

India: One year after the Russian invasion, what should solidarity with Ukraine look like?

Monday 6 March 2023, by [KRISHNAN Kavita](#) (Date first published: 25 February 2023).

The best form of support for us here in India is to make the effort to prepare basic information and analysis to counter Moscow's propaganda about the conflict.

Ukraine has resisted the Putin invasion for a full year. A year full of mass killings, mass deportations, the separation of Ukrainian children from their parents, accompanied by incessant genocidal hate speech on Russian TV.

Last year, on the very day of the invasion, the Hindu Sena - which known for cutting a [cake on Trump's birthday](#) - put up [posters at the statue of Russian writer Alexander Pushkin](#) at Mandi House in Delhi, that read "Indian Hindus are with Putin and Russia in re-establishing the Soviet Union. Jai ho Akhand Russia. Jai Bharat." The phrase "Akhand (Unbroken) Russia" is a deliberate comparison of Putin's imperialist invasion to the Hindu supremacist agenda of "re-establishing" an Akhand Bharat - [a Hindu "Unbroken India"](#).

Hindu supremacists claim that Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Maldives, Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal and Aksai Chin as well as India are a single entity: an inseparable "geo-cultural" and "spiritual" entity , ["a civilisation and cultural oneness that politics dismembered"](#).

The Hindu Sena is not being ridiculous. If Russian President Vladimir Putin is not defeated decisively, if his invasion yields in anything but a decisive defeat; if it yields even the most nominal payoff - another chunk of Ukrainian territory, perhaps, or restrictions on Ukraine's independent foreign policy - fascist and despotic bullies everywhere will be emboldened and incentivised to pursue their own imperial and genocidal projects, assured that invasions yield a domestic as well as geopolitical payoffs.

In May 2022, writer-journalist Sushant Singh who is a keen observer of foreign policy and geopolitics, warned, ["The world ignored Russia's delusions. It shouldn't make the same mistake with India."](#) He identified the common thread between Putin's denial of Ukraine's existence as a state to restore Russia's perceived historical greatness, China's claim to "historical territory" to overcome its so-called century of humiliation, and the claim manufactured by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Narendra Modi to restore unbroken Hindu civilisation.

As Singh puts it, "Leaders have long relied on manufactured history to justify invasions." "We should not be surprised if Indian fascists whose shadowy functionaries operate with total lack of transparency and accountability, are watching Russia's fate closely - and are calculating possible moves in the direction of 'Akhand Bharat'."

[#UkraineCrisis](#): The Hindu Sena puts up two posters backing Russia's invasion of

Ukraine and the establishment of an “Akhand Russia” on a statue of Russian poet Alexander Pushkin in Delhi. <https://t.co/AVbVDH1GxN>

“Indian Hindus are with Putin...” the posters said pic.twitter.com/SvT3JRkSkP

— Scroll.in (@scroll_in) [March 1, 2022](#)

Putin’s invasion is based on the claim which he has repeated years before 2022 – that Ukraine does not exist as a nation. In the name of “[de-Satanisation](#)”, those who persist in identifying as Ukrainian must be wiped out. This ought to have been blindingly obvious to anti-fascist Indians (the Indian fascists saw this very clearly). The fascist Akhand Bharat agenda too is based on a denial of the nationhood of the countries named above, and also a demand that Indian Muslims must “[assimilated into Indian nationalism which is Hindu nationalism, and Indian culture which is Hindu culture](#)” or else be “driven out”.

In October 2022, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief Mohan Bhagwat announced that Akhand Bharat would become a reality in 10 years-15 years. “Hamari gaadi chal padi hai, bina brake ki gaadi hai, sirf accelerator hai,” he declared. “Jo rokne ki koshish karenge, woh mit jayenge. Jo aana chahe, woh hamare saath aa ke baith jaaye, gaadi rukegi nahi.” Our car is on its way. It has no brakes, only an accelerator. Anyone who comes in the way will be destroyed. Those who want can come join us in the car. This car won’t stop.

The “car without brakes that crushed anyone in the way” is a well-chosen metaphor: for most Indians, this would bring to mind Narendra Modi’s words in an interview with Reuters during his campaign as a prime ministerial candidate. Asked if he regretted the anti-Muslim massacres that took place on his watch as Gujarat chief minister in 2002, he replied, “If someone else is driving a car and we’re sitting behind, even then if a puppy comes under the wheel, will it be painful or not? Of course it is.”

