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Russia/Ukraine:

# "We are in a worse situation than during the Cold War"

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**Ilya Budraitskis, a Moscow-based historian and author, is one of the most credible and courageous left-wing critics of Vladimir Putin's regime. He is also an original writer who does not follow fashionable doctrines. In January of this year, Verso published his book "Dissidents among Dissidents", which focuses on the evolution of the most endangered political currents in Russia. [1]** He analyses the Russian left after the fall of the Soviet Union, when political groups ranging from anarcho-socialists to Trotskyists were active in Russia, critical of both Yeltsin's neoliberalism and political movements based on nostalgia for the USSR and, later, the regime of Vladimir Putin.

Bulgarian political writer Ivan Kristeva, one of Eastern Europe's most relevant analysts, calls him a "maverick, incisive, sharp and polemical" analyst who denounces liberal and illiberal clichés about Putin and his regime. Budraitskis lives in Moscow and teaches political science and art history at two universities. In 2014, when Crimea was occupied, he published with Arseniy Jilayev the book *Pedagogical Poem, Archives of the Future History Museum*, based on an exhibition bringing together fine arts, history and literature in an interpretation of the contemporary world they had organized in Moscow in 2012-2013.

As the first shipments of military equipment sent by the United States and the European Union arrived in Kiev, he spoke to Ervin Hladnik Milhari with some thoughts on the political tensions that seem to herald a military confrontation between the West and Russia on the borders of the European Union. [2]

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**While you are in Moscow and I am in Ljubljana, are we talking through a future front line? People are talking about war. In Europe, the policy strongly encourages the Russians to do something, using all media channels for this. And on your side, what does it look like?**

Do you mean how ordinary people perceive the situation or what imaginary scenario the regime creates?

**To begin with, how do the Russian media present the tensions on the Russian-Ukrainian border?**

The Russian official media, including all the television channels, are controlled by the Kremlin. Other media are almost non-existent. About Ukraine, these state media have been using a language of war since 2014. In recent months there have been no changes in this way of talking about it. It's still the same vocabulary.

**What do you mean by the language of war?**

Endless debates about the deep divide between our country and the West, with which we are in historical conflict. The use of extremely aggressive military rhetoric. We hear about our bombs, tanks, planes and other weapons. We hear that we can destroy the USA in two or three minutes, or that we can easily win a world war again. This has become the common language of the official media.

**What effect does this have on public opinion?**

Fabulous. In our country, to help children fall asleep, we tell them the story of a boy who cried "wolf". You know that story, don't you? The boy ran around the village shouting "wolf, wolf, wolf" to draw attention to himself. He did it. The

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whole village was stirred up several times. When finally, the wolf came to the village, no one paid attention to him anymore. At least since 2014, the official media has been talking incessantly and in a very fanciful tone about an inevitable conflict with Ukraine, which has never materialized. Now they want to sound the alarm. In recent weeks, the official media have tried to make it known that the situation has become very serious. That this military confrontation is real. However, the public does not perceive this message as something different. The common reaction to this news is to say: We know we are in conflict with Ukraine, we know that we are in conflict with the United States, "you tell us all the time, so it's normal."

### **No particular emotion?**

It's more complicated than that. On the one hand, people see it as a continuation of the usual strategy of pointing the finger at the oddities of the ruling elites. The language of conflict is so familiar to them that they are no longer moved. But at the same time, there are growing fears of the possibility of a real escalation. The fear of war is slowly making its way.

### **Is this malaise also noticeable in the official media?**

No, according to them we have already won the victory. But people are increasingly worried. It's not just my feeling. The fear of war has always been the second greatest fear after that concerning one's personal health and the worries that accompany it because of the functioning of public institutions and their responsibility for individuals. Recent opinion polls, however, show that at least 60% of the population fears the possibility of armed conflict, and that this fear is stronger than health concerns related to the pandemic. These two elements are present simultaneously in the collective consciousness. People are so used to militaristic rhetoric that they don't take it too seriously, but on the other hand, there is growing concern. For my part, I think the fear stems from the events we witnessed last year. A fear linked to the growing repression of the state, the growing violence that accompanies it and the climate of anxiety it generates. I would say that this question is at the heart of the political thinking of the masses on our situation. But you must bear in mind that in our society there are no serious political reactions, no demonstrations, no protests. There are no more massive demonstrations of discontent, no more occupations of streets or squares. Nothing.

