Nostalgia, Nationalism and the New Russia

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Russian socialist Ilya Budraitskis talks to Tribune about the war in Ukraine, the politics that produced that disaster – and the complexities of nationalism in Putin's Russia.

For the last decade, one of the liveliest and most intelligent voices on the Russian left has come from the Moscow-based writer, curator, and thinker Ilya Budraitskis. His first English-language book, *Dissidents among Dissidents*, translated by Giuliano Vivaldi, was published by Verso at the start of this year—just before the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Owen Hatherley, Guido Sechi, and Giuliano Vivaldi sat down with Ilya remotely in early April for a wide-ranging discussion of his work, the rise of neoliberalism and nationalism in Russia, left responses inside and outside the region, and the importance of the anti-fascist legacy in the post-Soviet space and beyond.

Neoliberalism and Nationalism in Russia

GS | In recent interventions you stated you regard the current stage of the Russian regime as 'post-fascist', using Enzo Traverso's phrase, with the main difference with classical fascism being the demobilization, rather than mobilization, of Russian society. You have associated this demobilisation with neoliberalism; other authors—from political activists to geographers to anthropologists—have emphasised the connection between the latter and de-politicization and atomization. However, neoliberal hegemony and dominant subjectivities are common in the post-Soviet/post-socialist space, not only in Russia. You curated an exhibition in 2013 to mark the 20th anniversary of Yeltsin's violent conflict with the Russian Parliament, an exhibition which after a short period was closed down. The events of 1993 have been more or less repressed from any official discourse. Is it then possible then to find the roots of the current situation both in neoliberal ideology and practice and in Yeltsin's 1993 authoritarian, ultra-presidentialist turn?

And, how do you think the Putinist regime—neoliberal to the core in its essence—will deal with the current situation in political and economic terms? Can it implement an autarchic economic model while carrying out an imperial war?

IB | I think you are completely right when you point to the roots of this war to the birth of the Russian authoritarian regime in the early 1990s. And I think it started in 1993 when the radical market reforms were combined with the state of emergency after the conflict between President Yeltsin and the Parliament and the installation of the Russian constitution in December 1993, which provided unprecedented authoritarian Presidential power in a very unbalanced manner.

It's interesting that you talked about the ideological evolution of this regime starting from Yeltsin's authoritarian constitution, leading to Putin's rule through some kind of amalgamation of neo-liberal practices and pro-market ideas *with* the spirit of the so-called patriotic opposition to this market transformation. This patriotic opposition in the Russian nineties somehow combined anti-market sentiments with a revanchist and imperialist ideology. I think that from a theoretical point of view it

could be described with the help of Boltanski and Chiapello's theory of *The New Spirit of Capitalism* when we are talking about the spirit of a Russian, post-Soviet capitalism which somehow adopted elements of criticism to its own spirit. So the elements of the criticism were precisely that the market was built on the ruins of the great Soviet empire, it was the result of the defeat in the Cold War, and when Putin, in the very early years of his rule, made his famous point about the collapse of the Soviet Union as being the greatest geopolitical catastrophe, somehow he combined the massive feelings of Russians about the social catastrophe of market reforms with the idea of a geopolitical defeat.

So the rebirth of Russia as a great power was somehow viewed by many Russians as a way out of the social catastrophe of the nineties. It was a very important ideological turn, when the anti-market sentiments were included in the pro-market ideology of the ruling elite, and I think that that it provided a possibility for Putin to create such broad (but passive) social support for his regime. Then the neo-liberal element in this ideological combination was not just the idea of marketisation, privatisation and so on, but it also was the idea of a contest. It was competition between individuals, as well as between global powers. Despite the human rights rhetoric, everyone is just following their own interests—this idea became very important to justify all the accusations about the breaking of democratic liberties, and infringement of human rights and so on, which were presented by state propaganda as just a tool to defend the West's interests against Russia. And that's why all the opposition during Putin's rule were portrayed as just tools of the anti-Russian forces.