Those resisting the “accelerating car” of Hindu supremacism in India, any Indian concerned with democracy and experts who comment on geopolitics ought to be able to see that Putin, just as much as Donald Trump in the US, shares a political and ideological project with Modi, and with despots like China’s Xi Jinping. It is interesting then to note that Indian civil society as well media and social media is saturated with Putin propaganda on Ukraine. The vast ecosystem that believes and reproduces whichever element of Putinist propaganda confirms their particular biases includes leading journalists, foreign policy commentators and strategists, former Indian diplomats and retired military officers, as well as progressive and left activists and organisations.

For instance, on February 22, two days before the anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, N Ram, one of India’s most respected journalists, who is also known to be left-leaning, attended a photo exhibition titled “Ordinary Nazism” at the Russian Centre of Science and Culture in Chennai where he was hosted by the Consul General of Russia. Addressing a talk on the “Genesis of Ukraine-Russia conflict”, Ram said praised the USSR and then Russia for being “an all-weather friend” of India.

His next observation was most extraordinary. N Ram, who is known for his sharp criticisms of [Hindu supremacist](#) policies and the “[Hindu Nation](#)” project, said that the “conflict” between Russia and Ukraine “goes back to the history of the Russian Orthodox Church”, and that “every attempt is made by the Zelensky regime, with the support of the most reactionary forces in the world, to eradicate those historical ties is impossible”.

Indian journalist, Director of THG Publishing Private Limited, The Hindu Group's publishing company Mr. N. Ram is sharing his thoughts about the exhibition "Ordinary Nazism" at the inauguration ceremony at [#RussianHouseChennai.#TheHindu#OrdinaryNazism #exhibiton pic.twitter.com/t8kKwD61nD](#)

— Russian House, Chennai (@ruscult_chennai) [February 22, 2023](#)

Many leading commentators and politicians in India, especially those who are Left leaders or left-leaning or progressive, usually blame the “conflict” on US and NATO provocation, and accuse Ukraine of being “Nazi”. Some on the left condemn the invasion and Putin’s “revanchism” and distancing themselves from Putin’s “de-Nazification” and “NATO provocation” pretexts, while also wanting a mediated end to the war that will appease Putin.

Both of the above have avoided acknowledging the elephant in the room – the inconvenient fact that for at least a decade before his 2014 and 2022 invasions, Putin has couched Russia’s mystical oneness with Ukraine primarily in terms of Christian nationalism: [the authority of the Lord](#)”, based on a story about a prince (whose name Valdemar fortuitously sounds like Putin’s own) who converted to Eastern Christianity in the 10th century in what is now modern Kyiv.

Ram is the first intellectual of this stature to actually endorse Putin’s religious-civilisational claims over Ukraine. These are indistinguishable from claims that the history of Hindu civilisation began from the dawn of humanity, was crushed by “Muslim invaders” (they skate past the anti-colonial struggle) and is finally resurgent now in a fast car to the Hindu nation under Modi’s leadership. Vladimir Putin’s claims over Ukraine are just as specious and fantastic.

To cite a few more instances from the fields of diplomacy and the armed forces rather than left politics or editorial journalism, Venkatesh Varma, a former Indian Ambassador to Russia and a career diplomat, said, [“Ukraine has become a proxy war between Russia and the West”](#). Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat, India’s former Chief of the Naval Staff, who known to stand against Hindu supremacist politics, has consistently advocated for the view that Ukraine (a proxy for the US and NATO) is the real aggressor who left Russia with no alternative but to make a “strategic intervention” (which is what he called the invasion [a month after it began](#)).

Elsewhere, [I have written about the ways](#) in which the Left parties and intellectuals, advocate for a value-free “multipolarity” to avoid substantive protests against crimes against humanity by Russia and China. They also limit their solidarity to Ukraine lest efforts to correct the Putinist propaganda rampant in India distract us from our “national priority” of fighting fascism in India. They also hold their members and supporters back from complete identification with and advocacy for the Ukraine resistance. They argue that an outright defeat might weaken Russia and thus be a setback for “multipolarity”, which they claim is important, [“regardless of”](#) whether these non-US Big Powers are despotic. But instead of being a “pole to keep US imperialism in check”, they are emerging as a lightning rod for anti-democratic forces all over the world.

