IPS

INTERVIEWS 01.08.2023

‘Nobody in Russia believes that he or she can influence any events’

Greg Yudin on how Russian society perceives the war and why, only when Putin’s government is gone, there will be negotiations

The war in Ukraine has been going on for 17 months now. From an outside perspective, it's hard to assess how ordinary Russian citizens view the invasion. How united is Russian society on this topic?

The society is generally deeply divided. We are talking about a country with an incredibly low level of interpersonal trust, extremely low levels of interest in politics, and particularly of political engagement, of belief in one's ability to affect politics. The war is generally perceived as something that comes from the outside. There's nothing to do about that. That doesn't really create significant unity. It creates a lot of fear, uncertainty and despair.

In general, the society can be subdivided into three categories. The first group is supporting the war. These are people who are emotionally involved and sometimes militarised. They support the army with resources. Many demand more brutality, more aggression. That's a minority, I would say 15 to 20 per cent. But they are very vocal because of the skewed public sphere, because their voices are incredibly amplified. More or less, it's basically the only voice you can hear. Then you have a different minority. The one that doesn't perceive this war as just and is disgusted by the war and also sees it as a fatal mistake that is going to incur a lot of suffering on Russia. That minority is slightly larger than the previous one, but that's just an estimate. And the third group is in the middle — trying to not follow what is happening and to push it away. The last category is where the overwhelming majority lays. And this middle is basically willing to go along with whatever happens. That is the dominant attitude, because the ability to influence the situation is almost zero.

Are there any notable differences between age groups or geography?

If you take a closer look, you can see the cleavages that exist in Russian society. Perhaps the most prominent one is the generational divide. The war is supported by the old, by the elderly people who want a world that Russian elites propose. The perception of the war and of the situation is very different from generation to generation.

The second cleavage is the income divide. This is not only the war of the old but it's also the war of the rich. Basically, it's a war of the people who are not going to die in it. The old are for total mobilisation, but they're not going to go to this war, they are going to send their children. And the same applies to income. The rich are not going to get killed. They'll just send the poor. Those divides create a lot of tensions. At this point, these tensions are suppressed because of the war, but they definitely do exist.

With these disparities in mind, how fragile is the Russian Empire?

It's certainly a dying empire. You can see that because it basically offers nothing to the areas it wants to control. The only thing that is offers is the idea of bringing back the Soviet Union, which is basically a fantasy. There are no civilizational projects. That's what makes it totally unattractive for Ukrainians, and for other countries. And that's what makes it believe solely in force. If they don't want to be there with us, we'll just force them, instead of offering them something. And in that sense, it's a very fragile empire. It's more or less clear that the way the empire should end is not necessarily by getting dissolved, but by putting the imperial idea to death and to transform Russia into a republic. That's what happened in Germany, that's what happened in France. That's the usual way to overcome the imperial idea.

You state that most of the society is apolitical. Why is the average Russian so indifferent towards politics?

Well, because politicisation happens when there is an opportunity for political action, and there's zero in Russia. Nobody in Russia believes that he or she can influence any events. Politicisation means collective action, because politics is about collectivities, about solidarity. There is zero opportunity for that. And the regime that built this has always destroyed all sorts of solidarity in Russia. Any sort of collective action is suppressed and discredited. As a result, the common sense is, that one should only care about themselves.

Does the military mobilisation have an impact on the cohesiveness of the state and the society?

The mobilisation reflects but also enhances those disparities. It is

selective and targeted. It targets people who have the least amount of capital, not only economic capital, but also social capital. In order to flee or to hide, you need enough social support. Most people don't understand that the vast majority of Russians have never been abroad. 70 per cent of Russians have never had a travel passport. So, where do you hide? That's a huge challenge.