But how does all this logic lead to this semi-fascist or post-fascist condition that we have in Russia as I see it at the moment? I think that one of the main characteristics of fascism is the depoliticization and atomization of society. And that was basically the aim of historical fascism, to destroy any elements of democracy and social self-organization. In the twentieth century this task was made by the massive counter-revolutionary fascist movements from below. But in the current situation where any elements of self-organisation are already destroyed by the market, neo-liberalism and so on, this fascist condition came as just a move from the elites. And we can say that in the moment the war was started, most of Russian society was ready to adapt to this move. So the relation between capitalism and the fascist condition is very complicated. Because any fascist regime adopted the market elements—for example, the rights of property or the interests of big business—but the key capitalist element in this fascism is that due to the atomization of this society, it has transformed these atomized individuals into a passive and managed workforce for industry which has no elements of self-organization, no elements of subjectivity.

GS | The question is also whether a regime that is so fiscally conservative that it did not promote any welfare spending during the Covid crisis can promote an autarkic model in the light of the conflict with the West during wartime.

IB | Yes, because we're now at a historical moment when we can view all the twenty or thirty years of the post-Soviet condition from the perspective of this war. This war became possible because of all these elements: the growth of police control and the decrease of democratic rights during the pandemic, the change of the constitution in 2020, repressions against the opposition. There is a continuity between this war and all that happened in 2014 with the annexation of the Crimea and the war in the Donbas. And even earlier—the return of Putin in 2012 after the wave of protests, and then the experience of two Chechen wars in the nineties and 2000s. They were the key elements to establish Putin's legitimacy, because even in 2000 he came to power as a president of war. All the practice of this mass violence against the population and so on, that we see in Ukraine basically existed during the two Chechen wars.

OH | The Russian Socialist Movement, the organisation you're a part of, has just put out a joint statement on the war with Sotsialnyi Ruch in Ukraine. This text takes a perhaps controversial line of

not just arguing for a ceasefire, but for the victory of Ukraine and for arms to be sent to the country. Some on the left, including those who are otherwise sympathetic, might be quite reluctant to be seen to be supporting the demands of our governments or of NATO and are accordingly reluctant to call for a Ukrainian victory rather than just for peace. So while I know Russian and Ukrainian socialists have their reasons for taking this line, how do you think socialists in, say, the UK, should react to it?

IB | This question is very complicated and I can't effectively give any clear, consistent answer. There are so many elements such as sanctions which harm the Russian population a lot and will basically destroy the Russian economy—but also it is true that they are very much related to this war and can make a great impact on its result. The same is true with this idea of military victory for Ukraine, because of course this war and and the question of how it will end are organically related to the end of this regime. If this ends with anything that could be sold to the Russian population as a victory, then this regime will continue in one way or another, and this catastrophe for the country, for Russian society, will be prolonged for years.

And it's also very true that the change of this regime, some kind of re-establishment of Russian society, could be possible after a military defeat. It happened in 1905, for example, in the Russo-Japanese War which was a key element for the revolution in the Russian Empire that year, or if we remember the First World War and the role of this war in 1917. We should remember also what a big role there was these two Russian revolutions for soldiers of the defeated Russian army, who felt they were betrayed and were just victims of the military authorities. I think this lesson is relevant even for today in as far as we have so much evidence of Russian soldiers who don't want to fight in this war. It's very interesting even now when we have such big support in Russian society for this war, we can see how in the conversations of these ordinary people who support Putin and so on that their minds immediately change when you ask them: 'How about your children? Do you want them to go to Ukraine?' This question is absolutely crucial, and I think that this pro-war propaganda that you have now in Russia, its influence is very unstable. Because it will not be possible to stay silent about such a huge level of deaths among the Russian soldiers in this war, if it becomes clear for a big part of the society the scale of what has happened. For now it seems that most people in Russia still don't realise the real situation in Ukraine. So the question of NATO and weapons for Ukraine is also very complicated because, of course, not just the victory of Ukraine but its ability to resist is related directly to this military help. So in this sense I think that this demand in the statement is very much justified.

