

Ukrainian & Russian Activists on How Putin's War Emboldens "Authoritarian Forces" Around the World

Friday 8 September 2023, by [BUDRAITSKIS Ilya](#), [PEREKHODA Hanna](#), [SHAIKH Nermeen](#) (Date first published: 7 September 2023).

On the same day U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Kyiv to announce \$1 billion in new U.S. aid to Ukraine, 17 Ukrainians were killed in a Russian missile attack on a Donetsk market. "It's very painful for me to see all the streets and cities that I spent my childhood in to be completely destroyed by the ongoing war," says Hanna Perekhoda, Ukrainian historian from the Donetsk region on a speaking tour of the U.S. calling for an end to the war by driving out Putin's occupation. "If we let Russian authoritarians win, it will mean that the authoritarian forces also in our countries, in the U.S., for example, will grow stronger." Perekhoda is joined on the speaking tour by Russian historian Ilya Budraitskis, who agrees that this war is about Putin's regime maintaining its power. "This criminal war is not just a war against Ukraine. It's a war of the Russian regime against its own society," says Budraitskis.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: We begin today's show looking at the war in Ukraine. On Wednesday, a Russian missile hit an outdoor market in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, killing 17 and injuring 32. It was one of the deadliest attacks in Ukraine in months. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky condemned the, quote, "utter inhumanity" of the attack. Diana Khodak, who works in a pharmacy next to the market, described the missile strike.

DIANA KHODAK: [translated] I only saw a flash and then shouted to my colleagues, "Lie on the floor!" All the customers laid down on the floor. All the pharmacy employees laid down on the floor. I heard things falling over. Then everything was covered in smoke, and fire started. ...

One wounded woman walked into the pharmacy on her own. Her arm and her leg were bleeding. She had a big wound on her arm. Another woman was scared inside by soldiers. She had an open fracture, and her bone was sticking out from her leg. She was very pale. She remained conscious but in shock while she was given first aid.

AMY GOODMAN: The attack on the Ukrainian market occurred as U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken made a surprise visit to Kyiv, where he met with President Zelensky. Blinken announced \$1 billion in new U.S. aid to Ukraine.

SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN: We will continue to stand by Ukraine's side, and today we're announcing new assistance totaling more than \$1 billion in this common effort. That includes \$665.5 million in new military and civilian security assistance. In total, we committed over \$43 billion in assistance, security assistance,

since the beginning of the Russian aggression.

AMY GOODMAN: In Moscow, the Kremlin criticized Blinken's visit, saying it's proof the United States plans to keep funding Ukraine's war effort, quote, "until the last Ukrainian."

We're joined now by two activists — one Russian, one Ukrainian. They're on a speaking tour of the United States organized by the Ukraine Solidarity Network, a group which supports Ukraine's struggle for self-determination. Ilya Budraitskis is a Russian historian and political theorist who was previously based in Moscow and recently joined University of California, Berkeley as a visiting scholar. He's co-founder of Posle, which means "After," a network of Russian intellectuals in exile who oppose the war against Ukraine. He's the author of the award-winning book, *Dissidents Among Dissidents: Ideology, Politics and the Left in Post-Soviet Russia*. Hanna Perekhoda is a Ukrainian historian at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland. She's a member of the Ukrainian democratic socialist organization, which is called Sotsialnyi Rukh. She's also part of the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine.

We welcome you both to New York and to the United States and to *Democracy Now!* Hanna, we want to begin with you. Can you describe what's happening to your country now? Your response to the latest attack in the Donetsk region? In fact, Hanna, are you also from the Donetsk region?

HANNA PEREKHODA: Yeah. Basically, the essence of this war is the same as one year before. That means that most of the Ukrainians living in any part of the country are facing a threat of Russian missiles targeting their residential areas, because Russia has engaged itself in a strategy of terror against civilians. And this continues, as we can witness it with this horrible attack on a city in the Donetsk region. And yeah, in fact, I am from this region, and it's very painful for me to see all the streets and cities that I spent my childhood in to be completely destroyed by the ongoing war.

But also what defines this war is the fact that a great — a big part of the Ukrainian territories are still under the Russian occupation. And civilians living in these territories are facing torture. They're facing murder. They're facing rape and also forced displacement, as well as the mass kidnapping of children, who are sent to Russia in order to be reeducated. This is something we must not forget, that the reality of this war is still horrible.