But there is also a financial incentive to join the military. Most of those people would have never earned this kind of money. A fair portion of them understand that they're likely going to die. But is their life worth living? For many of them, the answer is no. Many of the places where they are recruited from are very bleak. It's like they've been living at war forever. So, this combination of fear, of lack of orientation, of the only lucrative channel for upward mobility, is what drives people to the military. It's not limitless, of course, but still it works.

Many people think the only way to end this war is via a peace treaty. You argue that the West should not negotiate with Putin. Why?

The war is about Ukraine being a sovereign country. The idea of forcing Ukrainians to the negotiating table is patronising. It means implicitly accepting Putin's idea that Ukraine is not a sovereign country, that somebody else is going to dictate the conditions. Putin gets entrenched in his belief that Ukraine doesn't exist. That's the thing that people don't understand. However, negotiation and restoring the relationships between the countries is necessary and actually unavoidable. But to do that, we have to remove the roadblock: The people in the Kremlin who destroy relationships between culturally close groups. After that, there is definitely a need for negotiations. I think Wolodymyr Zelensky puts it very clearly: There will be no negotiation with this leadership, but there will be negotiation with the next Russian government. There will be a need to restore the relationships. And of course, on our part, there will be a lot of effort needed for that.

So, is an end to the war only possible if there's no more Putin and no more Kremlin?

As long as Putin is in power, the war will continue and escalate. For Putin, this war is not about Ukraine. This is a war to restore the empire. And the empire definitely includes the Warsaw block countries. And since he doesn't believe in neutrality, of course the goal is not to make those countries neutral, but for them to get back to the Russian sphere of influence. That includes Eastern Germany. If he succeeds, it's not going to end in Ukraine. Moldova is already clearly

in the military plans of this operation. It's just that this operation is failing miserably. Had the Russian military seized Odessa, Moldova would have been invaded. That's only the initial stage of this huge war that he's unleashing. Their vision is an inevitable war with the West, with NATO. They don't perceive it as a war of choice, which it is, of course. If the war succeeds, it'll definitely go further to the West. And the calculation is also very clear, nobody is going to risk a nuclear war over Poland, Lithuania, or Estonia. I'm not saying this is a plan that's going to work. I don't believe that. But it's clearly a plan, one that must be kept in mind.

You criticised that the German government made a huge mistake in its cooperation with Russia by focusing their efforts on Putin and the ruling elite. How could a cooperation with Russia look like in the future?

I know there's a lot of criticism about Germany's Russia politics, and I don't think all of that is fair because it is quite natural to seek a cooperation with a large country with which you have a lot of common history. That was never a mistake to me. The mistake was the idea that the cooperation should be maintained with the ruling elites and not with the society. At least since the brutally suppressed uprising in Russia in 2011 and 2012, it was very clear, that German businessmen and politicians are dealing with people who are willing to destroy Russian democracy. And we were saying that for many years to the Germans. What Chancellor Merkel was doing was insane. It was like trading the security of all of Europe for a terrible deal over operative energy resources. The government should not have engaged with the very thin elite, which was very keen on repressing Russian society. This should not be repeated. There is a need for people to people communication. There is a need for more interaction, more engagement, more involvement. The current German government came up with a brilliant idea of lifting the visa requirements for the Russian youth. But that happened in December 2021, when for me, it was clear that the war was coming. It was too late. It should have been done at least 20 years earlier. These are all missed opportunities and we have to learn from that.

Is this missing interaction also the reason why the state's propaganda is so effective?

There are various reasons why the state propaganda works. The general strategy of state propaganda is to demobilise people. It tells you that everything is under control, that they're on the right side. To create this perception, it tells a lot of fairy tales about what's going on in Germany and it simplifies greatly how the world is structured

today. First-hand experience help change that. People who have the opportunity to go abroad, suddenly realise that things can be different. Their imagination starts working. Unfortunately, the dominant mindset in Russia is that you live in a world without alternatives.

This interview was conducted by Julika Luisa Enbergs.



Greg Yudin

Greg Yudin is a Russian political scientist and sociologist. He is an expert in public opinion and polling in Russia.