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Russia/Ukraine

How do Russians interpret the invasion of Ukraine?

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In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, *New Left Review* spoke with Ilya Budraitskis about the political context of the attack, Putin's military and political goals in the short and long term, and the response so far from the Russian citizenry. Why were so many on the Left surprised by the extent of the military action, and, finally, how might we express solidarity right now?

What is the situation at this point? How extensive is the damage?

It is very difficult to judge, as reports from both sides are highly contradictory. But we can already say for sure that we are talking about dozens of dead Ukrainian citizens, as well as Ukrainian and Russian military personnel. Russian troops are advancing in several directions (including from the territory of Belarus), and their aim is to capture the largest cities in the country, Kiev and Kharkiv. There are also reports of explosions in the Russian border town of Belgorod. The coming days will be decisive, as Russia obviously expects to achieve its military objectives quickly and force the Ukrainian leadership to capitulate completely. At the same time, despite the West's refusal to support Ukraine militarily, its army is showing combat effectiveness and the "special operation" announced by Putin may well escalate into a full-fledged, long-term war. There is already news of Russian army conscripts - i.e. soldiers aged 18-20 - taking part in the war. Although so far the military leadership is trying to conceal this (including from the families of these soldiers), if this development continues it will no longer be possible.

Many Western mainstream media outlets were consistently emphasizing the likelihood of imminent invasion, with many on the Left voicing a much higher degree of scepticism. Were you surprised by the extent of the attack?

I, like most commentators in Russia, did not believe until the last moment that a full-scale attack on Ukraine was possible. Nevertheless, the aggressive orientation of Russia's foreign policy, and the Russian army's hybrid involvement in the war in Donbass were obvious to me. However, those Western leftists, who up to the last minute made Russia look like a victim and endlessly called the Ukrainian regime "Nazi", now bear their share of responsibility for the war. And if they want to be honest with themselves and their supporters, they should publicly admit their mistake.

What are Putin's goals, both militarily and politically, in the short and medium term? What are Putin's intentions in Ukraine, and what does he hope to achieve with the invasion in terms of domestic policy in Russia?

Putin's aims were made clear in yesterday's address to the nation: destroying Ukraine's military infrastructure, forcing Ukraine to surrender and replacing its leadership with a regime loyal to Russia. He also explained that this "special operation" is a coercive one (i.e. Russia is only defending itself with an attack) and is aimed at ending "genocide" in Donbass. Ukraine itself, according to his view, is an artificial state formation and actually represents historical Russian lands. This interpretation clearly goes against previous official propaganda, which ridiculed the very possibility of an invasion.

In terms of the historical context in the run up to the invasion, how significant was Putin's strategy since early 2021 to further consolidate power and crush organized opposition?

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Certainly, the political repressions of the past year have allowed the elimination of the organized opposition within the country, which could have been the centre of the anti-war movement. Moreover, the aim of the repression was to create an atmosphere of fear in society and to suppress interest in politics. Nevertheless, even now we can see that society is highly divided in its attitude to the war that has started and there has been no "rally around the flag".

What is the significance of the two break-away "republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk in the broader conflict?

The recognition of the independence of the "republics" in Donetsk and Luhansk was the key pretext for launching a military operation. For this purpose, an atmosphere of panic was artificially created among the local population (including through announced evacuations). An important point was that the borders of the territories where this recognition took place were not clearly marked and opened up a direct route to advance deep into Ukraine.

How will the conflict affect the political economy of the region and beyond? What might be the results of an extended conflict?

The logic of the Russian leadership in justifying the war with Ukraine easily opens up the possibility of further revising all post-Soviet borders (for they too, according to Putin, were created artificially). This is well understood by the leaders of all the post-Soviet republics, none of which have expressed support for Russia. Even Lukashenko, who provided the territory of Belarus for Russian troops, has publicly dissociated himself from the war and tried to present himself as a neutral party to the conflict. Putin's calculation is that possession of nuclear weapons gives him a guarantee against military intervention by the West on what he considers to be "historically" Russian territories. So it is very difficult to say at what point he will be satisfied. If his plan to establish political and military control over Ukraine is realized, it could well open the way for Russia to move further into the post-Soviet space.

We are now seeing major protests in Russia, with many being arrested. What is your sense of the sentiment of the Russian people to the invasion?

Unlike in 2014, there is no patriotic enthusiasm in Russia today. Part of society is obviously outright opposed to the war with Ukraine, while the majority simply believes that it will soon be over and Russia will restore peace. There are very few actual revanchists who welcome the war and are prepared to make any sacrifice for the sake of Russia's geopolitical triumph. On the other hand, during the long years of Putin's rule, the vast majority of Russians have adopted the attitude that they have no ability to influence anything, and that everything will be decided without their participation anyway. This background of depoliticization and demoralization may provide passive support for the war for some period of time. However, if the war drags on and its economic and social consequences are felt by the majority of Russians, their mood may change dramatically. It should also be remembered that for Russia, the perception of Ukrainians as culturally and historically the closest people is very important. Also many Russians have Ukrainian roots or relatives who live in Ukraine. All this creates extremely shaky ground for continued approval of the war from below.

What should the Left response outside of Russia amount to? How should we pressure our own governments, and what demands should be made?

First of all, we need to demand an end to the war in Ukraine, and direct talks between Putin and Zelensky. It is necessary to demand the withdrawal of weapons in the Donbass and UN control. It is necessary to say clearly who started this war and not to look for any excuses for it. All this does not mean supporting the governments in question, still less the NATO bloc. Obviously, Putin has done a lot to provide justification for the existence of NATO and its strengthening in Europe. At the same time, one has to understand that sanctions targeting the entire Russian population, deepening the country's international isolation - not only of the government, but also of Russian society -

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can have the opposite effect and lead to a strengthening of the regime.

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