

# Russia: ‘This regime is not subject to evolution’ an interview with Ilya Budraitskis

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**Political writer Ilya Budraitskis explains the left’s vision of decentralized governance and why Russia’s Communist Party must exit together with Putin.**

The invasion of Ukraine confronted Russian society with the consequences of a decades-long transformation that began, among other things, with Vladimir Putin’s introduction of a new Labor Code. The new labor legislation, passed in December 2001, curtailed the rights of labor unions, contributing to social atomization and to the crumbling of solidarity politics. Historian and political commentator Ilya Budraitskis has been part of Russia’s leftist political scene since the 1990s, engaging in labor union activism and other civic initiatives. Meduza spoke with him about Russia’s wartime left-wing politics, the role of CPRF (Russia’s establishment Communist Party) in the large picture of the Russian left, the latter’s survival in what Budraitskis calls “the conditions of dictatorship,” and the goals its activists can embrace now to bring about a decentralized, democratic future Russia, where the state will genuinely serve the interests of the majority.

## **What are the elements that comprise Russia’s political left today?**

Starting on February 24, 2022, the present regime in Russia entered the stage of flagrant dictatorship, which puts in question all legal political activity in the country. Accordingly, political groups and movements that existed until that date split into two major camps: one supporting the so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine, and the other condemning and protesting it. The same kind of division occurred with the political left at large. This was a foreseeable development, since it extended the tendencies that can be traced all the way back to 2014. Today’s Russia has two different kinds of leftists, and we need to be clear as to which of these two antagonistic movements we’re talking about.

## **Let’s begin with the pro-war bloc. When talking about the establishment parliamentary left represented by the Communist Party (CPRF), can we consider it a genuine leftist force?**

The pro-war left is represented first and foremost by CPRF’s leadership and by those who support its position. For instance, Sergey Udaltsov’s Left Front has [adopted](#) a pro-war position and is effectively allied with the CPRF. They think of the war and the conflict with the West as a radical challenge to Russia’s former socio-political model, a challenge that will inevitably push the country in the direction of what they like to call “socialism.”

The main problem with their position (bracketing its morality and practicability) is that it provides no account of who is to be the subject of the political shift towards this “socialism” of theirs. They cannot be talking about the masses, the organized hired labor, because that possibility has been eradicated in Russia. All public [political life](#), including the freedom of assembly, has been [destroyed](#). Strikes have ceased to be a phenomenon. Russia’s society is in a maximally depressed and

humiliated state. Putin's Russia has no room for any kind of progress towards social justice.

From the point of view of the pro-war left, the subject of the "socialist" shift is to be today's ruling elite. Its strategy, then, is to persuade the elite to go down the path of socio-economic reforms. The motive of these changes, meanwhile (we're talking about things like nationalization of major industrial concerns, or a more "equitable" redistribution of the country's resources) are the objective needs of a country confronted with acute external conflict. Hence the orientation towards militarized socialism, including top-down planning to meet the needs of ongoing warfare.

In the actual conditions of dictatorship, Putin has become the sole addressee of all CPRF propaganda. It's him that this party must persuade to effect the reforms it is promoting. So, at the president's July 2022 meeting with the parliamentary factions, the CPRF's chairman Gennady Zyuganov [declared](#) that his party fully supports Putin's political course, but it would like to see movement towards socialism. Putin replied, somewhat facetiously, that it's an interesting idea, but it would be good to first come up with some estimates of what socialism would look like in practice.

There are very good reasons to doubt that the CPRF and its allies can be described as a bona fide leftist political force, since the socialist position is based on the idea that disenfranchised masses must take back political and economic power through grassroots self-organization. Socialism in this classic leftist sense is something that's initiated by the people, who establish a new social order to benefit the many instead of the few.

Today's CPRF and its allies have rejected this idea, since they don't view the masses with their interest in bottom-up change as a subject, or an engine, of change. Zyuganov's idea of socialism does not require any participation from the masses; in his view, grassroots activity is actually undesirable, since everyday people's behavior is unpredictable and can therefore be exploited by Russia's enemies, who might seduce them with their false values. It's far safer to conduct reforms with a view to the interests of the state.

### **Does the CPRF have real political power? Even if it's abandoned the root ideas of left-wing politics, does this party have real influence over reforms in the country?**

The CPRF has just celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and with great pomp. This makes the party, headed by its changeless leader Gennady Zyuganov practically coeval with the post-Soviet political system itself. It's worth noting that its place in that system is fairly ambiguous. As a party of "managed democracy," it never made any claims to real political power, coordinating its every step with the Kremlin, and lately following its explicit directives.