Thanks [@manavikapur](#) for quoting me here: "One of the major reasons why India doesn't want to jeopardise its ties with Moscow is that it sees Russia as a guarantor of multipolarity. India favours a world order where multiple powers balance each other out." <https://t.co/uUw8S6hWi5>

— Michael Kugelman (@MichaelKugelman) [February 25, 2022](#)

Times are strange, and the political and geopolitical equations of an earlier time do not serve us now, if they ever did. Doubt about verifiable facts thrives in a climate where leading Indian public figures, political leaders, field experts (with very few exceptions) regurgitate Putinist propaganda, (or offer plausibly reasonable for tempering passionate advocacy with Ukraine, with “perspective, proportion, and patience” (a memorable phrase I recall from the many lectures in Left politics I was privileged to receive last year.)

The sources where we sought moral leadership and intellectual, fact-based analysis in the past are now themselves victims or propagandists of untruths. We need to look at the changing world with humility, without the hubris that all the answers to today’s problems are to be found in outdated paradigms of the past, which are at best distorted, at worst dishonest - and always dangerous. If we do so, one thing that stands out is the courage, resilience, and sense of community and mutual networks of help that is moving and inspiring.

The adjective tags we use to describe our specific understanding of democracy and our arguments over them - “democratic socialism” (the modern phrase in use in the US, and Ram Manohar Lohia’s use of that phrase long ago); “socialist democracy”, “social democracy”, “bourgeois democracy”, “liberal democracy” - lock us into a joyless and inert sense of democracy, or a vague romantic one. We cannot fight for a better democracy and resist despotisms without breaking out of that mental prison.

Ukraine is by no means perfect - neither is ours in India, is it? But what Ukraine offers us, at a time when our hope tends to get frayed at the edges, is a reminder of something important. Much like the movement against the Citizenship Amendment Act and National Register of Citizens and the farmers’ movement in India, the Ukraine Maidan Revolution of 2014 and the Ukrainian resistance puts the “public” back into the “republic.” Democracy does not lie in a particular economic or political system. National slogans can inspire a democratic response sometimes - but the same one may not communicate at all when we reproduce it mechanically in another situation.

The beating heart of democracy where I used to think were the “less political” places. A big crisis might bring people together - but they stay together because of the small human interactions: a shawl lent, a baby rocked, a song learnt, a joke shared, a hot meal offered to strangers. Even during the Covid lockdown, networks of migrant workers stranded in cities and desperate to go home, and those of city volunteers created a sense of community in the midst of cruelty and hatred. In the summer of 2021 when people saw loved ones forced to die for lack of oxygen or hospital beds, there were so many unnamed self-organised volunteers who monitored oxygen needs and supplies, and volunteered to bury or cremate loved ones of strangers.

"We are with you, we support you."

Eduard Sturza is the Mayor of Geamăna, a small village in [#Moldova](#), which has mobilized to provide support, food, clothing and more for refugees from [#Ukraine](#) transitioning or settling temporarily. pic.twitter.com/OaxRED9ou1

— UN Development (@UNDP) [February 24, 2023](#)

If we gratefully receive hope and courage from Ukraine, what do we owe them in return? How best to make solidarity actually help the Ukraine resistance? What should the bare minimum standards of genuine solidarity with Ukraine look like - in India and elsewhere? The answer lies in the very same problem discussed above: the distressing fact that most of India seems to be in the grip of propaganda, and if politically progressive people ought to know better, it is true that most Indians

do not have access to facts on Ukraine, especially in languages other than English.

Statements like “We stand with Ukraine” and “We categorically condemn the invasion”, a year after the invasion, are a case of “too little too late”. The best and most effective form of solidarity for us here in India is to make the effort to prepare basic information and analysis in the languages we speak (like Ukrainians, most Indians speak two or even three languages). We can counter disinformation – not on one or two occasions, but consistently and patiently as long as the invasion lasts.

“We have no time”, this will “distract us” from priorities here in India. That’s actually not true. When we inform Indians about the connections between the fascists and despots – Putin, Trump, Modi, Xi – when we tell people details of the Ukraine resistance, we are strengthening our own movements for democracy. We do expect people fighting Trumpism in the US or racist Brexiteers in the United Kingdom to take the time to show meaningful solidarity with our struggles in India. We especially want them to counter propaganda that muddies the waters in other countries, by equating criticism of Hindu supremacist politics and violence, with “Hinduphobia”.

