Global Issues

"Ordinary People" and Fascism: A Conjunctural Perspective on (Pre)War Russia

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In the first weeks and months of the war of Russian aggression against Ukraine, one of the central questions of the Ukrainian resistance and Western observers was whether this war was "Putin's war" or "Russia's war" – that is, whether the Russian population at large supported the Kremlin's fascist and imperial ideology.

Several public opinion polls – by governmental and independent research institutes – concluded that 70 per cent or more of the respondents supported the war of aggression;[1] nevertheless, there continues to be a heated debate. The credibility of such surveys is disputed because of the repression announced by the government for anti-war statements. Only one in two or one in four interviewees (depending on the survey) were willing to share their attitudes toward the war. This is important, but the results of all surveys were similar despite differing methodologies. Because the findings could be partially supplemented with qualitative methods (for example, Erpyleva, 2022), I am inclined to evaluate the results of the opinion polls as credible. Moreover, as long as other data does not refute them and we have no other basis for analysis, we have to operate with these results of the opinion polls.

The discussions about "Putin's war" often seem to me to disguise the truth that in Russia most intellectuals and most Russians do not or do not strongly oppose the war of aggression. The hope, especially of the international left, is placed on "the ordinary people in Russia and Ukraine" who do not want war, like all other people in the world. But who are the "ordinary Russians"? And why do they support the war of aggression and crimes against humanity in Ukraine? What ideology serves as a superstructure for the war – a war that, among other things, is waged by Russia without regard for the rational interests of its citizens?

In the course of this war, the question of who feels themselves to be "ordinary people" or "ordinary Russians", and what ideological and everyday consequences are drawn from this, takes on a new political dimension. The same applies to the questions of "unity", ethics and the potential of the protest against Putin. In this paper, I will note some aspects that have already played a role in analysing social circumstances in pre-war Russia and that are now at the centre of current discussions on Russian ideology. I argue that the figuration of "ordinary people" in the last financial crisis (2015–2016) replaced the collective perspective on social inequalities or injustice, even when protest is organised and carried out by workers. In the context of the depoliticisation and

[1] See, for example, monthly surveys of the independent Levada Center (2022), which show that the majority of Russians "strongly" (53 per cent at the end of March, 45 per cent at the end of April) and "rather" (28 per cent at the end of March, 29 per cent at the end of April) support the "Special Military Operation". It is also interesting that to the question "Who is primarily responsible for killing civilians and destroying houses in Ukraine?" 57 per cent of respondents answered that the "USA and NATO" were responsible for it. Similar figures were seen in studies of pro-government opinion polls (VTsION News (2022), as well as the independent opinion polls of Russian Field (2022).

individualisation of society, social protest by ordinary Russians (or just "the bottom") is the only way to make concrete social demands. In building alliances (for example, among social protesters or between social protests and anti-Putin protests), it becomes particularly clear that the only collective strategy in this context is the ethnonationalist "unification of the people" against the elite. I also argue that a fascist ideology with imperial and ethnonationalist elements prevails in Russia today, which for years emerged from the bottom up.

The "Ordinary Russian"

In my 2015–2018 research, I studied the figures of "ordinary people/common people/ordinary Russians" (*простой народ/простые русские*) in various protests, with a strong focus on workers' struggles. For this, I researched the conflicts and alliances in the Russian protest landscape, specifically protests about social issues. I conducted many interviews in the liberal spectrum of the opposition, among left-liberal human rights protesters and among leftist groups generally. In addition, most crucially, I conducted two long-term ethnographies. The first was a month-long truck drivers' strike that aimed to improve drivers' working conditions and to fight against "the privatisation" of "common resources". Perhaps because of their specific profession, the workers on strike insisted on personal independence and individualism. The strike resulted in the formation of an independent union. The second ethnography related to a neighbourhood protest in Moscow. The protest activists described themselves in public and among themselves as "angry ordinary people" who were fighting injustice. In the one-on-one interviews, they answered my question about their class, stating that they belong to the working class, but they did not use this understanding in collective actions and statements. The strikes and protests were conducted only on behalf of ordinary people. Neither the workers nor the activists perceived themselves as collective actors in their particular sector, but first and foremost as ordinary people, underprivileged Russians who sought protection from the country's president.

However, the notion of "ordinary people" is not only about the self-perception of the workers or of underprivileged people. The truckers were perceived by the media and by the government as both anti-Putin protesters and as ordinary people. The right-wing populist political elite used this characterisation to keep the workers from allying with the intelligentsia, which they described as being "alienated from the people". The anti-Putin coalition either responded with contempt and hastened to position itself as separate from the ordinary Russian or, ignoring the concrete social issues, tried to unite with the ordinary people and support their protest.

