

War and resistance in Putin's Russia

Friday 30 September 2022, by [BUDRAITSKIS Ilya](#), [SMITH Ashley](#) (Date first published: 29 September 2022).

The Ukrainian resistance has scored major victories in its struggle to liberate its country from Russian occupation. Putin, facing defeats on the battleground, has issued draft orders for 300,000 people in Russia to shore up his military forces in Ukraine. He has also staged “sham” referendums in occupied Donbas as part of his drive to annex it to be part of Russia. Tempest's Ashley Smith spoke with Russian Marxist Ilya Budraitskis about the war, the resistance to the draft, and the future of Russia.

Ashley Smith: What impact has Putin's mobilization order had in Russia? How is it being implemented and who is most targeted for the call-up? How many are being drafted into service? How has this shifted consciousness in Russia about the war?

Ilya Budraitskis: The scale of the mobilization is hard to determine but it is clearly much larger than the publicly stated call-up of 300,000 people. It is not a partial mobilization. They are drafting all sorts of men, some in their twenties, many in their thirties and forties, and some more than fifty years old. Putin has even mobilized people with chronic illnesses.

It is happening all over Russia from Moscow to the republics. Like always happens in this autocratic state, the local authorities—as they did in the last “election” when they cooked the books to increase numbers “voting” for Putin's party—are trying to prove their loyalty to the regime, boosting the numbers they draft in cities and towns.

People speculate about the scale of the mobilization because the document announcing it included clauses, which were not made public, that could bring the actual number of draftees to as many as a million. So, people are really scared. They understand that this mobilization could engulf almost anyone.

“The regional resistance is perhaps the most important. It has the greatest potential right now to sabotage the mobilization and challenge Putin.”

It has provoked widespread panic. As many as 260,000 people, mostly men, have fled the country. They have fled in different directions. The main destination has been Kazakhstan. Officials there have reported that about 90,000 people have entered the country since the declaration of

mobilization.

This wave shows no sign of stopping at this point. There are already huge lines at the borders not only of Kazakhstan but also Georgia and Finland. People have to wait as long as two or three days in their cars before they can get across.

Most of the people who have fled are not activists. They don't have any clear political position, except that they do not want to be conscripted to fight in Putin's war. It is implicit resistance to the regime and its imperialism.

Of course, there are some political activists who tried to stay in the country and organize in face of months of repression that are now leaving. Any activist who remains in the country is a target for the draft, especially those arrested on protests. Some of them are immediately deployed to Ukraine.

The regime will likely close all the borders and stop the outflow of people. Already there are some restrictions. The border guards are beginning to interrogate people to determine if they were served papers. They deny the right to leave to those who are on the conscription list and, at least at this point, let the rest through.

The huge number of people seeking refuge in Kazakhstan and Georgia is already causing problems for those countries. For example, in the north of Kazakhstan, there are simply not enough hotels or places for these people to find shelter.

Some Kazakh volunteers are helping people to find a place to stay. In one case, in Uralsk, a mainly Russian speaking city in northwest Kazakhstan, the director of a local cinema invited all the Russian refugees to stay there. Now, hundreds of people are sleeping there.

AS: Putin's mass conscription has also triggered a new wave of protest. What is the nature of the protests? What are its slogans? Who is coming out to protest? How organized is this resistance and does it have the potential to challenge Putin's rule?

IB: There are two kinds of protests that have developed. One is the continuation of student demonstrations we saw in the big cities especially Moscow and St. Petersburg at the start of the war.

These are organized through Telegram channels. The Feminist Anti-War Resistance has played a leading role in this work as well as Spring, which is very popular among students. The state smashed these protests, arresting well over 700 people.

The brutality meted out against these protesters has been severe. In one of the most terrible examples, the police arrested a young guy for reading a poem against the war in Moscow. They raped him with a dumbbell. Such brutality is shocking even by Putin's standard.

The second and new form of protest is a wave of more spontaneous resistance outside the main centers of Russia in the republics, especially the North Caucasus. These protests are not led by political activists. They are just local people who do not want to be sent into this horrible war.

People have organized protests to stop the conscription of men, even going so far as to beat up the officers who are serving papers. In other cases, there have been quite large demonstrations.

