

Resistance inside Putin's Russia: an interview with Ilya Budraitskis

Monday 10 October 2022, by [BUDRAITSKIS Ilya](#), [MORLEY Eleanor](#) (Date first published: 4 October 2022).

Ilya Budraitskis, author of *Dissidents Among Dissidents: Ideology, Politics and the Left in Post-Soviet Russia*, taught political philosophy at the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences until he left Russia in March this year. He is now involved in the anti-war media project *posle.media*. Ilya spoke to *Red Flag* about the effect within Russia of the invasion of Ukraine.

In what ways is the war affecting everyday life inside Russia?

When the war started, a number of repressive laws were introduced, which have affected nearly every person critical of the war. There is a law against so-called “fake information”—that means if you use any source other than the Russian Ministry of Defence to comment on the war, you're distributing “fake information”. Even if you call the war a war, you're already breaking this law.

Another law is directed against those said to discredit the Russian army—any criticism of the war can be considered as discrediting the Russian army. More than 16,000 people have been prosecuted using this law. Some of them have paid fines, some of them spent weeks in prison, and some of them will spend years in prison. This repression is really strong, it has affected a lot of people in Russia, and it has created an atmosphere of fear in which people are starting to limit their expressions.

Then there is the economic effect of the sanctions. The Russian economy has not been totally destroyed by sanctions, because it is mostly dependent on oil and gas exports, which have not been sanctioned. People are not suffering as the Ukrainians are, for the moment. But a lot of foreign businesses left the country very rapidly during the early months, which shut down workplaces. Some services also shut down, especially those belonging to transnational corporations.

But the events of the last week, the mass conscription mobilisation, created a serious challenge for Russian society, for the political regime and for the Russian economy. Hundreds of thousands of Russians are trying to escape the country, and many more are trying to hide inside the country. They all have left their workplaces, because that's where they can be found to then be recruited to the Russian army. This will provoke some social chaos and create a serious economic effect in the coming months.

How have Russians responded to the recent conscription drive? How sizeable are the anti-war demonstrations and how severely are they being repressed? What is the political significance of these developments?

Firstly, I can't say that there wasn't *any* kind of enthusiasm in society around the mobilisation; some people are ready to obey and serve. But of course, many people are trying to escape, and that's the main strategy for the moment—to save your personal life, to save the life of your sons, your parents maybe, because people who are older than 50 have been conscripted. A huge number of people are trying to reach the Russian borders, especially in the direction of post-Soviet states like Kazakhstan

and Georgia. Also, the declaration of the conscription mobilisation provoked some protests in the first few days, and I can divide these protests into two types.

The first kind is the protests in the big cities like Moscow and St Petersburg, and these protests continue the tradition of anti-war protests that happened in March this year. Protesters are mostly young people, mostly students, who are very peaceful. Their protests are in the traditional form of marches, using anti-war logos, slogans and so on. The main problem with these protests is that they are very socially limited so they have been easily and brutally smashed by the police. Hundreds of people were arrested in Moscow, St Petersburg, Yekaterinburg and some other big cities. It is very hard to protest like this in the current conditions where the Russian regime has turned to an open fascist type of dictatorship.

But there are also protests of a different type, outside of the major cities. There was a big protest in Dagestan, which is a region in the south of Russia populated by the country's Muslim minority. It is one of the poorer areas in the country and has been badly affected by the war. Dagestan has suffered some of the greatest losses in Ukraine already, even before the mobilisation. When the mobilisation started, authorities were starting to catch people in the streets; they came to catch people even in the small villages to take them to the army. This provoked protests, which were much more massive, much more energetic—there was even some violence against the police. They have been much more popular; lots of local people from the countryside have been involved, as have women young and old. Lots of mothers of men who could be recruited to the Russian army. This is the new type of protest.

Also, something similar has happened in Yakutia, in east Siberia. It's also a region with a mostly indigenous, non-Russian population. There are local people, Yakuts, who are of Asian Turkish origin. They also had a very impressive protest of mostly women in the main square of the capital of the area.

These protests are a serious perspective for resistance. They could grow and spread to some other areas of the country, which could create serious problems for the mobilisation.

But the government is starting to realise the mistake that it made with the mobilisation. One of the main features of Putin's regime for all the years of its existence was that people had dominance over their private lives. The regime may have taken away your political rights, civil liberties, the right to vote, to elect your own parliament, but you still had a say over your private life. And now this contract is broken because of the mobilisation, and it could lead to a very serious social crisis in Russia.

Since the beginning of the war, there have been reports of disarray, demoralisation and even opposition within the Russian army. What is the extent of this?