The alliance of the left-populist wing of the political protests thus saw the striking workers only an instrument, not as legitimately criticising social injustice. Various types of social protesters examined whether or not it was possible to unite against Putin , without critically questioning people's attitudes towards privatisation, individualisation or even social justice.

In these protests, I observed that discontent with social injustice rapidly developed into anger against the oligarchs and corruption, and sometimes also against the government. But this anger quickly spilled over into anti-Semitic fantasies, hoping for a "united nation" to "show the world" what Russia was capable of.[2] On the individual level, workers mostly perceived social protest and strikes as "liberation from slavery". Less common but quite widespread was the view of the

[2] This and other quotations in this paragraph come from a workers' protest, a strike against the deterioration of working conditions and the introduction of new legal standards. The activists made these statements in 2015 or 2016 during the active phase of their protest. The quotes are taken from the private archive of the researcher and have not yet been published.

protesters that they had uncovered a "worldwide conspiracy" or "realised who rules the world". Therefore, when President Putin was criticised, it was not for anti-Western and anti-democratic policies nor for anti-social reforms, but for "dancing to the American tune", for "being in cahoots with Israel"; the criticism was not for occupying Crimea, but more often for "betraying our guys" (Russian soldiers who had fought in Donbas against Ukraine from 2014 to 2016) or for "Putin not acting decisively enough" (that is, not occupying more Ukrainian territories). Many strikers and protesters reported that before the protest, they were "in the dark" and only discovered "the truth" through the protest. However, this "truth" often meant the worldview of ethnic-nationalists and anti-Semites. Workers adopted the anti-Semitic world view, the conspiracy narrative and the ethnic understanding of the "Russian people" in the course of their "politicisation" – that is, by participating in protests and strikes, and not necessarily due to exposure to "TV propaganda". Importantly, openly anti-Semitic rhetoric was not characteristic of the Kremlin rhetoric of that time. Anti-Semitism tended to emanate "from below" in Russia. According to my observations, this changed about a month into the war, when overt anti-Semitic rhetoric gained prominence also in government rhetoric.[3]

Of course, the anti-Semitism and ethnic-nationalist ideology did not come about only through politicisation of the current conflict. Since the late 1980s, anti-Semitism has been part of the "renaissance of the Russian Orthodox Church" with its rhetoric about "Russians saving the world from anti-Christians" (Shnirelman, 2005, 2017). And of course, it is difficult to separate the anti-Semitic narrative of the workers from conspiracy narratives that form part of the official political rhetoric in Russia. But I would like to note two observations from my research. First, the anti-Semitic interpretation of inequalities came primarily "from below": from "the people", not from the government. And second, the consensus among various Russian protests was that the only way to achieve a broad alliance was to unite as a people in the ethnic sense and to fight against the elite.

How can we characterise this process? On the grounds of my research before the war, I suggest that the pre-war conjuncture can be captured with the term "fascistisation", and that fascism is a dominant ideology in today's Russia.

Ideology in Contemporary Russia

The analytical use of the term fascism for ideology, state and society in Russia is currently very controversial. I do not consider as significant that the resistance against the war of aggression is

[3] Explicit anti-Semitism was not typical for Putin or for the official rhetoric of United Russia, the ruling party. However, this has changed since the beginning of the war. Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy figures in Russian propaganda as a nationalist, not despite the fact that he is a Jew but because he is a Jew. Around the same time, government spokesmen started to refer to an Orthodox synagogue in the Ukrainian city of Uman as a center for fascism. In parallel, in April, a Jewish pro-Ukrainian activist from Russia was arrested and demonised with anti-Semitic rhetoric. At the beginning of May, there were reports about the Ukrainian military in the Russian pro-government media; an alleged affiliation to "the Nazis" was illustrated by using Jewish symbolism. Furthermore, there is a connection between anti-Semitism and pro-Russian positions in the West, as the recent anti-Semitic caricature of Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on 26 May 2022 demonstrates (https://twitter.com/SZ/status/1529815334219395074). In the cartoon we see typical anti-Semitic visual language; the Ukrainian president appears online in front of World Economic Forum's annual meeting, depicted as a fat Jew ruling over the economy of the world. The drawn gestures and physiognomy on this cartoon have a long anti-Semitic tradition. This example shows that the anti-Semitic interpretations suggested by the Kremlin are ultimately spread not only in Russia.

called a struggle against fascism, while the prevailing Russian war rhetoric proclaims that it is fighting for "liberation from Ukrainian fascism". That the Russian side uses the term need not devalue it; such and similar (false) projections on the victims of violence are familiar from research on racism and anti-Semitism.

