

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > Russia > On the left (Russia) > **Russia: “Stop the War” Means “Death to the Dictatorship”**

Russia: “Stop the War” Means “Death to the Dictatorship”

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The statement of Russian Socialist Movement about the means of achieving peace in Ukraine

Two years ago, Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This decision by Russia’s leaders was not a response to any military threat posed by Ukraine or NATO—it was an attempt to subjugate a neighboring country that Putin simply believes should not exist.

Putin’s original plan in Ukraine seems to have been for a “special operation” of regime change: troops would swiftly occupy the country’s main cities, the Russian National Guard would suppress “nationalist” protests, and the majority of the population would greet their long-awaited Russian “brothers” with flowers.

But instead of flowers and fanfare, the Russian army was met with stubborn resistance from the Ukrainians, and instead of “gangs,” they found a well-trained and highly motivated army. The “special operation” turned into a real war.

The primary victim of Russia’s aggression is Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. Over 10,000 civilians have been killed, with over 18,500 wounded. 6.3 million have sought refuge abroad, and 3.7 million have been displaced within the country. Over the course of the war, hundreds of thousands of medical, housing, educational, and sports facilities have been destroyed. Ecosystems have been subject to ecocide.

The damage to Ukraine’s economy, estimated at over \$300 billion, will affect the well-being of its citizens for years to come, making life harder for its poorest in particular.

Russian society is undergoing a painful transformation as well. Leon Trotsky once wrote that “It is not consciousness that governs war, but war that governs consciousness.” War has its own logic and alters human plans. Instead of a “special operation,” Putin has committed to the exact opposite—a long, bloody, exhausting war to ultimately erode Ukraine’s resources and force the West to withhold its aid. This scenario will require enormous sacrifices from Russia for which neither its population nor its economy were prepared.

Drawn into this long war, Putin’s state has changed from within: it needs to force society to accept such losses. This has been achieved through political repression and a climate of fear.

According to OVD Info, 1,980 people have been detained for opposing the war since it began, and 825 of them face criminal charges; at least half a million people have left the country for moral and political reasons or to escape the draft. And, the war has not become a rallying point, a “WWII 2.0” for most Russians—ideological supporters of Putin’s aggression are still in the minority, even though only they are allowed to voice their views. <https://www.bbc.com/english/news-64764949>

The Causes and Nature of the War

The goal of the current war is clearly not to protect Ukraine's Russian-speaking population, which has suffered the most at the hands of the occupiers, nor is it to counter Western expansion, as the Kremlin shares a long history of mutual enrichment with the West.

The Kremlin's real motive for the invasion is its desire to further entrench its political, economic, and military domination over Russian society and the societies of other post-Soviet countries, to which Moscow claims to be "historically entitled."

Democratic Popular Movements of the Last Decade

As part of their conspiratorial worldview, Putin and his entourage consider the Maidan (2014) in Ukraine, uprisings in Belarus (2020) and Kazakhstan (2021), and the waves of mass protests in Russia itself since 2012 part of a "hybrid war" waged against Russia by the West.

"Combating Western hegemony" as Putin sees it has nothing to do with resisting the exploitative policies of American and European elites on the world stage. On the contrary, the Kremlin accepts and welcomes Western policies that come with no ethical strings attached.

The only "alien Western values" that Russia is fighting against are human rights, freedom of speech, gender equality, sustainable development, and so on. In this sense, Putinism is the vanguard of a far-right international that threatens democracy and progressive movements around the world, including Trump and his supporters in the US, the AfD in Germany, the Erdogan regime in Turkey, Orbán in Hungary, and others.

The main goal of the war is to protect the Putin regime and its autocratic vassal states, like the Lukashenko dictatorship in Belarus, from the threat of revolution.

This goal coincides perfectly with the elite's dreams of rebuilding the Russian Empire, which requires enslaving Ukraine but Russian expansion will not end there.

It also lines up with their hopes for a "multipolar world"—a world in which dictators and oligarchs enjoy complete freedom to plunder their subjects, repress dissenters, and divide up the world with no regard for international law.

