

Russian socialist Ilya Matveev: 'Putin's war on Ukraine is not about security, it is about imperialist interests'

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[Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#) — Ilya Matveev is a Russian socialist, political economist and member of the editorial collective of [Posle](#), a new Russian anti-war website. Below, Matveev discusses the background to Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the impact of sanctions on Russia and why the international left needs to come to grips with Russian imperialism

Very few predicted Russia would invade Ukraine on the scale that it did on February 24, yet many were quick to come up with explanations for Russian President Vladimir Putin's actions. How do you account for the invasion and current war?

First, when I heard that Russia had invaded Ukraine on February 24, I was completely shocked and demoralised, but I was not completely surprised because the possibility that this invasion could occur was always there. It was there simply due to the masses of Russian troops that had been stationed along the Ukrainian border, almost 200,000 soldiers for more than a year. I would say that an invasion was on the cards ever since March-April of 2021

Some people said that amassing troops on the Ukrainian border was a kind of bluff by Putin, but bluffing is not Putin's style because, according to his principles, if you demonstrate force then you must be ready to use that force. So from the moment Putin amassed 200,000 soldiers on the Ukrainian border it was clear that he was ready to invade.

Second, we need to understand this conflict from a longer-term perspective. There was already a war going on between Russia and Ukraine prior to the invasion. If you open up the Wikipedia page on the [Russo-Ukrainian War](#), it refers to 2014 as the starting point for the war, when Russia annexed Crimea. I think that makes sense.

The war itself can be traced back through the prolonged conflict that began eight years ago, when Russia started supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine and annexed Crimea. In this sense, the Russian invasion is just the latest phase of the war. Yes, the previous phase was one of a war on a smaller scale, but we are still talking about no less than 10,000 Russian troops that participated in that first phase of the Russian war on Ukraine.

The latest phase of the war falls within the logic of this conflict that began in 2014. A threshold was crossed with the annexation of Crimea. It is important to understand this and to separate out the history of Russia and Ukraine before and after this annexation.

Prior to this, Ukraine had signed the [Budapest Memorandum in 1994](#), whereby it handed over its nuclear weapons to Russia in return for security assurances that Russia would not attack Ukraine.

Putin trampled on those assurances by essentially going to war with Ukraine and occupying parts of it in 2014-15.

So this is when the war started. Ever since then, with the troop buildup, a large-scale invasion became possible. It became possible, but I would say not inevitable: it was still Putin's choice to launch this invasion.

It is often said that Russia's annexation of Crimea was primarily due to security concerns, in particular its fear of losing access to its naval base on the Black Sea. In a similar vein, some say Putin's invasion in February was also driven by security concerns regarding NATO expansionism. Is it the case that Russia's actions in Ukraine since 2014 have been primarily driven by such security concerns?

It is not entirely clear why Russia annexed Crimea or why it invaded in February. We do not know with 100% certainty why Putin did this. But we can make an educated guess.

Russian leaders clearly saw that Ukraine was moving decisively away from Russia's sphere of influence and aligning itself with the West. For the Kremlin, a Ukraine that is independent of Russia, one where key decisions are not made in Russia and that aligns itself with the West, is unacceptable.

Ever since the Maidan uprising in 2014, Ukraine has been drifting away from Russia's orbit and closer to the West. During that time, the Kremlin has demonstrated that it is prepared to do whatever it takes to subjugate Ukraine and force it back into its sphere of influence.

The annexation of Crimea was probably specifically dictated by Russia's fear of losing its Black Sea Fleet and its naval base in Sevastopol. For some leftists, this serves as a justification for Russia's annexation. But can we really justify this kind of preventive aggression?

Now, Russia is in the process of annexing even more territories from another sovereign country. This kind of preventive aggression is not normal behaviour; this kind of preventive imperialist intervention is not acceptable, and it is not justifiable.