But as to the question of NATO, you should think about the whole context of this war. Francis Fukuyama explained in a recent article that the result of the Ukrainian War will be the final end of history. The end did not happen thirty years ago but it will probably happen after the military victory of Ukraine. I totally don't believe in this optimistic perspective, and the real result will be the militarisation of the whole region of Eastern Europe and Europe as such. And the question as follows: what will the military victory of Ukraine mean? Will it bring us to some kind of reconstruction of the European order, will it lead to demilitarisation, will it lead to an understanding of the huge mistakes of the positions of the Western governments and its huge role and its huge responsibility in this conflict as well? That will be one result and this result should be on the table for the Left in Europe. But the other result would be the triumph of NATO, the triumph of the western military bloc, and in this sense it would not be the end of the story. It would a step towards some further conflict with China, because China would probably be the next step in this global competition. The existence of Putin's Russia is very important for the very existence of NATO, its self-justification after the Cold War.

Cold and Hot Wars

OH | In last year's elections the usually very conservative and pro-government Communist Party of

the Russian Federation (KPRF) made some significant gains and seemed to be moving towards real opposition and also towards openness to other left-wing currents. Currently, the KPRF seems very supportive of the war and firmly behind the war, and, in many ways, even helped it along with their demand for the recognition of the 'republics' of Donetsk and Luhansk. So what do you think of the prospects for that shift in the Communist Party now? Do you see any opposition within the KPRF to the war or do you think that their opening last year is now over?

IB | In the past few years we saw a growing imbalance between the leadership of the Communist Party and its electoral base that was changing quite fast in the sense that most of the people who were disaffected with the regime, because of social inequality and the lack of democratic rights, voted for the Communist Party. But at the same time this party didn't change too much at the level of its leadership. So its leadership has the same kind of nationalist and Stalinist rhetoric, with the same people in the leadership. Its historical leader Zyuganov is still there, the guy who became leader of the Communist Party in 1993.

At the last elections in September 2021, the Communist Party had one of its best results during recent years; even officially it had nearly twenty percent of the votes, but because there was some fraud with internet voting probably in reality they got much more than this. And what was interesting was that among those who voted for the Communist Party were a lot of young people from the big cities which is very new for this party and expresses huge shifts in the structure of their support. Most importantly, this support came not because of the position of the party leadership. At the same time, during recent years, some people from a new generation have come into the Communist Party and were elected to various positions in the national parliament, in the local parliaments of Moscow, and in some other regions. And the feelings of the new voters and this new generation of Communist Party activists were very different from the pro-war position taken by its leadership. So, for example, when the war started, there were only three members of the Russian parliament who openly expressed their disagreement, and all these three people were from the Communist Party. There were also a number of members of the local parliaments: for example, in the Moscow parliament, there were Communist Party members who publicly stood against the war.

The prospects of the Communist Party are very much related to the future of this political regime. In time we may see the further degradation of the Communist Party and a growing repression against those members and supporters who have openly declared their anti-war position. Actually that is already happening now—there are a number of criminal cases against members of the Communist Party, including members of local parliaments. And don't forget that in his speech just two days before the war, Putin started with his accusation against Lenin and the Bolsheviks who 'created' Ukraine. Coming back to this idea of the geopolitical catastrophe that was the collapse of the Soviet Union, finally Putin has come to the idea that *the very creation* of the Soviet Union was a catastrophe. This is a new idea that came precisely from this last speech which was, openly and aggressively, anti-communist.

So in this sense where Lenin was basically personally blamed for the creation of a Ukraine that should be destroyed—which is the aim of this war—I think that the legal status of the Soviet legacy in Putin's Russia is very much under question. I would not be surprised if Putin decided to close the Lenin Mausoleum and take away his body, which is a very important symbolic thing because the Mausoleum question is somehow included in the package with the question of the existence of the Communist Party. When Lenin is taken out of the Mausoleum the Communist Party will probably be banned the same day, so it's nearly the same question. And if we are following the fascistisation of the regime, I think there will simply be no place for the Communist Party under this rule. The official position of the Communist Party leadership which is an aggressively pro-war one is also motivated by fear about the very existence of their own party.

OH | The English version of *Dissidents Among Dissidents* begins with a piece on Putin as a follower of Samuel Huntingdon and his *Clash of Civilisations*. To what extent do you think this war can be understand along those lines as an attempt to assert total control over a Russian civilization imagined to encompass Ukraine and Belarus, and to what degree do you see an increasingly open ethno-nationalism as being part of this war?