But also something which is not fading away is the consensus among the Ukrainian population, even despite all the political disagreements inside the Ukrainian population, because it's a complex society. All the citizens of Ukraine are united by a strong consensus that only the fact — only our capability to liberate the whole territory of Ukraine could be a precondition for the lasting peace for Ukraine and for the whole region, because Russia and Vladimir Putin are still openly denying the very right of Ukrainians to exist as a state and as a separate society from Russia.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: Hanna, could you elaborate on that, the sense that you have of what the trajectory and the purpose of this war are now for Russia, and where you see this going?

HANNA PEREKHODA: I will try to summarize it, because it's not an easy war to understand maybe from outside. But, basically, this war is not a response for some external military threat for Russia emanating from NATO, for example, but this war is a response of the Russian ruling classes to the internal — internal — threat to their power, because Russian civil society was quite active on the last years. And also, being under threat of democratizing Russian society, Putin and his clan actually tried to eliminate all possible democratizing tendencies in the neighborhood. That's why the war in Ukraine was provoked by Russia in 2014. That's why also Putin invaded it. And it is necessary to understand that the reasons of this war are internal to Russia and has more to do with the internal politics than with some external international relations between Russia and, for example, the

Western countries.

So, actually, we see that this — we don't have an easy exit from this situation, because Putin doesn't seem to show any clear demands of what he actually wants from Ukraine. He doesn't — I think this war is not about territories. It's about the full control of Ukraine in order to prevent it to become a prosperous and democratic country, because it may awaken some dangerous ideas among Russians themselves, who are also tired of the autocratic regime and of the extreme inequality in Russia. So, basically, the danger of this war, that even if somehow Ukraine cedes some part of territories or even the whole territory of Ukraine would belong to Russia, the war would continue, because any democratic country on the borders of Russia is a threat for the Putin regime.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: Ilya Budraitskis, I'd like to bring you into the conversation. We've had you on the show a few times, the first time, in fact, just weeks before the Russian invasion, and then on two subsequent occasions when we did not disclose your location, though you had fled the country. And now you're at UC Berkeley. If you could talk about what the situation now is in Russia? Respond to what Hanna said about, you know, the protests that began in Russia in 2011, how they were connected — you've said that over the last several years the Russian population has been preparing or has been prepared for this war. Talk about what you know of the situation on the ground there now.

ILYA BUDRAITSKIS: Yes. Thank you.

So, basically, I agree with what just Hanna was saying. This criminal war is not just a war against Ukraine. It's a war of the Russian regime against its own society. And this war started not just a year ago. It started, as you said, from 2011, then in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea. And somehow, you see the combination of the external and internal goals of Putin's regime in his actions against his own population and against his neighbors. So, definitely, this war is ongoing to save the regime, to strengthen its power over its own population. But it's also about the imperial and imperialist ambitions of Putin's Russia in the post-Soviet space. And probably Ukraine will be not the last goal of this aggression, if the conflict will continue in different ways and this regime will continue to exist.

So, as you mentioned, in 2011, Putin was challenged by the rise of the huge protest movement that was a movement for the democratization of political system for some more just redistribution of the wealth in the country. And, in fact, the annexation of Crimea, the rally around the flag that appeared in the Russian society after it, was the answer of the regime to this democratic challenge. Then, even just few years before the full-scale invasion, you also saw the rise of the EU protest movement, even the protest movement of the more younger generation that was not participated in the protests of 2011.

And the full-scale invasion of Ukraine somehow marked a significant turn in the very character of the Putin's regime, which became a open and extremely repressive dictatorship. So, for now, in Russia, you have much more political prisoners than you had, for example, in the late Soviet period under Brezhnev. You have a total censorship. You have an atmosphere of fear. You have the more and more repressive measures coming from the government. But somehow we see that even in this very dramatic situation, there are still many kind of hidden dissent in the Russian society.