The most impressive one so far was in Dagestan in the North Caucasus. This is a mainly Muslim republic and one of the poorest areas of Russia. Unsurprisingly, it has also been a disproportionate source of soldiers for the war and those have suffered some of the highest rates of casualties and

deaths.

Putin's mobilization provoked a serious protest in the capital, Makhachkala, as well as in some of the villages. Crowds of people—men and women—tried to demonstrate against the police and military officers who were sent to coordinate the mobilization.

Like elsewhere, the protesters were smashed by the police and military. Dozens of people were arrested. Nevertheless, such demonstrations have serious potential to grow not just in Dagestan, but also in other areas in the Caucasus.

Similar protests have exploded in Siberia. In Yakutsk, hundreds of women organized an impressive peaceful demonstration to stop conscription.

While they were largely spontaneous, people have started to coordinate them over local Telegram channels and other social media. This has led local authorities to back off the most extreme repression.

The local officials are quite worried that the resistance could get out ahead of their ability to control and repress it. So, they may concede that they made mistakes in the mobilization and that they will try and limit the number of conscripts.

Now, I want to stress that both sets of protests are not just against the mobilization order. They are also against Putin's invasion and occupation. They have anti-war slogans and chants. And even if they are just against the mobilization, that in and of itself is anti-war.

Here's an example of this anti-war consciousness in the protests. It happened in one of the republics and was broadcast on local TV. A woman tried to convince the man he was serving conscription orders to that it was his duty to defend Russia by fighting like previous generations who fought in the Great Patriotic War, World War II.

The man responded, "my grandfather fought for our motherland in that war, but this war is not to defend the motherland, it is just about politics." This shows the anti-war sentiment that the mobilization has stirred up.

AS: Up until this mobilization, Putin seemed determined to avoid such a call-up of the broader population. Ukraine's recent victories have clearly changed the whole situation and is putting Russia on the defensive. Is there a shift inside the state and ruling class about the war? Are their fissures at the top of Russia over the war?

IB: Putin has been forced to shift his military strategy first and foremost because of the victories scored by the Ukrainian offensive. Their ongoing liberation of territory left him no other options but to draft more people.

The Russian military simply does not have enough active duty personnel to hold the line. Over the last decade, Putin has dramatically downsized the old Soviet army, which was made up of massive numbers of conscripts. It was a truly immense force.

In its place, he established a professional army designed to carry out small operations, not major seizures of territory. This remodeled army was quite effective when Putin deployed it in Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, and Syria in 2015.

But Russia's invasion of Ukraine is completely different than those special operations. In this case, the military faces a determined population and military that is prepared with both the will and

means to resist and turn back a special operation. So, the state has been forced to call-up troops more on the model of the Soviet model to hold conquered territory.

When Putin was reforming the army into a smaller professional one, some generals opposed it. Undoubtedly, they are now feeling vindicated and have been pushing for the call-up to stop what they fear would otherwise be a defeat in Ukraine.

The old KGB now called the Federal Security Services or FSB in its Russian acronym has cautioned against such a call-up. Because they spy on the Russian population, they are more in touch with the dangers of organizing such a large-scale conscription.

So, there are probably some tensions in the state. But there are as of yet no deep fissures. The FSB is in fact now pressuring Putin to close the borders to stop the flight of draftees.

There are also probably some divisions in the ruling class. Some of the big businesses and some ministers in charge of economic policies may be worried about all the damage sanctions are doing. Some have even made public statements of concern.

But they have little power in the state's decision-making. The oligarchs long ago put their faith in Putin. And anyone in the lower echelons of the state merely takes orders. They are just managers of Putin and his clique's decisions.

Only military defeat at the hands of the Ukrainian liberation struggle could split the ruling class and state bureaucracy. Now, it remains solid and unified behind Putin.

AS: Putin's strategy has been forced to retreat from seizing all of Ukraine. What is his strategy now? What impact will the call-up of broader forces have on the military situation?

IB: Putin, remember, initially wanted to seize Kyiv, and impose a puppet government over the whole country. The Ukrainian resistance stopped that and now is driving Russian forces out of occupied territories.

