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'Russia needs to be defeated': Russian socialists in exile say Putin has to be defeated in Ukraine

Monday 11 July 2022, by [DAVIS Charles R.](#) (Date first published: 28 June 2022).

Ilya Matveev and Ilya Budraitskis are socialist activists from Russia. They fled the country weeks after the February 24 invasion of Ukraine. For the good of Ukraine — and Russia — they argue that Vladimir Putin cannot be allowed to win.

Over coffee in a bustling Eurasian neighborhood full of cafés, bars, delivery drivers on mopeds, and scores of cigarette-smoking hipsters, Ilya Matveev — a democratic socialist and academic — said he had come to terms with the fact that he may have to spend the rest of his life in exile here or in one of the handful of other places currently open to Russian expats.

He also knows that he will be hated — not just by nationalists in the country he fled, but by the victims of a war that he himself opposes.

“How can you create anything besides hatred after what Russia did?” Matveev asked. Maybe the hate won't last forever, but if there ever is peace, there will also be loathing, with memories having been created that will last generations. “If Ukrainians don't like me,” he said, “it's perfectly understandable.”

In the wake of the [Bucha massacre](#), where dozens of unarmed civilians were executed by Russian forces, and the bombing and killing of [more than 600 men, women, and children](#) sheltering in a Mariupol theater, there will be no easy postwar reconciliation.

“I feel a lot of shame,” Matveev, in his early 30s and wearing round glasses with clear frames, said in an interview. “Maybe I'm not personally responsible for the war, but when I look at these atrocities — that definitely happened — I'm very ashamed of Russian soldiers, of Russian everything.”

Even acknowledging that what Moscow is waging in Ukraine is indeed a “war” is punishable by up to 15 years in prison in Russia. It's why Matveev — an associate dean for international relations at the North-West Academy for Public Administration in St. Petersburg, and a founder of the [Openleft.ru](#) socialist website — left a country that he loved for a land he doesn't know. Vladimir Putin's government had long been repressive, jailing and assassinating its opposition, but after the February invasion it became intolerable for liberals, leftists, and [anyone else](#) who would not remain silent as their homeland became an international pariah.

“I'm feeling awful because my country is destroyed in every sense possible,” Matveev said. Cultural and academic exchanges are a thing of the past, with Russia turning inward on the orders of those at the top, extinguishing hope that an open society could be built from the bottom up. “It's just the destruction of everything.”

It's impossible to say how many other Russians are mortified by their country's war on its neighbor. What is known is that there was an [uptick in Russians leaving](#) the country this year. Most are not antiwar socialist dissidents but driven by concerns about their economic prospects under a pariah regime.

Even abroad, Russians who spoke to Insider did not always feel comfortable sharing their opinions on the record. Some, after all, may wish to return. Even the outspoken, like Matveev, remain cautious; he asked that his host country not be revealed, wishing to avoid drawing attention to the fact it's hosting anti-Putin activists.

What unites all in the Russian diaspora is that they had the means to leave, something not available to the vast majority of those living under the Putin regime and suffering under sanctions for a war they cannot stop.

A necessary evil

As a leftist and a Russian, Matveev is adamant that the masses are not to blame for a war launched by one man. He takes no pleasure in seeing the pain imposed by broad sanctions that have tanked the economy and indirectly contributed to shortages of things like medicine.

Recognizing the privilege of living abroad, "I'm not going to cheer that," he said.

At the same time, "I cannot even call for the lifting of sanctions," he said, "because I think they can be effective." What hurts the economy also hurts Russia's military-industrial complex, potentially compelling an early end to the war effort in Ukraine.

And Matveev is clear: His country needs to lose.

"Russia needs to be defeated, basically," he said.

On this count, Russia's democratic left finds itself more anti-Moscow than some other socialists in the United States and Western Europe, where the wisdom of Noam Chomsky — the former MIT linguist who argues the US aimed to "[draw the Russians into Ukraine](#)" and is now intentionally prolonging the conflict — is sometimes given more airtime than the perspective of those [in Kyiv](#) or Moscow.

"Most of the leftists were wrong on this," Matveev said. Chomsky, for example, dismissed concerns about an imminent invasion as an "[annual media event](#)," an argument echoed by his [anti-imperialist fellow travelers](#). "And they are still wrong on this," Matveev continued, "because they cannot understand Russian imperialism. They don't understand there is imperialism outside the West. They just reject this idea."

This manifests itself in demands that Ukraine, viewed as a mere proxy for US power, be made to effectively surrender in order to stop the war. But ceding territory and laying down arms at this point means "ethnic cleansing," Matveev said — the elimination of any shred of Ukrainian identity in lands seized by Russian forces. For Ukrainians, the fight is existential, "a nightmare scenario"; on the other hand, he said, "the worst thing that will happen for Russia is that it just goes back to its borders."

Confused and in exile

Openly agitating against the government is not possible in today's Russia. That, in some ways, has eased some Russians' transition to the opposition abroad. There, at least, they can write and publish

what they really thinks.

Until recently, Ilya Budraitskis, a stocky, left-wing political writer in his 40s, was based in Moscow. In 2015, in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the Kremlin's support for armed insurrection in east Ukraine, he [warned the left abroad](#) that his country was as imperialist as Washington.

Even so, "I didn't believe until the last moment that this invasion was possible, because it was clear that it's such a stupid plan," he said, speaking to Insider thousands of miles from home in a location that he asked not be named.

Budraitskis — like Matveev — has joined the Russian diaspora. As with the invasion he did not see coming, he's still coming to terms with his new reality and the possibility he will never go back to the place he was born.

"Little bit confused," he said, repeating the words to himself, of his new life as an expatriate, one where he still faces the brunt of sanctions in the form of banks being hesitant to open an account for him. He blames the lack of any dissenting voices around Putin for the quagmire in Ukraine that also served to push him and others out of Russia.

"One old man is the only powerful political institution," he said. "The system is this man, and no one around him is [able] to balance his decisions in any way."

The point of propaganda in modern Russia, he argued, is not to rally people behind a government whose actions they cannot influence. It's more "psychotherapy," Budraitskis explained — a state-sponsored coping mechanism, minimizing cognitive dissonance by fashioning reality to something more bearable, so at least the masses have a rationale to help them sleep at night.

There is, indeed, not much else that a Russian can do within Russia other than to keep their head down and try to improve their own life (although resistance persists: someone has been [setting fire](#) to military-recruitment offices).

"People sort of feel — and it is proved to them by their material conditions — that they cannot do anything. Whatever they do, wherever they go, if they try to protest and do something, to organize or whatever, it doesn't really work," Budraitskis said. Especially in more remote regions of the country, far from Moscow and St. Petersburg, there are few prospects and less hope.

"And these people, they're not so much supportive of either Putin or the war. It's just their practice, their everyday life, that tells them nothing is going to change — and they've never seen any change in their lives," Budraitskis said.

He's skeptical of economy-wide sanctions, not seeing the pain inflicted on those Russians as contributing to the end of a war. But he does believe that for the sake of Ukraine as well as his own country — and for others who [fear they are targets](#) for Russian expansionism — there can be no victory for Moscow.

"To end the regime," he said, "there should be some defeat."

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