This party has never tried to get anyone to take to the streets. Its orientation is not about what happens outside the parliament; instead, it's all about redistributing the seats in the State Duma and in regional governance. In other words, this party has no great political ambitions. It simply maintains itself and its own apparatus, providing a career ladder for politicians.

There are scores of people who became governors or representatives solely because they spent their early years climbing the hierarchic ladder of the Communist Party. Take the Oryol Governor Andrey Klychkov or Moscow City Duma deputies like Gennady Zyuganov's grandson Leonid Zyuganov, or the governor of Khakassia, Valentin Konovalov. All of them made their careers in the CPRF, getting their modest share of political power. Within the current political system, the CPRF is unlikely to take you beyond the post of a deputy or a place in local government.

The CPRF's niche in the system of Russian politics is a product of its function, which is to [absorb](#) protest-minded dissident voters during elections. People who vote for the CPRF don't do it because

they want Zyuganov's grandson to make a career for himself, or because they want their party to support Putin's every new undertaking. They vote for the CPRF because they are disgruntled with Russian life in various aspects, the social aspect being foremost. They're unhappy about inequality and poverty.

For 30 years, the CPRF has consistently betrayed the interests of the people who have voted for it. At every stage of Russia's contemporary political history, we saw this chasm between the voters and those who ended up representing them in the government. Take 2011, when, following the State Duma election falsified in favor of United Russia, the Fair Vote movement first began, alongside the Bolotnaya protest movement. In that election, votes had been stolen specifically from the communists. The liberal opposition either took no part in that election, or else its results were far more modest than the communists'. The Fair Vote protests were largely an expression of indignation by those who had voted for the CPRF. But the party itself didn't join the protests; instead, it joined in persecuting the protesters.

Another case in point is the September 2021 State Duma election. Thanks in large part to the "smart vote" strategy championed by the Navalny team, most opposition voters gave their votes to CPRF candidates. A significant share of those candidates [won](#) their districts but still couldn't get a seat in the parliament because of the sweeping [falsifications](#), including the manipulation of [online votes](#). The party leadership's position was, meanwhile: sure, there have been some violations, but not so great as to question the election results or to go to bat against the regime.

This ambivalence on the part of the CPRF, an establishment party that attracted voters prone to protest, was also reflected in its composition. The CPRF has been a magnet for people looking to get serious about leftist opposition politics without pandering to the Kremlin, to defend their constituents' interests, and to develop grassroots movements. Over its entire lifespan, the CPRF included these two conflicting groups with completely different motives. Its leadership, though, was always comprised of Kremlin collaborators, content to see the CPRF as an establishment party. Meanwhile, the party's local branches often attracted people with completely different expectations.

In 2021, we saw this contradiction at play when the "smart vote" strategy garnered support for CPRF candidates like [Mikhail Lobanov](#) in Moscow, not least thanks to the fact that they held genuine, consistent anti-establishment views. When the war broke out, just a few State Duma deputies declared their antiwar position, but all of those who spoke up were CPRF members.

### **Did CPRF activists manage to achieve results despite these internal antagonisms?**

When you become a municipal or a regional deputy, this opens up certain opportunities. They are, of course, severely circumscribed, given that any establishment opposition party, the CPRF included, is going to be a minority presence. Still, a deputy is someone who can significantly amplify the voices of local communities, as in the case of the Moscow City Duma Deputy Evgeny Stupin, who happens to be a CPRF member.

### **Let's talk about the other leftist camp, which didn't support the invasion. If a person doesn't see oneself affiliated with the CPRF, what other leftist options are there?**

Among the leftist organizations that condemned the invasion, there's a number of small groups operating essentially as mass media. In the situation where practically any pacifist or antiwar activity is outlawed, these groups are just barely legal. Political organizations that adopted a clear-cut antiwar position have been forced underground and must be extremely careful now. This presents a serious strategic problem for all leftist groups that existed in Russia prior to the invasion, be they socialist or anarchist. There are several basic strategies they can use to adapt in today's

severe conditions.

The first approach is illicit direct action, which is difficult to embrace if you're already a public figure. The second is to limit one's activity to propaganda in small communities like closed reading groups. Finally, there is the strategy of labor advocacy, which remains legal for now. We're talking about the messengers' union Courier, the medical workers' union Deistvie, and a number of other smaller unions where antiwar activists participate.

### **How did Russia's trade unions become a political force, and is this changing now?**

Let's begin with the fact that Russia has both establishment and independent trade unions. The establishment, official unions get very little media attention, and most of their putative members hardly even suspect that they exist. Still, it's a massive bureaucracy. Russia's Federation of Independent Trade Unions ("FNPR") has functioned for decades as an extension of the government in the arena of labor relations and as a tool of the business owners' control over the workers. Clearly, this has nothing to do with real labor unions. If we look for historic parallels, various fascist regimes had their own state trade unions and associations for both employers and workers.