However, there are analytical objections to consider. Is there even a dominant ideology in Russia today? Human rights activist Igor Kochetkov[4] assumes that there is no unifying state ideology in Russia today. Right-wing liberals like Latynina[5] and Khodorkovsky[6] usually argue that instead of an ideology there is only a void. Fascism usually involves the mobilisation of mass movements. However, not only is the government not mobilising the citizens of the Russian Federation in a movement, it is actually trying to demobilise and depoliticise the citizens. Of course, if we judge exclusively by the standards of the past, a mass movement, armoured by the state institutions, should look different. The absence of mobilisation for the war and for a pro-war movement could be an indication that ideology is altogether absent. But ideology should not be reduced to state propaganda and the deliberate misleading of supporters. Rather, it should be understood as part of the country's social conditions and culture, as a response to material challenges, and also as a (necessary) "false consciousness" that manifests itself in relations between individuals and groups. In this sense, ideology unquestionably exists in Russia – just like in any other country.

But another question is whether this ideology – which accompanies everyday life, work, consumption and all relationships, which runs (with all its ambivalences and contradictions) through protests and through popular and high culture – should really be called fascist. The discussion of whether or not Russia is fascist began even before the war of aggression. On one side are Alexander Motyl (2007), Timothy Snyder (2014, 2016, 2022), Lev Gudkov (2015) and Vladislav Inozemtsev (2017), as well as other public intellectuals who compare the dominant ideology in Russia to Nazi Germany and diagnose the dominance of a fascist ideology for the elite and the general population alike. On the other hand, Marlene Laruelle (2021) and Jeremy Morris (2016, 2022), among others, reserve the term illiberalism for the ideology of the Russian elite and view more general diagnoses of fascism primarily as the othering of Russia and its underprivileged population by the West. This discussion continues today.

A direct comparison of present Russia with Nazi Germany, as drawn by Inozemzev, Gudkov and Snyder, is difficult to sustain because it neglects the crucial element of National Socialism, namely the pursuit of the extermination of all Jews. However, in my view, the talk of illiberalism of the elite does not explain the essential aspects of contemporary Russian ideology. First, the design of a new man – "Homo Putinus", as Alexander Skobov (2022) calls him – does not originate from the Soviet notion of the "new man" but has quite different characteristics. The widespread liberal assessment, according to which the current ideology is an illiberal return to the Soviet Union, fails to recognise the main elements of Homo Putinus, who stands for war, against humanism and a good life (even for himself) and approves (or at least does not condemn) brutality, authoritarian hierarchy and violence. This kind of ethics is new and is not derivable from Soviet ideology, which

[4] See his YouTube channel on 3 September 2022: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEs1mPxAjyw.

[5] See for example her tweet from April 2022: https://twitter.com/YLatynina/status/1510570981345349632.

[6] See for example the interview with him from 2021 https://www.dw.com/ru/hodorkovskij-u-putinskogo-rezhima-net-ideologii-jeto-rezhim-pro-dengi/a-59045145, and the interview from 2022 https://www.svoboda.org/a/mihail-hodorkovskiy-putin-podvel-rossiyu-k-neizbezhnomu-raspadu/31901605.html.

at least postulated peace, humanism and equality.

The second difference concerns the goal, clearly present in the population and in state rhetoric, of changing the world order. The ideological rhetoric states that Russia must "get up off its knees" and "show them". A new world order is imagined, which is backward-looking but which believes that the "Russian world" will never end. The currently dominant ideology in Russia is characterised by a utopia in which a new world order is established, one which draws its legitimacy from a mixture of neo-imperialism and fascism. It does not seek a better life, happiness or fun, but violence and humility. The task of the new people in the new world order is, therefore, to endure suffering; this is reflected not only in the rhetoric of the government and the president but also in numerous other aspects of the construction of ideology (such as everyday life, culture, consumption, work and relationships).

The third and final aspect concerns once again the reference to ordinary Russians. Neither the workers dissatisfied with their situation nor the majority of the anti-Putin opposition intended to fight the imperial and fascist forces in Russia. Indeed, collective great power fantasies that are promoted by authors like Shura Burtin (2022) were widespread in pre-war social protests (see also Erpyleva and Saveljeva, 2022). The protesters longed for "unification with the common Russian people" and, in doing so, animated the narrative about Great Power Chauvinism and the related narrative about how Russian violence could make "the world proper and liberated" and contribute to politicising social protests.[7]

Of course, on the basis of approximately eighty interviews with strikers and other protesters, and a long-term ethnography of two protests, it is not possible to make a statement about "workers" or "Russians" in general. But what can be done is to describe a conjuncture. This description makes more credible the claims of opinion polls that show mass support for the war of aggression.