There is a serious demotivation in the Russian army. Even after six, seven months of war, the Russian government hasn't provided one clear narrative of what people are fighting for, and for what you should risk your life. The motivation of Ukrainians is quite clear: it is to defend their country from invasion, to defend their families. Not much additional explanation is needed.

But for Russians the situation is very different. The war started with the idea of anti-fascism and the so-called de-Nazification of Ukraine, which means that it should be a continuation of the Second World War in the popular political imagination—you should fight against fascists, against Nazis, the same way as your grandfathers. The problem, which is quite evident for many people, is that our grandfathers fought against an invasion of their territory, but now Russians are fighting the so-called fascists by invading *their* territory. This makes the current war and the Second World War

incomparable from the Russian perspective.

Now Putin, in his recent speech announcing the mobilisation, provided a new explanation: that we are fighting not against Ukraine, but against NATO, and that Russia is under attack from the West. He didn't explain in what way it's under attack, but that now people should defend the integrity of Russia and its foreign borders. This explanation sounds more patriotic, but there is no clear proof for most people in Russia that this aggression against Russian territory is happening.

So that's one thing, the problem of propaganda, which has provoked a lot of questions among the people. Why do we need this war? Is it about the interest of the country? Or is it about the interest of the ruling elite? All these questions have arisen during the recent anti-war protests.

The second thing is the reform of the Russian army that happened some years ago. The army was transformed from the old Soviet type to a more mobile type that could carry out special military operations. This was very effective in the annexation of Crimea, the operation in Syria in support of Bashar al-Assad and the invasion of Georgia. But this type of the army is not prepared for a full-scale invasion of another big country, like Ukraine.

That's why the first months of the war were very unsuccessful for the Russian army. They lost a lot of their professional cadres, including those who were able to train and reproduce the army on a more massive scale. Now with the mobilisation, they face big problems with these people who have been recruited but need to be trained to be effective enough on the front line.

Putin has recently been criticised by the hard right inside Russia and on state television for his failures in Ukraine. How deep is the elite dissatisfaction with Putin?

The people who criticise Putin and his authority from a more radical right-wing point of view, particularly those employed by state news agencies, are managed; they don't exist as an independent political force. I believe that there is a strategy the Kremlin uses to present Putin as the moderate. You think that I'm the most radical person? No, we have radicals that are much more terrible than me.

This was the strategy used after the Russian failure due to the Ukrainian offensive. A lot of the so-called oppositional voices in the last few weeks have been demanding the mobilisation, creating a mood that justifies Putin's announcement—he was supposedly just going along with what people wanted. When you have people like Margarita Simonyan, the director of Russia Today, criticising the government for not being radical enough, it is impossible to believe this person is just an independent journalist expressing their own opinion.

There is a special institution called the Presidential Administration of Russia, which is a very serious, huge, unelected, powerful centre, and they have a huge department which controls the ideology, and all the media in the country.

Putin still has the support of the elite. He still has the support of the oligarchs. This is the situation he has created over many years.

Are there any indications of declining popularity for Putin among the general population? How does this moment compare to previous instances of opposition to his rule?

It is hard to get an accurate read of support for the president. I don't really trust the opinion polls about Putin's popularity, even before the war, because of the nature of the dictatorship. People do not have a choice between different leaders in these polls, they don't know what they could be voting for in place of Putin. Disappearance of the country? Destruction of society? Civil war? And

since the war started, it is even harder to get an accurate poll. A friend of mine who works for a polling agency said that only 1-2 percent of the people they survey are willing to answer them.

But there are other ways to think about Putin's popularity. When support for Putin grows, it is usually because of some events in international politics. When it declines, it is usually because of some problems with the economy and the quality of life. Putin is always trying to present himself as the global leader, the great military leader, as the person who can defend Russia's interests in the global arena. He tries to avoid responsibility for other things like social inequality and poverty. For these, he blames other people around him like government ministers and the governors. This is his usual strategy.

But now you can see the cracks in this strategy, because more and more people are starting to see that he is not actually a good military leader. He started the war in Ukraine with the promise that Russia would quickly be victorious, but the opposite has happened. Russia has not found victory, and now they are launching the massive mobilisation. It seems that this will continue for months, and even years.

The second problem for Putin, which I already discussed, is the intervention of the state into the private lives of citizens with the mobilisation. This is creating some big problems for Putin's support. And it is only in its early stages.

Eleanor Morley

Ilya Budraitskis will be a guest speaker at the **Marxism Conference** in Melbourne in April 2023.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to *ESSF* newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Red Flag

<https://redflag.org.au/article/resistance-inside-putins-russia-interview-ilya-budraitskis>