IB | So for the first thing, I don't believe in the great power of ideas and intellectual history in this conflict. The connection does not exist in this way that 'Putin read some book and then he decided to restore the Russian Empire'. I think that a more justifiable approach would be to use the concept of the 'style of thinking' which was expressed by Karl Mannheim in his *Sociology of Knowledge*, when he explained that some social layers like, for example, a state bureaucracy, can reproduce some some kinds of rhetorical figures and so on that are not directly related to consistent intellectual constructions. If we're talking about the style of thinking of the Russian bureaucracy we can say that, of course, it is very eclectic and unsystematised, but somehow, some elements of nationalist, imperialist ideas from the Russian conservative baggage, from international thoughts on geopolitics, conspiracy theories and so on, created this style of thinking.

The question of ethno-nationalism is a very important element in it, because if we look to the oldest lines of anti-Ukrainian sentiment, that is very much rooted in a conservative and imperialist explanation of the history of Ukraine from the Tsarist times. An explanation that basically repeats that Ukraine is not a real thing, that they are just part of Greater Russia. And the aim of Russia is to destroy the Ukrainian idea, which is an artificial idea and provided by some other countries, which was established in Austria, in Germany or whatever. That is very familiar from the nineteenth century. But there is an idea of a multi-national empire that is new, that came from the results of the Soviet Union and that is expressed in the Constitution of the Russian Federation, which in its first article says 'We as the multi-national people of Russia, blah blah blah…' This multi-national people of Russia are not just ethnic Russians, they are like one civic nation and even for now the official Putin propaganda, they explain that global Russophobia is not something directed against ethnic Russians but is against every people who recognize Russian as their native tongue. That is the idea. That is why we who all recognize the role of Russian culture and language are under threat from this global Russophobia.

Of course, these two motifs, the ethno-nationalist one of one great Slavic nation which includes Ukrainians and this motif of cultural nationalism, they somehow contradict each other. This contradiction for now is not so much stressed. There is a conflict in between these two ideas and I think this conflict will make sense when we look to the quite big role of the soldiers from the non-Russian areas of the Russian federation who are taking part in this war. It's not just Chechens but also people from the Northern Caucasus, peoples of Siberia and so on and so forth. And in the separation of this great challenge for the Russian authoritarian, very centralized model of rule inside the country, I think that these regionalist and local nationalist feelings will gain some ground.

OH | In *Dissidents among Dissidents* you analyse this New Cold War discourse and the centrality of culture within it that emerged in around 2014. You're very scathing about people like Timothy Snyder and the way they've set up this kind of civilisational discourse about Russian and Ukraine, and this has come back in a very big way obviously with the current war. You see people making these very broad statements about 'Russian culture' and the kind of culpability of this culture in the war. But your major argument is about the way that intellectuals sacrificed their integrity during the Cold War by decisively taking one side or another. In a war like this, a very clear-cut moral issue with an extremely clear aggressor, how do we avoid falling into these Cold War/civilisational tropes while maintaining that clarity?

IB | I think now we have much more of this Cold War logic than we had eight years ago and it's very

hard to debate it, but I would say that there are two main points. One point is that you need to clearly divide the regime and the people: the people in the very broad sense, so not just that people who openly oppose the war, but also those who are a majority who have no voice in this political system and who are just victims of this semi-fascist regime. In this sense, this idea of collective responsibility should be very strongly rejected.

As for Russian culture: I just read that in Ukraine you have this big wave of deconstruction of monuments to Russian writers or the renaming of streets and so on, and in the very centre of Kyiv you have a metro station called Leo Tolstoy. It's very well-known, it's one of the metro stations in the centre of the city, and now they are going to rename it because Tolstoy is somehow responsible for the invasion. But during these days I would say that Tolstoy was one of the most readable anti-war authors that I ever can imagine. If you look back to his statements against militarism, against Russian imperialist wars starting from the Caucasian wars to the Russo–Japanese, then you can find such strong statements against Russian imperialism, and such a strong understanding of Russian colonialism, more than you can find in any other literature, in any other writer. Russian writing can provide great material for the decolonisation of Russia itself, in such authors as Tolstoy or Platonov.