### **How did Putin achieve this?**

Thanks to a year of direct blows to the nuclei of the opposition. The political regime is increasingly repressive. After the arrest of Aleksei Navalny, leader of the opposition Russia of the Future party, and the dispersal of the protests that followed, public opinion was silenced. The entire opposition is now in a very depressing situation. Last year, we were the target of total repression. All of Alexei Navalny's structures were declared extremist organizations and his collaborators were considered extremists. Anyone who expressed support for Navalny could be arrested. The oldest civil rights organization, Memorial, recognized in 1989, was dissolved by a Supreme Court ruling because it supposedly fell under the Foreign Agents Act. Symbolically, it was very destructive: the oldest human rights organization suddenly became illegal. They have also targeted all independent media with extreme aggression. The Foreign Agents Act can be used against anyone. There is no longer a single independent media outlet in Russia that cannot be accused of being a foreign agency. The accusation is a warning. This means that they can be liquidated at any time, just like Memorial was. Much of the repression is related to what is currently happening on the border with Ukraine. They wanted to make sure that there would be no unpleasant surprises, opposition, reactions or resistance on the home front.

### **And ordinary people are only familiar with the official version?**

More or less, yes. People are thus psychologically prepared for war. You can follow state television and believe the

propaganda. It is not difficult. On the other hand, surviving in the event of conflict is a different matter entirely. In this area, the situation is already very different, because we live in a very poor country, which has seen the quality of life deteriorate in recent years, giving the impression of a country in decline in all areas. Only in the event that the situation - already bad - deteriorated very quickly and people saw no way out, could we expect a change and more pressing demands for a different policy. However, so far, nothing like this is in sight.

On the other hand, the situation is really unclear. The official discourse systematically maintains such ambiguity. On the one hand, they use aggressive and uncompromising militarist language. On the other, they also talk about the desire for peace, talks between Russia, the United States and European countries. They attribute this tension to the anti-Russian hysteria of the Western media and the politics behind it. They say that Russia has no plans to attack, that it does not plan any armed invasion, that the army is only doing normal manoeuvres on sovereign Russian territory, and that in the West they are creating panic because of their own problems. Many people wonder what is really going on. Should we really prepare for war, or is this yet another propaganda storm with no future? This dilemma is familiar to us. Are these just successive waves of disinformation, or is the danger of a military confrontation really near?

**The United States and some European countries are indeed sending military equipment to Ukraine. Has this been brought to your attention?**

Yes, that's clear. The fear of war has two faces. People are naturally afraid of military conflicts. If the West provides real military support to Ukraine, there could be a major war. On the other hand, there is a strong fear of additional economic sanctions, which could undermine the already battered economy. It may be that the West really sees Ukraine as a country where it can finally confront Russia on all fronts, and that it becomes a battlefield. But it is difficult to launch a slightly more serious debate on this issue in Russia. The official media are controlled and there is no possibility of engaging in a serious analysis of the situation and a confrontation of opinions. They deal with propaganda, information is secondary. There are still a few liberal opposition media. They are still there, but fewer and fewer and constantly under terrible pressure from the state. There is still a certain sense of revolt among the population. But the regime keeps sending two contradictory signals.

The official message is that, unlike the West, Russia wants talks and does not plan war, but is ready for anything. In this picture it is Ukraine - supplied by the West - that is the aggressor. Despite all the bellicose rhetoric, the official media conveys the Kremlin's message that this battle will be waged through talks and that war will be avoided.

**How do they justify such a message?**

We remember the experience of 2014, when the Russian army occupied Crimea and the reaction of the West was mainly rhetorical. Crimea was annexed to Russia, there were protests and turmoil, sanctions were imposed, but it did not occur to anyone to try to return Sevastopol and Yalta to Ukraine through war. The Kremlin can point to the Black Sea and say that it has established its authority there without being seriously embarrassed by anyone.

The liberal media is trying to tell a different story, but they are confused. The political opposition is also confused. No one knows what the secret content of the talks between Russia and the West is. Most citizens have the impression that relations between Russia and the West have been completely broken. The breakup, however, did not happen last year, but much earlier. Those who live in big cities and travel to other countries know that relations have been bad for a long time. The situation is clear. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow has not issued visas to Russian citizens for three years. If you want to go to America, you must first go elsewhere, such as Zagreb or Ljubljana, and apply for a visa there. It started in the days of Donald Trump and continues under Joe Biden.

