

Russia: What Is a Country?

Wednesday 10 August 2022, by [KRITSKIY Vsevolod](#) (Date first published: 25 March 2022).

Reflections on the tragedy unfolding in Eastern Europe and what we can do about it

What is a country? This question, and the many long and complex answers to it, constituted a major focus of my [academic work](#) for the better part of the last decade. I have been returning to this question ever since Russia, the country of my birth and citizenship, launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, the country of my roots, eight years after it annexed a part of it.

So what is, then, a country?

In over a decade of research, I have never seen a country. I have never touched a country, nor have I talked to a country. I have seen and talked to many people who represent their countries, though, and I've met many who believe in them. This was enough for me to put the question to bed — if countries existed in people's minds, then who was I to question their existence? The idea is not new. Benedict Anderson [wrote](#) about nations as “imagined communities” back in the 1980s. The problem is that nations are also labels, processes, and analytical constructions that make everyone's lives easier — for the people who identify with them and for the historians writing our histories.

History, Ideology, and the Russian Invasion

Who gets to imagine the national community, and who then gets to experience the sometimes deadly consequences of this imagination? Communities by definition exclude certain groups of people, usually already on the margins, while empowering others and providing them with their national “history”. Empowered people in particular love the “history” of “great men” and conquering “nations” that made the world a living hell for the dispossessed. They usually think, wrongly, that nations are [primordial](#). They love to read about Napoleon and Churchill, to categorize millions of incomprehensibly diverse people based on nationality or ethnicity, neatly associating them with certain psychological and cultural traits. They take the largest brushes and paint entire worlds in one colour.

It is thus little surprise to see history regularly weaponized for oppression and murder. Nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, fascism — these also have many long, complex, and obscure definitions. At the end of the day, they share the same roots: an insatiable desire to accumulate wealth and power on the backs, labour, and suffering of others, facilitated by the othering of the marginalized. “They” are subhuman, and “we” are righteous. The tree that grows from these roots usually takes the form of a country's righteous mission framed by its national “exceptionalness”. If you listen to these people, their particular country is usually very much the exception, yet somehow every country has them.

Much has been written about the absurd “de-nazification” claims that have been publicly used by the Russian regime to justify its invasion, but the power of this narrative makes perfect sense in a world where broad brushes have been used to categorize millions of people based on “scientific evidence” for a century, ever since the academic disciplines of anthropology and history in the West took their modern shape in nineteenth-century Europe. Much has also been written about Putin's absurd

historical claims related to Ukrainian statehood. If he follows his own logic, no country really exists — but I doubt that he intends to reach this conclusion. We can spend a lot of time digging into the ideology that Putin has created for this new Russia, but what would be the point?

With each passing day I believe more and more that the long, complex, and obscure definitions of whatever this ideology is do not really matter, and any detailed arguments rationally “debunking” it using historical evidence only give it more space and time to establish itself. Of course it is important to provide evidence and explain what the consensus in the historical record shows, but at this very moment, there is a literal battlefield we need to focus on, not the battlefield of ideas.

Since the start of the war, two pieces of political analysis stand out above everything else: an essay by Volodymyr Artiukh on the [mistakes made by the Western Left](#) and another by Taras Bilous on [what the Left can do now](#). They provide key insight and answers to the main questions facing us at this moment: who is to blame, does it matter, and what should we do now. I suggest you read them carefully. They are profound, yet to the point — exactly what is needed in wartime, which is now.

War is not a solution to anything, and is likely to cause many more problems than it claims to solve, leading to more conflict and war. We must do everything in our power to avoid it, and as Volodymyr Artiukh argued so convincingly, we, the collective Left, failed in that. But — and this is equally as important — when we are faced with the reality of the war in the present moment, we must adjust our thinking and action, which is what I take as the main message from Taras Bilous’s essay. There is one country acting as the aggressor, and there is one country on the defensive, fighting not just a military conflict but an existential one. In this reality, we must provide assistance and show material and symbolic solidarity with the side that is under attack, as well as the victims of war on all sides.

