and censorship!), fragmentary discussions with parents, or comments collected at the hairdresser or in the taxi... From my survey experience, what can I assume?

I would have been tempted to argue that the working classes, inclined to be wary of propaganda and misleading words, would not be easily fooled by pro-war propaganda (the Russians would save "their" own from the clutches of the "Nazis" in the Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine). Perhaps working people would keep a cool head and an ironic distance. However, one element introduces doubt: propaganda was above all denounced as false when it could be contradicted by experiential data, by life experience, when it was confronted with an alternative narrative, articulated in informal discussions, jokes, collusion...the certainty of one's criticism being backed by the approving echo that emanated from the imaginary community of a "little people".

But how can one experience a war that does not take place in one's immediate space and when ultra-contradictory information reaches you through unreliable channels? How can we be certain of sharing the same critical distance with an imaginary community whose opinions we no longer really know. There is a lack of a proven alternative

narrative, given the lack of free speech, even in informal spaces. Are the working classes then tempted to trust the television version, for lack of anything better? To cling to what is presented as the general opinion? No doubt this is at least partly what is happening now.

Without the war, I would have said that the working classes had the ability to build together a counter-narrative of what is happening, a narrative of subversive and disrespectful irony, which would present the war as yet another illustration of the crimes of the powerful of this world, against the little ones who always bear the brunt of their ambitions. Such a story could include the Ukrainian people in the imaginary community of the victims of history. But is there still an imaginary common world of ordinary people? Isn't the very basis of their existence - social interactions, the self-assurance, their living space - wavering under their feet?

Without the war, I would have said that the working classes were on principle wary of the 'humanist' designs of the rulers and the powerful, suspected a priori of serving their own interests above all. But a murderous offensive carried out on a brotherly, neighbouring country, of the same culture, undoubtedly exceeds the limits of the darkness attributed to the oligarchs.

So it seems likely that a large part of the working classes will again find themselves lost in the chaos and the absence of benchmarks, which translates into a wait-and-see attitude, a more or less active denial, a posture of defence or withdrawal. This is neither support for the war nor for Putin; but neither is it an opposition.

## How could this situation evolve?

An alternative narrative would have to manage to be audible and to resonate with the ways of working people see the world. This could emerge from real mobilizations and common struggles, in particular when the sanctions and the deterioration of living conditions come to be felt. Can it arise from educated middle classes rising up against war? Yes but on the sole condition that the latter are not perceived as coming from elites despising working people. In any case, a counter-narrative expressed exclusively by a minority in exile would have no impact. Alexei Navalny succeeded in appearing as a serious opponent concerned about the fate of Russia precisely because he took the risk of returning to the country.

A significant shock would have to hit people in their day to day lives. This shock may very well come from the arrival of the coffins of Russian soldiers killed in the war, especially since these soldiers, enlisted or forced to enlist, come en masse from the working classes.

In any case, a sudden reversal of opinion, as well as massive protests, cannot be ruled out. What is to be excluded, on the other hand, is a position based on abstract moral or political values. The whole experience of the working classes has indeed taught them to be wary of moral lessons and great democratic slogans, especially if they are perceived as coming from the West or from a pro-Western liberal elite. The 1990s taught them how much "democratic and humanist values" could turn against them and result in their impoverishment and subjugation.

The educated and progressive middle class can play a role in triggering a dynamic of protest. The stakes are high: it is not only a question of stopping the war and guaranteeing Ukrainian sovereignty, but also of avoiding the annihilation of Russian society, the relapse into a dynamic of disarray, impoverishment, atomization, apathy and anomie even more destructive than in the 1990s. To meet the challenge, it is absolutely necessary that part of this middle class shed its elitism and social contempt, that it renews a confident and empathetic dialogue with the popular classes and that it participates with them in the elaboration of a new perspective to overcome the crisis, of a break with the Putin regime, of real democratization and of the redistribution of wealth.

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[1] On this subject, see Karine Clément, *Les ouvriers russes dans la tourmente du marché. 1989-1999: destruction d'un groupe social et remobilisations collectives* (Russian workers in market turmoil. 1989-1999: destruction of a social group and collective remobilizations), Paris: Syllepse, 2000; also M. Burawoy, *The great involution: Russia's response to the market*, 1999. [Unpublished manuscript](#).

[2] Karine Clément, *Contestation sociale «à bas bruit» en Russie: critiques sociales ordinaires et nationalismes* ("Low noise" social protest in Russia: ordinary social criticism and nationalism), Paris, Ed. du Croquant, 2022.

[3] *Le Monde*, 29 March 2022 [« Mes chers amis russes, c'est l'heure de votre Maïdan »](#).