In this new situation, Putin's main priorities are to save the territories that he has occupied and to stop the Ukrainian offensive. If he doesn't, he will lose this war. So, he hopes to freeze the battle lines in place and dig in deep to hold what they have conquered.

That's why they ordered the mobilization. They will deploy as many soldiers as possible, even with inadequate training, to slow down the Ukrainian offensive.

They have no plans for any offensives at this point. We need to be clear, however, that he is not giving up his goal of the full conquest of Ukraine. He just can't carry that out right now, and instead must hold on to occupied territory, and buy time for a future offensive.

AS: As part of that, he is now organizing referendums to set up the annexation of parts of Ukraine. He's also drafting Ukrainians into the Russian military there. What impact will that have in Russian-occupied territories?

IB: These referendums are a sham. He organized "votes" at gunpoint. Russian authorities forced people to vote in favor of annexation. Of course, some did so willingly, but most under duress, and many hid or have fled.

Russia organized this vote to send a signal to people in the territories that they are now Russian subjects and that Russian forces are there to stay forever. The only option they have left is to accept

the Russian-backed authorities.

The aim is to make these Russian territories and declare that any attack on them is an attack on all of Russia. That in turn justifies their call-up of forces in Russia to “defend the motherland.”

They will intensify their repressive rule in the occupied territories. Already they are fighting a low-scale insurgency led by Ukrainian partisans against the occupation. These resisters have killed dozens of police and local administrators.

To defend their rule, the Russian military is replacing local Ukrainians with Russian bureaucrats. Thus, the local administrations are becoming openly colonial governments.

Faced with all this, many Ukrainians have fled their homes to elsewhere in Ukraine, some earlier and many more now. Russia, however, is now closing down the checkpoints to stop their flight.

Amidst these desperate moves by Putin, Zelensky has made appeals to Russian soldiers to surrender or escape from conscription. Some may heed that call. Regardless, this will not be a peaceful occupation.

AS: Up until recently, Putin has been able to win at least tacit support for the war from other states, especially China. That, however, seems to be ebbing. That was demonstrated by China and India’s very public expressions of concern and pressure on Putin to bring the war to an end. What impact will this pressure have?

IB: This is an important development. China especially is a key ally for Russia. It and India’s public criticisms of Putin’s war at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit are very significant.

Up until now, because of the history of U.S. imperialism, Putin was able to gain some support from states like China and others more broadly in the Global South. But this was always quite thin.

Putin’s attempt to present himself as a kind of leader of the “Third World” in the struggle against the Global North was never very convincing. He offers nothing to actually oppressed countries and is in fact carrying out oppression of an oppressed country by invading and occupying Ukraine.

While Putin has tried to justify all this with his hollow rhetoric of anti-imperialism, he more often turns to various conspiracy theories, especially one he repeatedly invokes—the Golden Billion Theory—and that has no purchase on almost anyone outside the far right.

According to this theory, the West has a plan to exterminate everyone on the planet except the “golden billion” people who live in their countries. Obviously, this has little to do with reality as the Western powers depend on the labor, resources, and markets of the whole world.

So, few governments in the Global South were ever going to recognize Putin as their leader. And certainly, now with Russia facing defeat, they are more likely to become critical, as their collective vote to invite Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky to address the recent UN meeting demonstrates.

In reality, Putin doesn’t present any kind of program for the Global South and people know that. While he may complain about Western imperialism, unequal distribution of resources, and so on, he does not offer any positive solution, but calls for support of his imperialist invasion of Ukraine to reclaim Russia’s lost empire. That is not a very convincing program or any kind of alternative to Western imperialism.

And the war itself has produced a crisis for the Global South. It has cut off food exports and spiked inflation in energy costs. That is only making life harder in the Global South.

Countries like China and India do not want to share the consequences of the disaster Putin has wrought. So their pressuring him at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting poses real problems for him.

AS: Putin seems to be in a weak position. He has even threatened to use nuclear weapons. Is this just bluster and posturing before he tries to sue for peace? Or is there a real risk that he would use them?

IB: We should not dismiss his threats of nuclear attacks. We should take this rhetoric very seriously. For years, Putin has promised that Russia will use nuclear weapons to defend its interests.