Responsibility and Blame

I say “on all sides” because there is one entity that bears the ultimate responsibility for this war: Vladimir Putin and his regime. We can debate for days about the roles of NATO and the US, about the failure of the international regime, about the historical context within which actors act and whether they have agency to begin with, but at the end of the day there is one foreign army invading Ukraine: the Russian army.

This is also the same, and only, entity that will benefit if we borrow its large brushes and start painting our own worlds. The anger we feel must not define our reaction. Collective punishment of all Russians — a violation of the Geneva Convention — will only benefit Putin’s narrative and reflect the collective punishment that all Ukrainians are now experiencing due to his actions. All Ukrainians, as well as the internal Russian opposition, are now regularly being framed as Nazi sympathisers in Russian social networks, and I have seen my fair share of posts blaming all Russians for the invasion. While I understand Ukrainians expressing the latter sentiment as they shield themselves from the bombs and bullets of the Russian army, neither will lead to a faster resolution, and both will only fuel an intensification of the conflict.

Even the recent [act of anti-war protest](#) on live national TV by Marina Ovsyannikova was immediately being interpreted as a false flag operation by many Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian accounts on social media, arguing that it was actually intended as a message to Western governments that “everyday” Russians are against the war and hence they should ease the sanctions. I can again understand this emotional reaction, but it highlights that the war has already accomplished one of its key objectives: an almost complete breakdown of relations between Russian and Ukrainian citizens, essentially giving Putin carte blanche to attack anyone. Once you believe that your relatives are your mortal enemies, and that peaceful protesters deserve 15 years in prison, everyone else quickly becomes an easy target. “They” are subhuman, and “we” are righteous.

As a mostly Russian and partly Ukrainian person, it is difficult for me to describe the mental gymnastics I am currently doing to remain relatively sane when I see Russians making casual pro-war remarks as if the Russian army is not currently bombing people who so many of us are literally related to, or when I see Ukrainians calling all Russians the perpetrators of war crimes because they didn't vote out the oligarchy-supported authoritarian dictator who carefully cultivated a cult of personality over two decades while systematically dismantling every organization, platform, and space that could provide even the slightest challenge to his rule (I highly recommend reading [Jeremy Morris' article](#) on this aspect). It's personal — which is why I am writing this essay, rather than about the wars in Syria, Yemen, or Ethiopia, or the continued occupation of the Palestinian territories. But of course, almost every single point made here would apply there, as well.

While it is clear that the psychological trauma from this war is intense and already generational within Russian and Ukrainian communities, my family and I are not physically harmed by it — yet, at least — which is why I can write this in relative sanity and safety. This context is important, because unlike the articles written by those currently in Ukraine, such as the powerful [essay](#) by Nelia Vakhovska, a RLS programme manager in Kyiv, I am writing from inside the borders of a country where homes are not being bombed. I have the luxury of asking questions and slowly contemplating them, uninterrupted by gunfire, or by the immediate threat of imprisonment, and I have three more to ask.

Are the people to blame for the actions of the regimes that rule their countries? If we extend the blame for this war to the Russian people as a whole because they have not been able to resist the slow onset of the brutality unleashed by the regime over the last two decades, we must logically extend the same blame onto the people of Europe and the US for allowing Western economists to destroy the post-Soviet space in their single-minded pursuit of privatization and free market capitalism delivered by literal shock therapy to the body and mind of the post-Soviet countries. Or for their role in not reigning in any number of other criminal wars their regimes supported and instigated in the last three decades alone. We can go further back and historicize many more events and processes — I hope you get my point.

If everyone is to blame for everything, then no one is responsible for anything. We risk losing focus on those ultimately responsible, as well as blunting or even preventing whatever action we can all be taking individually and collectively when grappling with our own individual responsibilities, in Russia and elsewhere. The only way to move forward productively is to recognize that responsibility is common but also differentiated — something that the Russian Left and anti-war movements are [currently](#) in the middle of enunciating.