As for the independent trade unions, the few remaining avenues of still legal public activity (like the trade union rights advocacy, connected with the propaganda of self-education) have become exceptionally risky. For example, Kirill Ukraintsev, the leader of the Courier messengers' union, was arrested and jailed last spring, and has only been released very recently.

We have to understand that, despite their localized achievements, these organizations cannot be considered fully-fledged trade unions, since a genuine trade union is capable of negotiating collective agreements with major industry employers. In today's Russia, though, this is practically impossible, and not just because of repressive pressure from the government and business owners. It's impossible due to the very legislation in effect, since one of Putin's earliest initiatives when he first came to power was the adoption of a new Labor Code that curtailed the powers of trade unions.

This means that it's practically impossible to have an effective strike in present-day Russia. The legal scope of trade unions is practically nil. Associations like Courier, Deistvie, or the Teachers' Alliance are excellent and very important initiatives, operating nevertheless in close-to-underground conditions. They look more like advocacy organizations than trade unions proper. For comparison, just take a look at the pension reform protests in France, and you'll see the difference.

### **What about the anarchists? They have long been subject to state [repressions](#); are anarchist movements now growing in response to the invasion? Is it anarchists that organize railway sabotage and set draft offices on fire?**

We have fairly scant information about who is really behind those initiatives. I have no data on whether anarchist movements are growing or shrinking, since they're operating under enormous pressure, in a de facto underground mode. But it's very difficult to grow when you're underground.

The regime has been at pains to curtail the anarchists' sweeping influence over the younger generation of Russians. About a decade ago, a major antifascist subculture that significantly relied on some anarchist ideas established itself in Russia. Its influence was very palpable. The regime invested a great deal of effort in crushing this antifascist scene. This is what prompted the prosecution of The Web, as well as many other politically-motivated criminal cases. The regime succeeded in liquidating a more-or-less mass movement, simply by taking out its key activists.

Of course, something of that antifascist element has survived, transforming into partisan groups.

The question here is not so much about the present as the future. How much of what these groups do today will remain meaningful in the future? Isolated actions, however heroic, are incapable of breaking the momentum of the current situation. But I think that if Russian society presents a demand for a mass antiwar movement, all of its available forms, including those that exist already, will be welcome.

**Is it true, then, that no left-wing movement can significantly grow in numbers in 2023? Isn't this, rather, the perfect time to aim for growth?**

I think that the dictatorial conditions leave no room for political and civic rights in principle. They permit no legal political activity in any form, effectively precluding these movements from gaining new adherents or actively spreading their message in society.

The question is whether Russian society can manifest change serious enough to engender a new kind of politics, and also what the left itself has to offer in terms of the country's post-Putin development. This is the main task faced by the left at the moment, as well as by any opposition group in Russia, and this means that what they're doing now is calculated largely for the long run, as opposed to immediate effect.

**How does the Russian left understand decolonization, and what should it look like in Russia?**

This is a complicated question, since there's, on the one hand, the term "decolonization" as it stands in the context of post-colonial studies, and on the other hand, there are practical questions about Russia's political future after the dead end it has come to at this time. And these two things are completely unrelated. So perhaps it's best to focus on Russia's current political order as rooted in its imperial past.

First of all, we realize that the war is grounded in historical revisionism and [the idea](#) that no authentic existence is possible for Russia within its current borders. The way the regime sees it, Russia's borders must be constantly advanced, so as to "recover" the supposedly "historically Russian" lands. Regrettably, this line of thought comes with a certain tradition: it wasn't invented by Putin, but is, instead, conditioned by all of Russia's pre-revolutionary imperial heritage, as well as the Stalin-era and the post-Stalin Soviet experience.

This tradition has by now rooted itself in the consciousness of a large part of the population, and this is what makes propaganda so effective. Making post-Putin Russia live in peace with its neighbors without threatening other countries, including the post-Soviet states and Eastern Europe, requires a cardinal overhaul of the imperial mindset. We have to work out not just our present, but also our past and how our people see Russia's history and its relations with the surrounding countries. This is the first point.

The second point has to do with Russia's current official status as a "federation," when in reality it's a hyper-centralized state where all the resources are [appropriated](#) by Moscow to trickle down back to the regions based on their degree of political loyalty to the regime. This is what determines Russia's policies with regard to its indigenous minorities, since the very existence of non-Russian identities inside the country is viewed by the Kremlin as a threat. Hence the suppression of [indigenous languages](#) and of the remaining vestiges of [autonomy](#) in regions with significant native non-Russian populations.