AMY GOODMAN: I wanted to ask Hanna Perekhoda — Antony Blinken just went to Kyiv in this surprise visit. I think it's his third time. And he made the announcement of a billion more dollars in aid to the Ukraine war. The counteroffensive very difficult, the U.S. is now apparently going to promise depleted uranium ammunition, before that, cluster bombs, violating a treaty — not that the U.S. has signed onto, but 110 other countries have signed onto — against cluster bombs. I'm wondering about your thoughts on the war. It sounds like, for many Ukrainians, there's a lot of

pressure to continue to say the war must be supported at any cost, because, otherwise, it means Russia could perhaps take over Ukraine or parts of Ukraine very significantly. But you're on an antiwar speaking tour.

HANNA PEREKHODA: Yeah. Actually, for Ukraine, this is a war of self-defense. And I think it's very important to make a difference between, you know, the use of violence with the aim of aggression and the use of violence with the aim to protect your own existence. So, this is why in Ukraine, as I said, all the civic and political organizations are united by this consensus that, you know, the political life in Ukraine, for example, the life of the civil society is possible under the — is not possible under the condition of a foreign occupation, an occupation by a foreign army, which actually commit war crimes.

So, that's why the support from other states and weapons are essential for Ukrainians in order to sustain their effort in order to liberate the territory. This is not just about liberating the territories, of course. This is about liberating the cities where our families and friends are living under the constant threat and under the danger of being, as I said, raped and murdered by the occupying forces. And the fact that countries like our partners continue to sustain the military effort of Ukraine is really essential, but I don't think that Ukraine actually receives enough to be really able to be in a better position and to regain its territories and to, for example, start negotiations from a strong position. And yes, so the question of weapons is essential to us because it's the question of our survival as a society and of our political, economic sovereignty.

Of course, nobody wants this war to continue, especially Ukrainians. But if we — like, I think we must remember that praising compromise with aggressor has never brought peace to anyone. It brought a total war. It brought a total war in 1939, for example. So, when we are faced with this kind of a state, a Russian state, an obscurantist, ultraconservative, authoritarian force, we must act in order to defend such things that often we take for granted being here in the Western countries. And that's what Ukrainians are doing. And, I mean, if we do not support them in this struggle and if we let Russian authoritarianism win, it will mean that the authoritarian forces also in our countries, in the U.S., for example, will become stronger. So, this is basically one of the demands and the position that we share, both progressivists in Ukraine, both progressive forces, antiwar Russian forces; we share this perspective that the development of our societies, a peaceful life in both Ukraine and Russia is only possible if Ukraine wins.

NERMEEN SHAIKH: Ilya, could you also talk about that, you know, where you see the war going, what the trajectory is? And talk about the changes that have been instituted domestically within Russia recently, in particular, the controversy around new history textbooks that are being taught in high schools and increasing the age of conscription to increase the number of Russian men eligible for service in the military.

ILYA BUDRAITSKIS: So, in fact, all your questions, they somehow relate to each other, because all it show that Putin basically is preparing for to continue this war, to prepare his population, his citizens, to become soldiers, to become war meat, you know, in this war, to give their flesh and blood there.

And as Hanna just said, there are not any clear goals of Russia in this war, so it's always changing. So, from one side, you can hear that Russia just want to keep the territories that it already control; in the same time, you hear regularly from Putin that the final goals of so-called special military operation must be achieved, and the final goals is the control over all Ukraine. It's regime change of Ukraine. It's what Putin called denazification and demilitarization. So, these goals are still there. So it seems that his strategies vary, depends on the conjuncture, on what he could gain. And he will gauge from the situation as much as possible, until he will be stopped in some point. So, in this

sense, I think that any, let's say, significant unsuccess of the Russian troops will create a true basis for some peace talks, will give Ukraine a much stronger position in these peace talks.

So, in Russia, well, you see the preparation for the next draft, so the rise of the age for the men for the draft now came from 27 to 30. So, according to new Russian laws, when you got the letter, like, from army, in the same moment, in the same minute, you are not allowed to leave the country. Your driver's license will be suspended and so on. So, basically, it is a very, very strict, very repressive type of enforced conscription to the Russian army.