Russian society is the lobster, dying as the temperature of the pan in which it haplessly floats slowly rises. It has been relatively clear for the last two decades what the logical conclusion of this is: the death of the lobster. Collective punishment of all Russians will not speed this process — if anything, it will strengthen the regime's position.

Slowly but surely, the last two decades saw the democratic space, political opposition, independent media, civil society, judicial independence and rule of law, human rights protection mechanisms, the rights of ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities, and almost every other indicator that tried desperately to measure the health of Russian society in utter and complete decline. The [court decision](#) that closed the last great Russian human rights organization, Memorial, as well as the fall of the last bastions of Russian independent media, [Echo Moskvi](#) and [Dozhd TV](#), immediately after the war began, represent the final chapter of this story, which started when Vladimir Putin [took over](#) NTV, the only independent TV station at the time, within a year of his first presidential term over 20 years ago. I was 12 years old, but I remember even then thinking about the country and what future it might have if something like this could happen.

The future of this country is here, and together with it, war. [The 1990s](#) again, but worse. What happens to the country now is anyone's guess.

My last two questions address what we need to do now, and in the future — and by we, I mean the broadly defined left and progressive space, including the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, peace and environmental activists, trade unions, civil society and social movements. First: what is the material reality of the moment, and how do we react to it?

What to Do Right Now

The material reality of the moment is that millions of Ukrainians are fleeing the war, both inside the country and across international borders, and that thousands are being killed, starved, and mutilated. As I write this, Mariupol is [under a horrific siege](#), without food supplies, water, power, or heat for over a week and any way out for the hundreds of thousands of people trapped there. The cause of this horrific reality is the invasion conducted by the Russian army, which is being stopped in its tracks by the Ukrainian army and the Ukrainian people. In this material reality, the Ukrainian people are fighting what seems to be an existential war and finding strength in their nation. The country binds them together in wartime, so I find myself asking, again, who am I to question this?

Usually I would caution that rising nationalist imagery and discourses hide the potential for the long-term expansion of right wing and far right forces — but does this hold true in Ukraine? Despite the [facts](#) that the country has been in a *de facto* war state for eight years, tripling its defence budget and engaging most of its male population in some level of military training, the far Right has stagnated. Even when the far-right political parties united into one coalition for the last parliamentary election in 2019, they failed to win a single seat in the Verkhovna Rada. If anything, politically, the far Right [lost quite a lot of ground](#) over this time. We cannot throw caution to the wind, but we also cannot deny the clear fact that despite living for almost a decade in laboratory-like conditions within which fascism and the far Right usually prosper, the Ukrainian people have resoundingly rejected them.

The future of Ukraine is relatively obvious, having witnessed the ways its citizens are protecting it, now and for the last eight years. In the long term, this country will survive and thrive, whatever the outcome of this war.

So, there is one important immediate cause to support: that of the Ukrainian people, to ensure their future. Our energies, at this moment, should not be wasted on finding ever more complex, longer, and more obscure definitions describing the situation — that can wait until after the people are in relative safety. I have already seen plenty of discourses on the left centring NATO and the US all the while the Russian army is killing people and destroying infrastructure in Ukraine. We have criticized NATO many times before this war, and let us hope there will be plenty of time after the war to discuss it. During the war, however, the material reality of the moment calls for very simple and clear action to support Ukrainian citizens with no hesitation, and full realization of who holds the ultimate responsibility for their suffering.

It is up to each of us to decide what this support entails, whether we agree with providing defensive armaments as well as offensive ones, whether we donate directly to the [Ukrainian Red Cross](#) (my personal recommendation), the [UNICEF appeal](#), or to other organizations, whether we provide our homes, whether we donate our time and skills, or write articles. I cannot decide this for you, but I can argue that you should be focusing on making these decisions right now.