These policies have been in place for the entirety of Putin's two decades in power, and are directly connected with the Moscow-centric nature of this regime and the absence of real democracy in the



country. In this sense, we do need a serious revision of Moscow's place in Russian governance.

### **Would this necessarily entail Russia's disintegration as a single political entity?**

Russia as it exists today is holding back the development of its regions with coercive power and money. It has no further positive program to offer those regions. This is why, once the regime's political power begins to wane and money starts to dry up (and this will happen within the foreseeable future), we're going to see an eruption of centrifugal forces within the country.

The results will not be entirely comfortable for those who live in the regions. If we want to preserve some common political space — not in the sense of its being bound by a single political power, but in the sense of an environment that permits some kind of intercultural human exchange — we have to think about the values, ideas, and principles that Russia as such can offer to the regions. The ideas of tolerance, equality, well-developed social policies, and the regions' right to manage their own resources would help preserve this space in the form of a federation or a commonwealth.

If we keep denying that centralization is a problem till the bitter end, if we keep trying to force the ethnic regions into some Procrustean single standard, considering all signs of uniqueness to be a threat to the state and its integrity, this will lead to disintegration. Russia's continuing its present course may possibly lead to a very harsh disintegration scenario. But it's also possible to change this course, and avert disintegration.

### **What is the Russians' overall attitude to left-wing politics? How much of a foundation for the future have these movements built up for themselves?**

Left-wing politicians have seen some success in post-Soviet Russia. There are, for example, Mikhail Lobanov's and other stories of electoral victories, as well as a whole array of charismatic municipal deputies like Sergey Tsukasov, who had at one point been the head of Moscow's Ostankino municipal district. Or take the role of left-wing politics in mass social movements like the Shies environmental protests in the Arkhangelsk region. Then, there is the work of independent trade unions, and their role in local victories like the Labor Confederacy's [effective](#) work on giving back their jobs to dozens of Moscow subway employees, illegally laid off in 2021.

Over the past decade, Russia presented a dual dynamic. On the one hand, we saw increasing political engagement among the younger people, growing grassroots movements and [political protest](#), and active participation in [electoral](#) campaigns and elections. On the other hand, we're also witnessing the growth of state repressive apparatus and its increasing pressure on this awakening society. Everything this regime had done in response to the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine, and right up to the launch of the invasion, pursued not just foreign policy goals but also domestic ones. The regime's principal aim was to suppress the society completely, atomizing the population and instilling an atmosphere of panic and terror in the face of any and all political activity.

Everything that has happened over the past decade in Russia's left-wing politics was part of this dual trend. The situation we arrived at by February 24, 2022, can be considered a triumph of the state over society over this particular historical stretch. And since the left always sides with society, as opposed to the state, this triumph is also a defeat for the left-wing movement.

I'm not a sociologist and cannot present specific numbers, but based on my own experience, which includes activism, I can say that the majority of Russians consider social inequality and inequity to be the key political question. An absolute majority of people would agree with you if you were to speak about redistributing the resources and wealth. They would also agree that Russia needs to become a genuine welfare state working in the interests of the majority. This is why the left-wing

agenda is so important here.

Even the thrice-outlawed Alexey Navalny's [achievements](#) have a lot to do with his [inclusion](#) of some elements of the leftist agenda in his own anti-corruption rhetoric. I would say that the majority of viewers realize that Navalny's videos are not just about corrupt state officials. They're really about how a negligible minority has [seized](#) all the wealth in an otherwise destitute country. This situation is flagrantly unjust. Whether the officials got rich legally or illegally is the last thing that people worry about, because the very laws that enabled this group to usurp these riches were written by the usurpers themselves.

Another important aspect of the leftist tradition is its orientation towards democracy, and not just formal democracy. For the political left, democracy is not just about working electoral institutions. It's a question of how ordinary people can take part in the decisions that affect their own life. Socialism as it had been conceived by its founders, some 150 years ago, was an internally consistent vision of democracy taken to its logical limits. It was an idea of democracy as a majority rule not just in politics, but also in economics. This is why the democratic demands that have been so important to Russian society over the past decades — the demands for fair elections, freedom of assembly, free trade unions, and the right to strike — are endemic to the political left.

I think that, had Russia preserved some possibility of genuine public political life, with the creation of a legal left-wing liberal party that could take part in elections, we would have already seen a rise in left-wing politics in this country. All the conditions have been in place over the past decade, and ferment in the masses was very much in its favor, too.