OH | Absolutely. My last question is on how *Dissidents Among Dissidents* tells a story about the transformation of what was initially a socialist dissident movement in the USSR into a nationalist and liberal one over the course of the '70s. Among the dissidents you find are a number in Ukraine who try to define opposition to Russification and advocating some form of Ukrainian national independence alongside a commitment to Marxism. You quote Stepan Virun, a socialist dissident in western Ukraine, that 'without Marxism… we wouldn't get much further than Kyiv'. In what ways did these socialist dissidents combine an opposition to Russian imperialism with socialist ideas—and do you think there's a 'useable past' here for people trying to reconcile opposition to Russian imperialism in Ukraine with broader socialist commitments?

IB | Yes, the first thing to say about the history of the Soviet dissidents is that this ideological struggle between the leftist dissidents and the conservative dissidents in, let's say, the 1970s was so important because some ideas from the conservative dissidents became mainstream for the current incarnation of this war against Ukraine—especially when you remember Solzhenitsyn's writings. He was absolutely sure that Ukrainians and Russians were one nation and who was very much against any idea of Ukrainian self-determination and so on. So that ideological struggle somehow influenced the further development of Russian intellectuals, and the the style of thinking of the Russian ruling elite which, unfortunately, took something from Solzhenitsyn as well.

Secondly, what was stressed in all these writings of the socialist dissidents in the national republics in the 1960s and 1970s, that exactly came from Lenin's genuine ideas on how the Soviet Union should be organised, is how the right for self-determination should be realised in the Soviet Union. What I try to argue in this chapter is that for the supporters of self-determination in the various national republics of the Soviet Union such as Ukraine and the Baltic states, this reference to Lenin's ideas was not just a rhetorical trick but was for them a very important and central part of the mission of self-determination of their country. When Putin is saying that Ukraine as it is now was created by Bolsheviks he is absolutely right. That is, without Bolshevism, without Lenin's national politics, we would never have Ukraine in such territory where it is now and where it is fighting for its independence.

Realignments

GV | In your essay in *Dissidents among Dissidents* on the Post-Soviet Left you give an excellent account of the trajectory of the Left and of the different forces in the Left. How do you think these events in Ukraine may play out in the Left and what realignments are possible in the current time?

IB | It's a very important question, because for now we see a huge division in between Russian left on the frontline of this war, we see that even many of the Stalinist groups are split on this question, we see how this question became very confrontational besides the Communist Party. I think, that from the basis of this regroupment on the ground of the anti-war position there will be created some kind of future for the post-war, post-Putinist Russian left.

GV | To link that to the prospects for an anti-war resistance—obviously there are such outstanding levels of repression and because of the general atomisation of Russian society, which means it's hard to have a sense of how this may develop. Do you have any general thoughts on this?

IB | So for now, it's very hard to understand the very real level of disagreement with this war in Russian society because even the pollsters who are doing all these opinion polls which express this huge level of support, they are saying that most people simply refuse to answer questions about the war and I think that in reality this hidden kind of dissatisfaction with various consequences of this war will grow. The question is what kind of organisational and political form it will take. For now the people who openly express their opposition to the war are a minority. They survive under very serious repressions and this situation could change in time, but for now we, unfortunately, see that the public anti-war position is very much a minority stance in Russia, which absolutely doesn't mean that it is meaningless. Its importance probably means more for some common future than the current period of time.

GV | Kirill Medvedev wrote an important post addressing this typical historical schism of those who emigrate and those who remain, and the importance of connecting these two groups. There have also been a few discussions about emigration, like the famous Loshak-Kostyuchenko dispute. What are your thoughts about this?

IB | There is a serious wave of emigration—for now it's several hundred thousand people that have already left the country. Most of these people left not because they are politically active and not because of their moral stance against the war. There are many young people who don't see any future in the country for the moment. There are a lot of IT specialists and so on and, of course, these people have become quite politicized because of the situation. For now the official propaganda works to highlight a confrontation between those who left and those who remained in the country. I think that as a Left, we should also work with these people who found themselves in emigration. We need to explain that there are not any real cultural or political ruptures between the people who left and the people who remained.