The problem with official Russian discourse is that it tries to conflate Russian security with Russian imperialist interests. They always talk about security. They talk about Ukraine somehow being an existential threat to Russia.

But Russia started the war with Ukraine, and if this war is not an existential threat — with the whole of the West against Russia — because of the nuclear weapons that Russia possesses, then how can Ukraine moving away from Russia's sphere of influence represent an existential threat? Clearly such a situation would be much more benign than the war we have now.

The Kremlin chose to go to war. Even now, the Kremlin feels secure enough to continue waging war, even as Western countries supply Ukraine with weapons.

In my opinion this is ultimately not about security; it is about imperialist interests and the imperial ideology that characterises the Russian regime. It has an imperial vision towards the post-soviet space, and specifically towards Ukraine. It cannot tolerate Ukraine being a sovereign country. That's the bottom line.

You talk about Ukraine moving towards the West, but if we look at Russia's trajectory since the turn of the century, we see that Russia too was attempting to integrate itself into the West. Yet, in seeming contradiction to this, we've seen on the political terrain, and not just in Ukraine but in Syria and other countries, that Russia is not afraid to directly confront

the West, perhaps like no other country has. How do you explain this contradiction within 21st century Russia?

I completely agree that it's a paradox and it is difficult to explain using the existing theories of imperialism. There is no ready-made explanation for this kind of situation. But if we go back to Vladimir Lenin, to Leon Trotsky, one concept we can use to better understand Russia is that of uneven and combined development.

As a part of the global capitalist system, we can see features of uneven and combined development in Russia. Going back more than 100 years, the former Russian tsarist empire was economically weak but had a disproportionately large military and a disproportionately large influence on global politics. Russia has been characterised by this strange combination of economic weakness and military strength for some time.

At present, I would say that Russia is not a "normal" country because, on the one hand, it has its oligarchs, it has its ruling class like any other capitalist country, that is integrated into global capitalism. This ruling class would prefer much more friendlier relations with the West.

But, at the same time, Russia has a military that it inherited from the Soviet Union. It has a disproportionately large military; in sheer numbers it is the second largest army in the world, even if its performance in Ukraine has demonstrated that many people overestimated Russia's military strength. But in numerical terms, it is a huge military force. And on top of this, there is a Soviet [strategic culture](#) that the Russian regime inherited.

So we have this strange imbalance of, on the one hand, a ruling class that is orientated towards closer ties with the West and, on the other hand, a military, foreign policy and national security elite – along with the military itself – that has interests that diverge from those of the ruling class, or where, at least, some kind of disconnect exists between the two.

This is the reality we have. We cannot deny the existence of Russian imperialism just because this does not fit into our theory of imperialism. What we need to do is to develop a genuine analysis of what Russia is and what Russia does, instead of trying to fit Russia's actions into some kind of preconceived notion of imperialism. Perhaps we should even update our theory of imperialism to better explain Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Why do you insist that it's so important for the left outside of Russia to understand Russian imperialism?

Let's start with a counterfactual. Let's imagine that we deny the fact that Russia is imperialist, and only view the countries of the capitalist core as imperialist countries. What flows from this denial of Russian imperialism? How do we explain Russian aggression while denying Russia's imperialist status?

Inevitably we end up coming to the conclusion that Russia's actions in Ukraine are not aggression but rather some kind of defence against Western imperialism, against United States imperialism. But this is patently false, because Russia is not defending itself; right now it is very clearly attacking.

There are leftists who think exactly this: that if Russia is not imperialist, then it is a non-imperialist power defending itself from Western imperialism, and therefore its actions are justified as they constitute a justifiable defence against imperialism. But this is simply not true.

What Russia is attempting to do is consolidate its influence within the post-soviet space in the region, and in Ukraine specifically, because Russia cannot tolerate an independent Ukraine, one that

is independent of Russian political influence.