If we are lucky enough to have people in other countries who care enough for us that they organise ways of countering Hindu-supremacist falsehoods, we owe it to Ukraine to do the same for them. Doing so is no “distraction”, just as fighting US disinformation in the name of “War on Terror” did not weaken our own struggles in India.

The litmus test for Ukraine solidarity, at the very least, requires us to publicly campaign against Putin propaganda – and those who disseminate it in India – not just the fascists, but especially when it comes from our friends and people we admire.

Questions for our friends

We need to ask sharp questions of our friends who defend and expand democracy in India – but do the opposite when it comes to Ukraine. So let us first ask ourselves the questions we wish to ask others. It does great harm when the Left and democratic groups say “solidarity” up front and then perpetuate the very debates Putin creates for people outside Russia. Inside, though, he is brazen in declaring fascist, communal, and genocidal reasons for his invasions.

- Are we willing to reject the demands of a “speedy end to the war” and instead to clearly and robustly advocate for a speedy victory for Ukraine? Are we willing to say, without ifs and buts, “Victory to Ukraine” and “defeat to Russia”?
- Are we willing to say that “end the war” can only mean “an end to the Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine”?
- Are we willing to say that a “negotiated peace” that has not been initiated by Ukraine itself but by US pressure, can only be that familiar story of imperialist powers deciding Ukraine’s fate among themselves. That’s what was done at the end of World War II, when the the US and Britain colluded with the USSR to betray Poland and condemn it to continue to be a colony of the latter. We cannot allow (let alone advocate) for this shameful chapter to be repeated in Ukraine.
- Are we willing to say that Ukraine has the moral right to demand and receive the weapons it needs to defend itself?

If we cannot answer the above questions without ifs and buts and dodges, we should not then claim to be offering solidarity. If you think this is unreasonable and undemocratic, take a moment. Those to whom you offer solidarity should not have to waste time convincing allies that facts are facts and day is not night. Imagine if we had to keep explaining to people offering solidarity how our

movements are not actually led by “terrorists”, how the Bharatiya Janata Party’s claim that Citizenship Amendment Act is just a law to help refugees is false.

Imagine in spite of all our efforts, our “allies” continue to be conflicted about the National Register of Citizens, especially in border states, in spite of no evidence to suggest a demographic threat from “illegal immigrants”, because so many activists and political leaders they trust, support it?

In fact, there is something that does undermine our struggles. When we suggest that the invasion and occupation of Ukraine in 2014 was [“retaliation” by Putin against the “toppling of the elected Yanukovych regime”](#) - even if we say that this is a matter of “opinion” or a “difference of judgment” and not an outright lie - we are creating a climate where people tend to doubt facts and believe a lie that is repeated often enough. If we believe that perhaps Putin is right when he talks about Nazis in Ukraine (or gay people, or Satanists, depending on which is your bias of choice), we make it easier for our own fascists’ canards to take root: that the farmers’ movement or activism against climate change and other movements are following some sinister [“toolkit” backed by Greta Thunberg or Rihanna](#) or “regime change” plots funded by Soros to undermine the Modi government.

[“toolkit” backed by Greta Thunberg or Rihanna](#)

Building meaningful Ukraine solidarity is possible only if we stop putting a concern for “multipolarity” over above a concern for Ukraine’s victory. It is possible only if we defend the international laws based on universally defined baseline standards of democracy and stop defending “multipolarity”, which is nothing but an alibi for despots (both in the US and in other states) to violate and attack those laws.

The generation before mine had raised the slogan “Our Name, Your Name, Vietnam”, in Hindi, Bangla, Tamil, Malayalam and in our diverse languages. In 2023, we need a new slogan that reflects our identification with Ukraine’s struggle and our recognition that we cannot fight fascism in India if we say of invader and invaded that “both sides are bleeding”; if we say “there are far-right forces on both sides” or indeed any version of this.

Ukrainians are not asking for solidarity with their far-right: they are asking us not to equate their far-right with the fascists that are in power in Russia and want to wipe out Ukraine and its people. Ukraine is doing us a service by helping us recognise and resist the language and ideology of Putin, Xi and the Modi government, which dress up attacks on democracy as “freedom from colonialism”.

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