**Apart from state repressions, were there other factors that kept left-wing movements from penetrating deeper into society?**

Despite Russian society's demand for democratization and social justice, most of it remains politically passive. People have shown themselves to be unprepared for action, and I don't think this has to do only with obstruction of grassroots self-organization or with the fear of repressions.

In a hardcore market society where every person stands for themselves, where money is synonymous with power, and where everyone subscribes to some personal survival strategy, any suggestion of common interests sounds like total rubbish. This prewar Russian "common sense" got in the way of the leftist agenda and of any grassroots self-organization. Russian activists had a very hard time explaining why the tenants in an apartment building should create a committee to defend their rights vis-à-vis the local management companies. Hired workers too have a hard time grasping what organized collective struggle for common rights is all about.

Instead, people wondered whether the struggle would bring them more benefits or problems. This was Russia's reality, and it was largely responsible for the apathy we've seen and for the population's vulnerability to militarist propaganda.

**The left's preoccupation with localized struggles against inequality seems to alienate it from the masses. At the same time, the left doesn't propose any systemic reforms, economic or any other kind. Is this view unfair?**

There is a real problem with the activists' focus on everyday practical matters. People are easier to motivate when there is something they can do here and now. It's generally a good thing, since activists often do manage to help someone. At the same time, the fixation on the "here and now" leads activists away from conceptualizing political programs and proposals, from developing large, comprehensive accounts that would explain the social reality. But everyday people need such

accounts.

We can see that the Russians' obsession with YouTube and with all kinds of talking heads has to do with this demand for a comprehensive worldview: to understand what they must do, people need someone who would tie all the events and goings-on into a coherent holistic picture. Often, people who are completely immersed in activism cannot supply such a picture. Either they don't think it's all that important, or they don't have the time and the resources. This is detrimental to the left-wing movement as we have it in today's Russia.

But this isn't just a problem of how few people are developing large-scale political programs. Proposals that are decoupled from practice and from actual mass movements often become abstract. When liberal economists, for example, start talking about "how to reform Russia," there's usually some clarity about agency: "Putin must be replaced by a figurative [Evgeny Chichvarkin](#), who will transform the economy as he sees fit." For the left, the question of agency is radically different. It's the question of how to reform the political system so that it would serve the majority. The answer to this question cannot be anticipated, or arrived at by some thought experiment.

Vladimir Lenin said that we'll never find out what socialism looks like in detail until the masses get to work. This is something that's still true for the left-wing movement. We won't know what a just society looks like, until the time when this idea reaches millions of people and the masses decide that they want to see it realized in practice.

### **How can we figure out which long-term goals should be the priority in Russia's left-wing politics? What should politicians emphasize if they want to be heard?**

Leftists must learn their lesson and draw conclusions from what has happened to the country. We must be very clear that this regime is not subject to evolution. It's not going to change on its own, and some fairly radical transformation is needed. This transformation will happen if Russia experiences a crisis of governance simultaneously with an active will for grassroots change from below.

This is why the left needs to think about how it plans to participate in this future mass movement. The present regime has made change within the existing institutional framework impossible. The country will need a new constitution, new laws, new political parties, and the CPRF will, in all likelihood, land in the dumpster together with the rest of the current political system.

There will be a definite need to reevaluate the past privatization, which became the foundation of the current regime in Russia. There will be a need for a radical revision of social policy, with a dismantling of the Putin-instituted labor law, with progressive taxation, with new budgetary policies for education and healthcare, now funded on a trickle-down basis.

Beyond this, what society needs isn't just a redistribution of resources but a revision of the whole philosophy underpinning Russia's social policy as we have it now. Today, it's governed by the principle of efficiency: colleges, hospitals, and museums are all free-market agents that must generate revenues and finance themselves. Inefficient institutions are [closed](#), ensuring that the state doesn't ever have to take a loss. This premise that the state must always make a profit, that it should get more than what it spends in the first place, must be defeated. The whole social welfare sphere must be determined by the needs of society, not by market efficiencies or profitability.

In addition, there has to be a program for gender equality, with an overhaul of all these anti-LGBT laws, and with new laws against domestic violence. There should be a special program for turning Russia into a genuine federation enabling local governance to manage regional budgets. We must



also enable ethnic minorities to develop their languages and cultures, without which these minorities are placed in a position of powerlessness and victimhood.

These aims are all definitely tied to decentralization of governance in Russia. What form this is all going to take is an open question, but I'm certain that decentralization is directly connected with democracy. The more power people have locally, and the less of it remains in the center, the more durable Russia's democratic institutions will be in the future.

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## **Meduza**

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## **P.S.**

This interview was initially published by [Meduza](#) and translated by Anna Razumnaya.