It is very important to recognise Russian imperialism, alongside Western imperialism, because doing so enables us to clearly see who is the culprit and who is the victim. Ukraine is clearly the victim in all this.

The ideas articulated by Russian leaders are very openly imperialist. They say Ukraine is not a real country, Ukrainians are not a real nation, Ukraine should be part of Russia. They are essentially saying that Ukrainians are basically Russians and that therefore Russia should enforce its control over the Ukrainian state or even make Ukraine part of Russia. They are arguing in favour of erasing Ukrainian national identity and forcing Ukrainians to be Russians.

Isn't this a clear expression of imperialism, much like the colonial empires, and what Russia did in the Caucasus and Central Asia in the 19th century? We need an analysis of Russian imperialism to differentiate between imperialist ambitions and struggles for national liberation.

But even if we accept that Russia is imperialist, it is clearly not the main imperialist power in the world today: the United States continues to hold that position. Given this, some would argue that any weakening of Russia as a result of a defeat in Ukraine would ultimately strengthen US imperialism, and that therefore the best solution is a ceasefire and some kind of negotiated settlement.

This is a tactical question, but of course it is a crucial one.

Let's start again with a counterfactual: let's say we call for a ceasefire. How would we guarantee this ceasefire, even if, somehow, Russia agreed to it? A ceasefire in the current situation would only mean giving Russia time to regroup and mobilise more forces in order to then restart the war and conquer more of Ukraine.

The Russian government has never indicated that it is ready to stop this war. In fact, there are indications that it still holds on to its maximalist goal of conquering all of Ukraine, including Kyiv. I don't see any evidence that they have abandoned those goals. In that sense, a ceasefire would just play into Russian hands and prolong the war.

Ultimately, yes, NATO will be strengthened as a result of this war; in fact this is already happening on a huge scale. The problem is that the trigger for this was not anything NATO did, the trigger was Putin's decision to invade. Arguing that we need a Ukrainian surrender in order to weaken NATO is very poor logic.

Allowing Russia to conquer more territories would mean erasing everything that is Ukrainian in those territories. If we allow Russia to continue annexing more and more of Ukraine, then everything that is Ukrainian in those territories will simply be erased.

I don't think that Russia will even tolerate the Ukrainian language being spoken in those territories. There are indications, for example, that [Ukrainian teachers in the occupied territories](#) are being forced to study Russian in order to teach in Russian and be integrated into the Russian education system.

I think that it is very faulty logic for the left internationally to think it can fight NATO via Russia. That is the logic behind arguing that Russia is fighting NATO, so therefore Russia should somehow win in order to weaken NATO.

It is not Russia's job to weaken NATO. It is the job of the Western left to weaken NATO and replace

it with a new system of international relations.

I agree that NATO is an imperialist alliance and that, despite what they say, NATO is not a defensive alliance. We have seen NATO go on the offensive several times in various countries. NATO is a belligerent entity, but we should not fight NATO by wishing for a Russian victory over NATO countries.

This is not some kind of zero sum game in which Western leftists should cheer for the other team, for the other camp. That is campist logic, that is tankie logic, which I reject 100%.

What leftists need to do is think through what a new global security architecture could look like, think through what new system of international relations could replace NATO, and fight for governmental power in order to bring about this new security architecture. That is the job of the international left.

And the job of the Russian left is to halt the imperialist aggression that Russia is waging. There is no other option. It is impossible for Russian leftists to in any way tolerate or justify this kind of aggression.

Tens of thousands of civilians and Ukrainian and Russian soldiers have already died in Ukraine. This is a catastrophe. This invasion makes no sense, it has made the situation worse for everyone – Ukrainians, the people in the Donbas, and the Russian population too. It is a catastrophe from any perspective that you look at it.

The best thing that could happen is an immediate end to this war through the withdrawal of Russian troops and a return, at least, to the status quo that existed prior to February 24.

Turning to the domestic situation in Russia now, how have sanctions impacted on the Russian economy?