Against this backdrop, I suggest analysing the pre-war period as a fascistisation of society, and the current dominant ideology as fascism. The simultaneity of the highest degree of individualisation and depoliticisation (even inside the protests) on the one hand, and the pursuit of belonging to ethnic-nationalist unification of Russians on the other, is central to the ideology in today's Russia.

Meanings of Solidarity

Members of the liberal opposition in exile are struggling to be recognised as belonging to the "common Russian people" and aim to ward off notions of their "collective guilt". A Russian Committee of Action held a conference in May 2022 in Vilnius, calling for a Free Russia. Among others, Garri Kasparov, Dmitry Gudkov and Mikhail Khodorkovsky declared that signatories of the committee's declaration would receive a certificate stating that they are "good Russians" or "European Russians". The certificate is meant to have both moral and practical meaning – the practical purpose being that these individuals will not be affected by the sanctions that hit Russians as a whole (Boguslavskaya, 2022; Russian Action Committee, 2022). However, this is not the same

[7] In reality, of course, everything looks much less monolithic. In the workers' movements, there have always been individuals and groups who uphold international solidarity, share emancipatory worldviews, reject right-wing populism and are not receptive to anti-Semitic racist and imperialist sentiment. But what I observed above all is that these people or groups were a tiny minority. That is why it is not surprising that during the pandemic, the independent union I researched was ostensibly against "poisoning the population through vaccination".

as renouncing Russian imperial claims. At the conference, Kasparov formulated the central task of the emigrant opposition as defending the rights of Russians in Crimea after the war and protecting emigrated Russians from "discrimination". At the same time, many of the workers protesting in 2015–2016 – as well as formerly non-politicised people – are now satisfied with "Putin's policy" and/or send their children to a war of aggression.[8]

Against this backdrop, an adequate assessment of whether the protesting workers will eventually fight against fascism has a meaning for military, political and civil society strategy in Ukraine and around the world. This is why the question of supporting the war in Russia (and potential mass resistance against the war) is being discussed so emotionally, even several months after the war started. Through that question alone shimmers hope. Could it not be that it is "just" Putin's war against Ukraine? Could it not be that the majority of Russians are against it? This would suggest that Russian society, at least theoretically, could stop the war, democratise itself without outside intervention, and distance itself from great power fantasies and claims. I think this hope is unfounded, as long as we do not have evidence to the contrary.

Of course, the pre-war period cannot be reduced to its meaning for the war. The period between the Chechen War (ending in 2009) and the war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, for example, was ambivalent and heterogeneous. However, in the context of the current urgent need for solidarity with the people still living in Ukraine, as well as the humanistic obligation of the left, we should not focus on the contradictions faced by and the grievances of the ordinary Russian people, at least until the victory of Ukraine is achieved. What is needed is solidarity with the courageous resistance in Ukraine and with those workers who set fire to the military recruitment offices in Russia, with those workers and activists who smash tracks used for military deliveries, with those who refuse military service, who desert or sit in jail for anti-fascist and anti-war agitation.

The war calls into question our understanding of solidarity. What is missing in the international left is a sharpening of the concept. What does real international solidarity mean? I propose to understand solidarity, on the one hand, as a common resistance against inhumanity and injustice and, on the other hand, as an action that renounces the claim of reciprocity.

Based on my social critique, I am convinced that the task of every progressive force today is to use all its resources to fight against Russian great-power chauvinism. All emancipatory political groups, the international workers' movement and its organic intellectuals must have one goal regarding Russia: to use all available means to smash this fascist ideology and put an end to Russia's war of aggression. Whether we support Ukraine by supplying weapons or analysis is ultimately a question of our resources and capabilities.

[8] The statement refers to the workers' strikes, trade unions and local protests that I researched and continued to observe. Of course, not all of the social protesters, workers and trade union officials favour the war. Some of them today join the resistance against the war, help their children to desert or refuse military service, support the Ukrainians deported to Russia, and position themselves against their former comrades-in-arms and their new symbols. All this could theoretically be interpreted as an indication of hope for a broad anti-fascist resistance. However, despite my deep sympathy and admiration for these people, I think that they have little influence on the current balance of power. Accordingly, many consider their struggle against fascist tendencies within the unions or groups as futile. But this is in no way only the problem of workers, low-income earners or socially underprivileged people in Russia. Russian Field's (2022) research shows that approval of the war is prevalent among all social classes. If anything, the least affluent Russians are an exception. According to an opinion poll, young Russians with the lowest incomes are more likely than other groups to oppose the war. See Kuznetsova (2022).

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