GS | One final broad question. You write in what is one of your most powerful essays, 'The Eternal Hunt for the Red Man', that it is important to refuse to accept the idea of the Soviet legacy as a remnant that one must either accept or reject wholesale—rather, 'one must constantly untangle it into its constituent parts: progressive and reactionary; liberating and enslaving'. There is often an over-estimation about the importance of the Soviet legacy within a sort of Putinist ideology, focused on by political scientists and commentators in the United States and the UK. I think they basically don't grasp the postmodern and eclectic components of the Putinist discourse. So, one, are there any elements of the Soviet legacy that are relevant for the Putinist ideology? And two, considering that Soviet nostalgia does exist in the population at large in Russia and in other parts of the former Soviet Union and the former socialist Europe, how should the New Left approach the issue of Soviet nostalgia?

IB | The first point is that Putin basically wants to end all of the Soviet legacy, all of the memory of a common past between the peoples of not just Ukraine but other post-Soviet republics. Any projects of reintegration—not just political but also social and cultural ones—of the post-Soviet space will be possible only after the end of this regime. So Putin for now is the main threat, the main killer of this

common memory in the post-Soviet space.

The second thing is that even the official reason for this war is not very related to Soviet nostalgia. This war is not declared as the way to restore the Soviet Union, but as the way to restore some kind of historical Russia, an Imperial Russia which denies any autonomy of the Post-Soviet Republics and even their borders. So in this way we can see even in official propaganda a refusal of this legacy.

The third thing is the terrible reference to the Second World War by Putin's regime. The official aim of this war is declared as 'de-Nazification'. But this de-Nazification for Putinism means, and that was expressed in some propaganda materials, a de-Ukrainisation. This is so dangerous because it denies the very universal understanding of what Nazism is, and what was the meaning of the victory over Nazism in the Second World War. For the Kremlin, to be a Nazi is now simply to be anti-Russian. So Russians, by their essence, are anti-Nazi, and those who oppose the official Russian line—they are fascists.

This kind of explanation, paradoxically, returns to a very Nazi understanding of politics where their people are judged by their essence. So Ukrainians are Nazis, they have this essence that immediately refers to them as absolute evil and absolute evil has no human rights at all, has not any right to exist. There can be no negotiations with Nazis, there can be no negotiations with evil. So the war against Nazism, the de-Nazification, means that the people who are essentially Nazis should be exterminated. This ideological reverse is very dangerous, and I think that we should be very clear about it. When the question who are Nazis and who are not Nazis is defined from the position of pure violence, that is a danger for the very post-Second War consensus, about a Nazism which is defined by this very short formula 'Never Again'. So 'Never Again', what? I believe that 'Never Again' this kind of approach, this approach must never be repeated. In this sense what Putin is doing now is refusing the results of the Second World War, especially from the universalist, anti-fascist perspective that was so morally important for the Soviet Union after the war.

GS | The second point was about the attitude that the New Left should have towards Soviet nostalgia, among the population at large, whereby by nostalgia I don't mean the nostalgia for great power status, but the memory of universal welfare and community life in the stagnation period.

IB | I agree that this element of Soviet nostalgia referred to the very idea of the society, that society should not be destroyed and split into these atomized individuals totally manipulated from the top. From this perspective the Putinist fascistisation is also directed against elements of Soviet nostalgia. By the way, what is now the official propaganda in Russia is the same that Owen named in one of his essays 'Austerity Nostalgia'. For now we have sanctions, we have a decline of our standard of living, we have the abolition of any labour rights, of any welfare—but let's remember how it was during the Great Patriotic War. That is something that we should sacrifice again. That is a kind of very neoliberal instrumentalisation of nostalgia. That is nostalgia not about social gains, but a nostalgia for social losses.

Ilya Budraitskis is a left-wing political writer based in Moscow, and the author of *Dissidents Among Dissidents* (Verso).

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Giuliano Vivaldi is a translator, blogger and writer on cultural issues. He is currently completing translations of the works of Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov and the contemporary leftist thinker Ilya Budraitskis, as well as translating (jointly with Tom Rowley) the writings of the murdered anti-fascist lawyer, Stanislav Markelov.

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