It is very much a tradition on the Left, of course, to argue, splinter, and split as soon as essentially anything of importance happens. Which, to me, begs the last question: where do we go from this

moment in the future? What are we fighting for, in the long term? Are we not all fighting for the same thing?

What to Do in the Long Term

I can say with certainty that we should not be fighting for countries — we should be fighting for a future in which the planet is not on fire, and in which all the people around the world, in every country, can be fed, clothed, and sheltered from the upcoming storms.

In Friedrich Engels's [words](#), "mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion". Not "countries", but "mankind", and not "everyone except for the political opposition, ethnic/gender/sexual/religious minorities, journalists and human rights defenders", but "mankind" — everyone. We should be fighting for a future in which everyone's material needs are satisfied.

I propose two concrete long-term priorities that we must keep in mind as we work towards this future.

First, this future is unachievable if our countries, parties, organizations and leaders ignore the human rights system or systematically violate human rights. In fact, two of the 30 articles in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) already cover our material needs: each one of us, without any distinction, is entitled to the right to life and the right to a standard of living adequate for our health and wellbeing, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care. This is supposed to be guaranteed to us all — but of course we are all aware that in reality it is not. We have to take seriously Taras Bilous's [call](#) to work on reforming the UN.

The criticisms of the UN human rights system are correct: it is indeed based on a liberal internationalism that baked a variety of discriminatory practices towards some regions, cultures, and peoples into the system, which is also to a degree reflected in the rights themselves. It is indeed often unwilling to take action on human rights abuses in Western countries. Having worked within the UN human rights system, and studied the roots of the broader UN for my PhD, I believe its fundamental flaw is existential: it is run by countries, for countries. There is only one member category in the United Nations, the member state. The fact that the UN system is flawed, however, does not negate the indivisible and inalienable nature of human rights, nor does it mean that we must immediately abandon the system as a space for action.

What I am calling for us to do and be is better than the UN system, better than our countries. To hold ourselves, our "member states", parties, leaders, and people accountable. Respect for, promotion, and protection of the human rights of every individual must be our collective responsibility. Leaving it to "member states" got us to where we are now. The Left cannot ignore, excuse, or facilitate human rights violations in countries ruled by leftist regimes — doubly so when these regimes target the political opposition, triply so when they also target the marginalized, the dispossessed and the vulnerable. We are guilty of painting worlds with our own broad brushes as well. Either we make full use of the UN human rights system while pushing for its reform, or we go beyond it and create our own systems of monitoring and protecting human rights that do a better job.

Second, I believe it is clear that one of the main reasons for the war in Ukraine is extractivism and the reliance of the global economy on fossil fuels — coincidentally also an existential threat to our species. Russia does not have many good years left to rely on its fossil fuel reserves — if it endures after this war in the first place. Nor does it, nor we, have many good years left at all if we don't tackle the climate crisis that is already unleashing untold misery on the world's most vulnerable

populations and will get much worse. I wonder if Siberia will have another [record-breaking forest fire](#) this summer.

The climate crisis, the global pandemic, and the rising likelihood that leaders of countries that depend on extracting fossil fuels will lash out in armed conflict and land grabs in response to their dwindling natural resources and diminished stature on an international stage that increasingly prioritizes “green” economies are all caused by our broken relationship with nature and the environment, which we believe is a consumable resource. If the US military was a country, it would be the [forty-seventh-largest polluter](#) in the world. Divestment from fossil fuels, exposing inadequate and technocratic “green” fixes, and battling green neo-colonialism must be the focus.

Right now, support the Ukrainian people, donate to their cause, connect with grassroots efforts that help refugees in your city — from Ukraine, but also from every country, whether or not the country is in what you imagine “Europe” to be, and whether or not its refugees are what you [imagine](#) “white” to be. I don’t know if this war will be over soon, whether or not it will spiral into a broader conflict, or what the outcome of that will be. But if we’re still standing in the aftermath, I hope we have the presence of mind to focus on tackling the human rights and climate crises. We have the solutions — what we are missing is the political will to implement them. Our job is to build it.

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