**But if there is a war, what will we fight for? In 2014, the Ukrainians ceded Crimea without a fight. The Ukrainian army did not even fire a shot in the air. Is the purpose of the conflict clear to you?**

That's the main question, isn't it? What are we fighting for? There is no dilemma for the Russian authorities. Over the past year, it has become clear that the Minsk agreement is not working. In Donetsk, the situation is at an impasse. The idea that the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics could be used to control the Ukrainian government collapsed. Putin thought he would find in the Donbas a pillar on which to build a policy concerning Ukraine. The deal was supposed to at least prevent Ukraine's cooperation with NATO, but it failed. Meanwhile, elections were held in Ukraine, and it quickly became clear to Putin that it would be impossible to reach an agreement with the new president, Volodymyr Zelensky. When he was elected in May 2019, there was some hope in the Kremlin that they could reach an agreement with him on normalizing relations. But then he turned out to be, in many ways, an even tougher nationalist than his predecessor, Petro Poroshenko. Putin had to find a way out of the impasse of the Minsk agreement, which had no future. He decided to move the centre of gravity from Donbas to all of Ukraine. He began to wonder what place had been reserved for Ukraine in NATO's plans. Will Ukraine be at least a neutral country, or an open military ally? He wanted to divert attention from the frozen situation in Donbas and start talking about interstate and global relations.

**How did he do it?**

Very simply. He began to move troops to the border. The idea was to force the West to react. Putin thus asked the West a very simple question: to what extent do you seriously consider supporting Ukraine militarily in the event of a military conflict? Or even more simply: will you go to war if I invade the country? He wanted to see what happens at the borders of the European Union in the event of military intervention. He asked the question in the way he prefers. Putin likes to challenge his opponent. He stands in front of them, looks them in the eye. "Well, what are you going to do? Are you going to strike, or are you just talking?" Who will back down first? He did this in Crimea in 2014, and then in Donbass. It wasn't really about preparing an invasion, he wanted to force the negotiations. But the West's response last January was surprising to Putin. He sees the West as a territory where scoundrels live who continue to preach human rights and are not prepared for real conflict. They are always the first to retreat before being challenged. But in recent weeks, the tone has changed in the West, first in the United States, then in the United Kingdom, and then in many others. Putin must now take note of the fact that the West has accepted his challenge and has begun to challenge him. First, diplomacy began to say that Putin was already the aggressor and that he had crossed borders. Putin was just moving tanks along the border and the West got the impression that he had already occupied Ukraine. Politics, diplomacy and the media have sown panic in the West by claiming that Russia is about to launch a major offensive in Ukraine. Now they are sending weapons to Ukraine and talking about intervening themselves. Putin did not expect this.

**Do you mean that Putin saw this whole movement of tanks as a negotiating tool?**

That's what I think. When Russia prepares an invasion, it usually has clear military objectives in front of it. What could be the military objectives of a frontal attack on Ukraine? All you hear are political responses. On the one hand, the desire to change the government in place in Kiev. On the other hand, there is the desire to create an atmosphere conducive to a hybrid war, i.e., the desire to divide the Western alliance, split Ukraine in two and take political control of one part. Suppose that favourable political currents could emerge from military intervention. But how to carry out the military part of the operation? Occupy Kiev? To win what? A military success would bring more problems than Russia already faces. The result could only be the most total confusion. Even the occupation of much of Ukraine would provide Russia with no guarantee of security vis-à-vis the West. There would be resistance, a large number of troops would be needed, and any stability could be forgotten. Ukrainian nationalist sentiments would be strengthened, and Russia would lose the country for good.

Today, the Russian government also overestimates Russia's popularity in Ukraine. It dreams of having a majority of the population speaking Russian and having no problem accepting Russia as their homeland. It is pure fabrication. For my part, I do not see a clear military plan for the invasion, nor any major preparations of the country for war. The only practical effect of the war would be to destabilize the situation in Russia.

### **But maybe Putin thinks Russia is threatened?**

Yes. I think there's a lot of anxiety about power. They are convinced that the United States and its European allies also want regime change in Russia. They feel that Russia is surrounded by hostile countries. And Putin has publicly stated on numerous occasions that he does not recognize the borders created after 1989. According to him, the borders are the result of a historical error, which he considers a tragedy. Since 1991, Russia has lost territories that Putin says historically belong to it. Ukraine is one such territory.