That's why, today, "Stop the War" has to mean "End Putin's Dictatorship." Demanding peace means demanding the abolition of the social hierarchies at the core of Russia's regime today: political authoritarianism; vast wealth inequality; conservative, patriarchal norms; and a colonial, imperial model of inter-ethnic relations.

Fighting for Peace or Forcing Negotiations?

2023 was a year of trench warfare for Ukraine. Despite heavy casualties, neither the Ukrainian nor the Russian army managed to make significant progress on the battlefield. This has increased war fatigue, including among Ukraine's allies.

In this context, the ideas of peace talks and opposition to arms transfers to the conflict zone—voiced by both the extreme right and some left wing forces—have become increasingly popular.

Of course, all wars foster militarism and nationalism, welfare cuts, infringement on civil liberties, and more in all countries party to the conflict. That is true for Russia, Ukraine, and the West.

It is also obvious that all wars end in negotiations, and it would be pointless to oppose this demand in principle.

But hoping for negotiations at this stage of the war is naive, as is the conviction that unilateral disarmament by the victim of aggression will bring peace.

Sponsors of such proposals do not take into account the Putin regime's evolution over the past few years. Putin's legitimacy today is that of a wartime leader; thus, he cannot hold on to power without waging wars.

He is now counting on the West ending its support for Ukraine after the American elections and making a deal—on the Kremlin's terms, of course. However, such a deal (for the partition of Ukraine? regime change in Kiev? the recognition of Russia's "new territories"?) will not change Putinism's essential attitude towards war, which is now its only mode of existence.

Putin's regime can no longer exit the state of war, as the only way to maintain its system is to escalate the international situation and intensify political repression within Russia.

That is why any negotiations with Putin now would bring, at best, a brief respite, not a genuine peace.

A victory for Russia would be evidence of the West's weakness and openness to redrawing its spheres of influence, above all in the post-Soviet space. Moldova and the Baltic States could be the next victims of aggression. A defeat for the regime, on the other hand, would be tantamount to its collapse.

Only the Ukrainian people have the right to decide when and under what conditions to make peace. As long as Ukrainians show a will to resist and the Putin regime remains unchanged in its expansionist goals, any coercion of Ukraine into negotiations is a step towards an imperialist "deal" at the expense of Ukrainian independence.

That imperialist "peace deal" would mean a return to the practice of the "great powers" partitioning the rest of the world, that is, to the conditions that gave birth to the First and Second World Wars.

The main obstacle to peace is certainly not Zelensky's "unwillingness to compromise," nor is it Biden's or Scholz's "hawkishness": it is Putin's unwillingness to even discuss deoccupying the Ukrainian territories seized after February 24, 2022. And it is the aggressor, not the victim, who must be forced to negotiate.

We, the Russian Socialist Movement, believe that under such circumstances the international left should demand:

- A just peace for the Ukrainian people, including the withdrawal of Russian troops from the internationally recognized territory of Ukraine
- The cancellation of Ukraine's public debt
- Increased sanctions pressure on Putin's elite and ruling class
- Increased pressure on various companies still doing business with Russia
- Increased humanitarian assistance to Ukrainian refugees and Russian political exiles, including those fleeing the draft
- An equitable post-war reconstruction of Ukraine, led by Ukrainians themselves along social justice lines, not by investment companies and hedge funds following austerity principles
- Direct support for left-wing volunteer and trade union organizations in Ukraine
- Platforms for Ukrainians and anti-war Russians to speak out

- The release of Russian political prisoners and an end to the repression of the political opposition in Russia

Today's world is shifting to the right, and politicians increasingly choose to use discrimination and wars of aggression to solve their problems, from Netanyahu's genocidal Western-backed military campaign in Gaza to Azerbaijan's attacks on Nagorny Karabakh (with which the international community is complicit) and the anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies espoused by mainstream parties in Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, France and the United States. Given this global context, the left must combat rising imperialist, militarist, and nationalist tendencies—not through utopian peacebuilding efforts, but by preventing new outbreaks of aggression and stopping kindred fascist forces sympathetic to Putin (Trump, the AfD, etc.) from coming to power.

Stop the war!

End Putinism!

Free Ukraine!

Free the oppressed in Russia!

Russian Socialist Movement

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