

Russian Socialist Movement: War and resistance under Putin

Monday 23 January 2023, by [FUENTES Federico](#), [MEDVEDEV Kirill](#) (Date first published: 20 January 2023).

Moscow-based poet, translator, and activist Kirill Medvedev, of the Russian Socialist Movement (RSD), speaks to *Green Left's* Federico Fuentes about Russian President Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine and anti-war resistance at home.

Could you tell us a bit about the Russian Socialist Movement?

RSD was formed in 2011 through the merger of two Trotskyist groups.

The RSD is a broad left organisation, whose membership ranges from progressive communists to social democrats. We played an active part in the [anti-Putin protests of 2012](#), representing the left-wing of this opposition movement.

The RSD has always been interested in combining a traditional class agenda with issues of gender inequality, ecology and the right to the city — in theory and practice. We have sought to criticise the reactionary part of the Soviet legacy while appropriating its progressive side.

As an organisation we have collaborated with independent trade unions, participated in environmental, urban and feminist initiatives, set up reading groups, run in municipal elections and supported like-minded people contesting city and federal election campaigns.

The RSD was part of a network that campaigned for leftist candidate [Mikhail Lobanov](#) in the 2021 Duma elections. His victory over the propagandist Yevgeny Popov, though stolen by the authorities, was an inspiring event for the Russian opposition.

Today, part of our organisation is located inside the Russian Federation, while another part is located outside the country.

How does RSD view Putin's war on Ukraine?

We consider this war to be an act of imperialist aggression by the Putin regime.

Putin's main task today is to strengthen his regime in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election in order to be re-elected or be able to appoint a reliable successor. In 2021, Putin's rating reached their lowest ever level.

In place of pro-Western liberals and pro-Soviet conservative Communists who fight among themselves, a populist movement has started to emerge in recent years. It has a large level of youth participation; an anti-corruption, redistributive and decentralist agenda; and the capacity to mobilise people in the streets and win elections. The regions have also become more and more active.

At the same time, Putin saw Ukraine increasingly moving out of Russia's sphere of influence, and

feared that the spirit of the [2014] Maidan [rebellion] could spill over into Russia.

To regain his popularity, he decided to reassert himself in the role of “collector of Russian lands” — a role he had begun to assert after 2014.

The benefits that certain sections of Russian business derive from the war — seizure of Ukrainian enterprises and fertile lands, export of metal, money for the military-industrial complex — are important, but most businesses have suffered as a result of the war and do not support this escalation.

What can you tell us about the state of anti-war organising?

There are several types of resistance.

First, there are peaceful actions carried out by individuals or informal groups: primarily individual pickets or anti-war graffiti.

Second, there is violent resistance: actions such as setting fire to military recruitment centres or damaging railroad tracks. Anarchist groups have largely taken responsibility for these.

Third, there are groups that support mobilised men, demanding their return and searching for the missing.

Women play a huge role in public resistance. Feminist Anti-War Resistance has greatly helped those resisting in Russia and those forced to flee the country.

Disaffection with the draft in some regions, such as Dagestan, has led to protests in which women play the leading role.

The Council of Mothers and Wives — composed of women who are trying to save their husbands and sons from mobilisation or calling for them to be returned home — is actively growing. This initiative is of great concern to the authorities, because it appeals to the deepest layers of the masses, to those who are just beginning to be politicised.

The victims of this war in Russia are the poorest strata. However, participation and losses in this war for the “Russian world” are symbolically and demographically more painful for non-titular [minority nationalities] and small-in-number [indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and Far East] communities. The decolonisation agenda is being actively discussed in this opposition milieu.

In recent years, we have seen steps taken by authorities to promote Russocentrism and consolidate it legally. For example, according to an amendment to the constitution, Russian language speakers have become a “state-forming people”. The war against Ukraine is a further radical and very dangerous step in this direction.

Russian socialists face the difficult task of deconstructing Russia’s imperial matrix and supporting the right of peoples to real self-determination, while offering a common social, class platform. We need to ensure the decolonisation agenda does not transform into bloody clashes over borders of supposedly “ancestral” territories, but rather into a common struggle against the parasitic oligarchy, imperial racism and patriarchy.

The main trade union federations support the war. Is there any sign of workers organising under conditions of war?

Despite the war, independent unions continue to stand up for workers' rights that have been violated at an even greater rate since the war began. Repression against unionists has escalated, but this is usually not directly related to the war.

[Kirill Ukraintsev](#), a leader of the Courier trade union, has been in jail since April. In December, the Courier union held a strike in several regions.

There has been repression against the medical workers' union, [Action](#), one of the most active independent unions. [Anton Orlov](#), Action coordinator in Bashkortostan, is in jail on a trumped-up fraud charge. Vladimir Baranov, the head of Action in St. Petersburg, has been interrogated and searched.

Lobanov, who I mentioned before, is a leader of the University Solidarity trade union. He has just served [15 days in jail](#) for "resisting police" during a search of his apartment. Last year, he was sentenced twice for a social media post that said "No to War" and for one about the class character of Putin's war.

Trade unions, like environmental movements, remain one of the hubs of self-organisation and collective action in the country.

From your vantage point in Russia, how do you view the role of NATO in this war?

Ukraine, as a country subject to intervention, has every right to receive military aid from anyone — just like the Kurds, and just like Vietnam in the 1960s and '70s. Especially as Russia has also been buying weapons from the West for years. And the desire of Russia's neighbours — traumatised by their history of interactions with Russia — to join NATO is quite understandable.

Russia's current war against Ukraine has one initiator: the Russian leadership. Its roots, among other things, lie in reanimated imperial stereotypes, claiming that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians are one people. But put in the historical perspective of the 30 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the NATO leadership bears enormous responsibility for the fact that we are once again facing the possibility of global military confrontation.

NATO should have been disbanded after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Its continued existence carried a direct message that there was no alternative to neoliberal capitalism. This lack of alternative gave rise to post-Soviet neoliberalism in Russia, and eventually to Putin and his war.

As a result, a false, reactionary alternative to liberal globalisation has emerged: the "multipolar world" project that Putin and his associates in various other countries dream of today. This is a world in which a few major players divide the world into spheres of influence, subjugate neighbouring countries, do not interfere with each other's ability to exploit their own peoples, and help each other to suppress internal discontent.

All of this is done in the name of some special, supposedly inherent "national" or "civilisational" values. Putin saw the war with Ukraine as a step in this direction. It is monstrous that this is happening under anti-fascist, and even anti-colonial slogans, which many take at face value.

The great question for the left and for 21st century democrats is how to ensure that the inevitably growing agenda of identities, of self-determination for different groups, communities, territories and nations does not get in the way but rather helps solve global problems related to climate, inequality and the new arms race.

[Kurdish revolutionary] Abdullah Ocalan, reflecting on the Kurdish national project, has written

about the concept of “[Democratic Confederalism](#)”. I think its relevance in this context will increase. However, the experience of 20th century socialism tells us that there is no single recipe for all countries and continents.

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