### **What makes Ukraine so important? Why not Tajikistan or Uzbekistan or the Baltic States? He never talks about Poland. Why Ukraine? Is it for strategic and economic reasons or for other reasons?**

The strategic and economic reasons are probably important to him. After Russia, Ukraine had the largest population of all Soviet republics and was its most important economic centre. It remains the largest post-Soviet country after Russia. Ukraine is also the link between Russia and Western Europe, the key country for control of the Black Sea. Russian gas and oil transit west through Ukraine. There are many objective reasons why this is important.

But there is yet another aspect. The problem is the idea that Ukraine can only be an independent state by being an anti-Russian state. Ukraine is the country that most closely resembles Russia culturally: language, religion, food, customs. There are no major differences. But it can only exist as an independent state by being an adversary of Russia. I am not the one saying that. This is what Putin wrote this summer in a 20-page program document on the history of Ukraine, from the time of Asian rule to the twentieth century. He published it on the government's website. "Russians and Ukrainians are one people," he wrote. The main idea of the article is that Ukraine is not only a specific part of Russia, but also an organic element of it. So, the project of an independent Ukraine still corresponds to a plan of the Western powers, which have used the country as a weapon against Russia. Putin's doctrine says that it is no different today, that the West wants to make Ukraine an anti-Russian state. Putin also believes that an independent Ukraine has no positive value, but that it is a negative project to undermine Russia. This is not speculation on my part, but an original article published by Putin in July this year. For him, the debate on a possible subjectivity of Ukraine is useless. That is why Russia is negotiating with the United States, Germany and the European Union, but not directly with Ukraine.

### **Can we conclude that for Putin, Ukraine is not a subject of international politics?**

There is no point in drawing any conclusions. Putin wrote this as his contribution to the understanding of the country. He negotiates without the presence of Ukraine. For Putin, this is an appropriate presentation of reality. Ukraine is not a subject in this story, Russia and the West are. The United States is the centre of gravity of the West. This is Putin's worldview.

### **Could the controversy degenerate into a military confrontation between Russia and NATO?**

Let's be realistic. You can't compare NATO and Russia. NATO is an alliance of thirty countries, Russia has no allies in the West. Russia is alone in this story and has no chance of victory in a direct head-on confrontation. In his analysis, Putin concluded that NATO is fragmented and will not be able to formulate a common strategy against him. Above all, that NATO will not be able to take the decision to defend Ukraine militarily against an invasion. That he

can therefore launch a challenge. He did not expect that the United States after its show of impotence in Afghanistan would be able to restore its decision-making monopoly over its allies so quickly. He did not think they could regain a leading role in European affairs and reconstitute NATO as a functioning military alliance, only a year after Trump. Putin saw the defeat in Afghanistan as a sign of NATO's weakness and a new united front seemed unlikely. But within weeks, the situation has turned around and NATO seems much more united than before. If this situation continues, NATO can only benefit. In recent days, Sweden and Finland, neutral countries, have revived the debate on the possibility of joining NATO. Finland will now be more of a concern for Putin than Ukraine. Finland's neutrality was a victory for the Soviet Union after World War II. It may well be that the result of the attempt to push NATO back from Russia's borders is Finland's entry into NATO.

### **So, in your opinion, Putin is losing ground?**

Yes, but there is also something to be gained. They will now look for a solution where both sides can claim victory. I think an agenda - which is not shared with the public - is being worked out in the course of the negotiations that we can follow. Negotiations began with the announcement of the Russian ultimatum. This is a very strange way to start negotiations. They presented a list of demands, but the Russian representative said before negotiations began that this list was not a menu from which the West could order whatever it wanted. This is not a very diplomatic approach. Usually, the objective is not announced before the negotiations. An ultimatum is what is imposed on the vanquished. It was therefore clear that the Russian requests would be rejected. However, negotiations are still ongoing and Russian troops are on the border. This context is dangerous. Nevertheless, I think they are looking for an agreement. Perhaps an assurance that Ukraine will not join NATO in the coming years. Nothing signed, no written guarantee, just an informal agreement.

### **Is Putin right when he says that the West wants to push Russia out of Ukraine and make it even weaker? Or is it just paranoia?**

That's a big question, you know. If by a weak Russia you mean a country that cannot play the same role as the Soviet Union in a US-led world order, Putin is right. If you mean that Russia will not be allowed to be part of the world order on its own terms as a sovereign power, I think that is also true. Putin's problem is that he does not understand politics other than as a competition between world powers. For him, political opposition to his regime is also a way for the West to make Russia appear weak in international relations. For him, defending human rights means the same thing. A weak Russia. That is why he bans movements defending rights. The fact that the presidential elections in Ukraine were won by a candidate who was not supported by Putin is also a defeat for Russia. I do not think anyone will be able to change his mind.