And then, as you mentioned, from the beginning of this new year, in school, in the universities, the number of new courses, like so-called patriotic courses, were introduced. So, for example, in universities now, it's obligatory for all the students to study a so-called DNA of Russia course. That means that the essence of Russian state, the essence of Russian history, which is a sort of perpetual war for the glory of the country, for the glory of the empire, the permanent expansion of its borders, somehow rooted in blood, in spirit of every Russian. And it's very much similar to the classical fascist ideas, for example, the idea of Benito Mussolini that the state is not just an institution, but it's a kind of spiritual force, a spiritual entity. So, all that is definitely very scary, and all of that mark the ongoing preparation for the long-term war from the side of Russia.

AMY GOODMAN: I wanted to ask Hanna Perekhoda — you are a Ukrainian historian, you're a socialist — about the concerns of people who say neo-Nazis in Ukraine are being strengthened by U.S. support or the West's support for the war. We had on Ukrainian American journalist Lev Golinkin, who said Azov is a hub for neo-Nazis to come to Ukraine from the United States and other places in the West to learn to fight, much like Islamists in different parts of the Middle East recruited Islamic fighters. Your response to this?

HANNA PEREKHODA: Well, there is a lot of things to say. First of all, about this mythology around the fact that — around this idea, promoted by Russia, that Ukraine somehow has large right-wing groups who are numerous and exercising large influence on the Ukrainian politics, I would like to stress that even after the five years of the war in Donbas, after the Crimean annexation, during the parliamentary elections in Ukraine in 2019, the coalition of extreme right, of right-wing forces, only had 2% of votes and didn't manage to go to the parliament. So, basically, Ukrainian parliament, you wouldn't find right-wing parties represented. They were represented before 2014, but now this is not the case. And also, after all these years of war, Ukrainians, which are supposed to be, like Putin says, right-wingers, or even he called them fascists, they elected a Jewish, Russian-speaking president who was openly opposed to the ethnonationalist agenda. So, right-wing forces in Ukraine, they do exist, because, as I said earlier, Ukraine is a complex society, not homogenic one, and it exists like in the other European countries; however, the extreme right-wing forces didn't manage to become a legitimate political subject in the institutional politics.

However, yes, they are present in the army, but their presence is now kind of diminished, because, well, Ukraine has 1 million of soldiers now who are defending the territory of Ukraine, and 99% of these people are ordinary Ukrainians not belonging to any political party, political force. So, it's kind of strange to think that Ukraine is infiltrated, the Ukrainian army is infiltrated by the Nazis and the right-wingers. And you have also — well, at the same time, you have this Azov Battalions, but they were, under Zelensky, losing their influence inside of the — on the Ukrainian army.

So, I don't want to say that the problem of the right-wing ideas or the right-wing organizations isn't existent in Ukraine. Of course it's existent. We, as progressivist forces, left-wing forces in Ukraine, are, like, facing this problem, you know, in a very concrete way, in a very personal way. But also, I think it could be an irresponsible thing to concentrate on the presence of right-wing organizations in Ukraine and to forget that the extreme right in Russia is actually in power and is currently waging a

war of aggression, a war that is justified by the kind of discourse that could be called an incitation to genocide, though this is — the things are kind of, you know, very serious. And it's kind of a pity that there is this disproportional perception of the right-wing threat in Ukraine and Russia. So, yeah, this is my response to that. It could be developed, of course.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, Hanna —

HANNA PEREKHODA: But maybe Ilya could add something about the right wing in Russia. He knows better.

AMY GOODMAN: We actually have to leave it at this point, but this is a discussion we will continue to have. Hanna Perekhoda, Ukrainian historian at University of Lausanne in Switzerland, member of the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine, and Ilya Budraitskis, exiled Russian historian and political theorist, author of *Dissidents Among Dissidents: Ideology, Politics and the Left in Post-Soviet Russia*. They're on a speaking tour of the United States organized by the Ukraine Solidarity Network. Ilya is now at the University of California, Berkeley.

Coming up, we speak to Jan Egeland, the secretary general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, just back from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Stay with us.

Hanna Perekhoda Ukrainian historian and researcher at the University of Lausanne. She is a member of the Ukrainian democratic socialist organization Sotsialnyi Rukh.

Ilya Budraitskis Russian historian and political theorist who was previously based in Moscow and recently joined UC Berkeley as a visiting scholar. He is a member of the Russian antiwar Posle.Media, a left-wing online platform founded after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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