The sanctions have not led to a collapse of the Russian economy. A few experts expected the Russian economy to collapse under the weight of these unprecedented sanctions, but this has not happened.

But at the same time, I would say the impact of the sanctions on the Russian economy has been dramatic, and that in the medium to long-term the impact will be completely devastating for the Russian economy.

It is impossible for Russia to develop under this kind of sanctions regime. It cannot develop at all due to the collapse in imports of all kinds of advanced goods and services from the West, and from many countries that are not geographically in the West, such as Japan and South Korea.

Not being able to import these advanced goods and services means that Russia cannot advance technologically, and that the gap between Russia and the rest of the world will widen overtime. There is nothing Russia can do about this; the only hope is to weaken or end the sanctions.

The consequences of sanctions for the people are, of course, already being felt. There is a very strong economic crisis, rising inflation, and cascading unemployment.

Russia was already a poor country, so seeing the impacts that the sanctions are having is very heartbreaking for a socialist, because we always advocate for the Russian poor. That is why I cannot cheer on these sanctions like some people in the West do, saying that sanctions will teach Russian people a lesson.

Up to two-thirds of Russians do not have any savings. Two-thirds of Russians can only afford food and clothes while buying durable consumer goods for them is extremely difficult. Russia is a very poor country, and now, on top of that, we have sanctions that will destroy the lives of ordinary people even further.

All of this is very devastating but, at the same time, I cannot blame the West for this because, ultimately, it was Putin's aggression that created this situation. What else could Western countries do? Just allow Russia to continue its aggression? What is the alternative?

I do believe that some modifications should be made to the sanctions regime. For instance, from a moral point of view, the West should do everything in its power to allow medical companies to continue operating in Russia, allow shipments of medicines and continue cooperation in the medical sphere, because sick people are not responsible for this war. The catastrophe that is unfolding in Russian healthcare is unnecessary, it shouldn't be occurring.

But in global terms, I would say that there was no other choice but to impose sanctions; it was inevitable. The best chance we have to lift the sanctions is to stop the war and withdraw troops from Ukraine.

Lastly, are sanctions having the supposed effect of undermining support for Putin? Or independently of the sanctions, are we seeing cracks in Putin's support base over the war?

It's very difficult to say because all opinion polls from Russia are completely unreliable. The level of repression makes polling meaningless, as any kind of criticism of the war could mean you are sent to prison for up to 15 years.

Imagine a sociologist coming up to you and asking "Do you support the war?", "Do you like Putin?" "Do you approve of Putin's actions", and you say "No, I do not like the war". The next thing you will hear is "Please go to the police van" and be sent off to prison. That is why we get polls coming from Russia showing 80% support for the war, 90% support for Putin - they are meaningless.

The dynamic in the country at the moment is not absolutely clear to me. What we know from conversations, from anthropologists, sociologists who rather than carrying out polls just talk to ordinary people, to long-term contacts, to people who know they can trust them; what they say is that there is no real enthusiasm for war within Russian society. People just accept it because they have no other choice. So they do not protest; instead they accept it because they are forced to.

This kind of mindset will probably continue, but I think that the impact of the sanctions will be felt more and more throughout this year. Unemployment, specifically, is likely to rise after the summer holidays; there will be hundreds of thousands more unemployed. This could lead to some kind of unrest, to certain pockets of protest activity.

I believe that despite repression, it is possible that protests will occur in some parts of the country because some towns are being left devastated. There are places that depend entirely on industries that are now being closed down due to the lack of imports. There are whole towns, 50,000 people, 70,000 people, who depend on factories that have stopped production because they do not have the component parts they need from the West. This is already happening.

I believe these towns could become sources of protest activity. If this occurs, these protests should be fully supported within Russia and internationally because they will be labour protests, workers' protests. I cannot guarantee that this will happen, but this is a real possibility.

Federico Fuentes

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