In fact, it is part of the state's military doctrine that it will use tactical nuclear missiles if it faces an existential threat to the country's security and the security of its borders. Now, after the annexation of parts of Ukraine, they will deem any attack on them as an attack on Russia, and an existential threat that justifies them launching a nuclear attack.

At the same time, there are restraints on using such nuclear weapons. It is not just up to Putin. Their use has to be approved by several levels of the military leadership. Putin might not want to take the risk of some generals disapproving their use, something that could lead them to challenge his rule from within the state.

Also, as Putin is no doubt aware, the U.S. and NATO would then respond with possible nuclear counter-attacks. They have already made that clear to Russia. But Putin's regime is at stake in this war, so it's hard to tell what's bluster and what's a real threat.

AS: Ukraine and its people are determined to liberate their entire country. The Western powers have backed them to this point. If Russia offers a deal how will the Western powers and Ukraine respond?

IB: I think that the West, and especially the European Union, will be eager to bring about a ceasefire and will probably pressure Ukraine to accept it. But Putin will not accept anything in writing that recognizes the territorial integrity of Ukraine. He remains determined to seize the whole country.

And for their part, Ukraine is determined to liberate all of its territory from occupation, including Donbas and Crimea. So, any deal is off the table, and any ceasefire will likely be temporary.

We have been through this before back in 2014, when Russia seized Crimea and established the so-called People's Republics. The conflict froze, but then broke out again, under a decade later.

If a ceasefire happens after the annexation, and that is by no means guaranteed, it will be disrupted by another round of Russian attempts at imperial conquest and Ukrainian efforts to liberate their land.

The only way out of this scenario is the end of Putin's regime. Its very existence is tied up with this imperial war. If it remains in power, the war will go on. It will only end with the downfall of the regime.

AS: One final question. Russian society seems tremendously destabilized by Putin's enormous setbacks, Western sanctions, and now resistance to the draft. It has a feel of the kind of crisis that precipitated the Russian Revolution in 1917—war, defeat, internal crisis,

and stirring of resistance to the regime. Where is Russian society headed?

IB: The combination of the war, the sanctions, and especially the mobilization have caused a severe and growing crisis in Russia. There is no doubt about that. But the regime remains resilient. It has been able to smash each round of protest in the main cities of Russia.

In the Caucasus, the local authorities have to be more careful. They never just repress protests. They know that police attacks could trigger even bigger protests. So, they always use a combination of police repression and concessions.

So, the regional resistance is perhaps the most important. It has the greatest potential right now to sabotage the mobilization and challenge Putin. But in the main cities, people are looking for individual means to escape the country rather than risk organized resistance and get smashed.

Other people don't have the money and opportunity to try and leave the country. So, they hide in their apartments or flee to the countryside where they can lay low and avoid the authorities and remain in hiding. Of course, this will create chaos as people fail to show up at their jobs, compromising an economy already weakened by sanctions.

All of this will weaken Putin's base, which has already been reduced dramatically. But this is not active resistance, yet. His regime has relied on passive obedience, which was premised on security in private life.

Now that is being threatened by the war, sanctions, and mobilization. If it continues to be compromised, it will create serious challenges for Putin to hold on to his base of support. But there is an enormous gap between individual solutions to the crisis like flight from the country and hiding in villages and active resistance to the regime.

Remember the Russian Revolution did not happen right at the start of World War I. It took three years of bloody war as well as social and economic crisis for workers and peasants to overthrow the Tsarist regime.

We are just at the very beginning of the process today. It will take some time for the organized political and social forces to come together and threaten Putin's rule. For now, I think we will see a continuation of a pattern of individual resistance and broader passive obedience.

And we should not underestimate the remaining support the regime has. Even with the hundreds of thousands fleeing conscription, there are a lot of people that are joining the army now. They believe the propaganda from the regime about defending their homeland from attack.

So, we are at the beginning of a crisis. But we should be clear; this crisis can only be overcome by the fall of Putin's regime. That is the only way to bring an end to this war.

P.S.

• Tempest. 29 September 2022:

<https://www.tempestmag.org/2022/09/war-and-resistance-in-putins-russia/>

• Ilya Budraitskis is the author of [Dissident Among Dissidents: Ideology, Politics and the Left in Post-](#)

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