### **Are we going back to the Cold War? Is any progress made by one side a failure of the other?**

We are in a worse situation than during the Cold War. Compared to the Cold War, there is a significant difference among the world's elites. The Cold War and the policy of *détente* were influenced by what Max Weber called the ethics of responsibility. Both sides thought the same way during the Cold War: "We are cynical and do not spare any punches in politics. But our cynicism has a specific purpose. We want to prevent nuclear war at all costs. This was the logic of politicians such as Leonid Brezhnev or Richard Nixon. Both were insensitive and cynical to the end in their policies, but what they really wanted was to prevent the nuclear-tipped missiles from taking off. The entire construction of the Cold War was built on the prevention of the destruction of the world by nuclear weapons. The elites in Russia, the United States and probably Europe no longer operate according to the principles of this ethic of responsibility.

The second difference is just as important. Unlike the Soviet Union during the Cold War, modern Russia has no project with which it could address the world. It cannot claim to offer any ideological, political, social or economic

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alternative to the American order. There is no Russian political, social or economic model that can be opposed to American liberal democracy. Putin has not even been able to export the Russian way of doing politics in Ukraine. That is why he took over Crimea in 2014. In recent history, Putin's Russia's position is weak. Much weaker than the position of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

### **Russia has no friends in the West. Does the opposition have any?**

The Russian liberals are in opposition. The West appreciates them. Many are already abroad. Hundreds of liberal opposition figures have recently left the country for political reasons. Liberals have many friends in the West and are welcomed by the European Union and the U.S. administration. In this case, there is no problem. From the point of view of the left, the situation is completely different. The European left has lost interest in internationalism. They see the world as a conflict between US imperialism and those who oppose it. The anti-imperialist position is dominant among many left forces in Europe. Among them we find, quite surprisingly, sympathy for Putin, because he resists the political domination of the United States. It seems to me that, in the light of the conflict in Ukraine, there is an urgent need to renew the internationalist approach of the European left to international politics. That would be very useful for us.

### **Our last conversation was late last spring, when the 20-year-old environmentalist Anastasia Ponkina was imprisoned in Siberia. At that time, a new generation seemed to be emerging in Russia, bringing a different vision to politics. Then it disappeared. What happened?**

It has not disappeared. This generation is still here. But all the political structures through which it could express its ideas were almost completely destroyed. We are now in a similar situation to the Kazakhs.

### **The situation is not so bad, is it?**

Really? I know Kazakhstan very well. I've been there several times recently. The events of the last few months have been very complex. They have been presented in an overly simplistic way. There was a real popular revolt in Kazakhstan. True, there were many provocateurs and people who came to loot the shops, but at the heart of the events there was a mass revolt of the most ordinary people. The workers, the poor, people from all walks of life resisted. A classic popular revolt. It took place in a country ruled for decades by a totally repressive regime. Much more repressive than Putin's. Nursultan Nazarbayev became president of the country in 1990 after serving as general secretary of the Communist Party. He ruled until 5 January this year, when he resigned as head of the country's Security Council. Immediately after taking power, he dissolved all opposition parties and organizations. First, he banned the Communist Party and all independent trade unions. It dismantled all organised liberal groups and effectively banned all independent political activity. He banned any form of organization, any activity. In January of this year, there was a revolt that had no political representation. Because it couldn't have any. There was no organization and no leaders. There were no clear symbols, political activists, visible parties or movements with programs and leaders. Everything was destroyed a long time ago. Banished, broken, forgotten or exiled leaders. All that remains are angry people on the street. If Russia continues its momentum, we will find ourselves in a similar situation.

### **From Moscow, do we see that the countries of Eastern Europe are following the same path and that the authorities, from Poland to Hungary to Slovenia, are tempted to transform democracy into authoritarian regimes?**

We see a lot of things. I think we understand what is happening to you. In many ways, we share a common experience, don't we?



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Translated by **International Viewpoint** from the French translation by Jan Malewski for [Inprecor](#).

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[1] Ilya Budraitskis, *Dissidents among Dissidents - Ideology, Politics and the Left in Post-Soviet Russia*, Verso Books 2022.

[2] Ervin Hladnik Milhari is a Slovenian journalist and this interview was published on 29 January 2022 in the Slovenian daily [Dnevnik](#).