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'They are aware that they fought for nothing'

Russian author Dmitry Glukhovsky captures the current mood in his country, giving insights into war responsibility and Russia's bleak future

Why aren't greater numbers of Russian citizens in Russia protesting the war in Ukraine unleashed by Vladimir Putin? Is it because they are not as directly in danger as the Ukrainians are in their air-raid shelters?

First of all, it must be said that the Russians, unlike the Ukrainians, have thus far always lost their conflicts with officials. All attempts to somehow influence the government's policy through peaceful demonstrations, to annul the results of falsified elections, to force the resignation of top politicians, to reverse changes that were not in the interest of the general population – all of these proved unsuccessful. They ended only in punishment for some of the activists and their organisations. When tens of thousands of Russians took to the streets against the war in Ukraine, I was sure that they didn't expect to end the war by doing so. They were united by a feeling of helplessness, because in situations like this, the Russian state has never made concessions.

It has always reacted with an iron fist, without compromises; it considers protests unacceptable. In this context, I must also point out the unprecedented cruelty with which the authorities have suppressed these current protests and punished their participants. 16,000 people were arrested in just a few days. Moreover, draconian laws newly introduced by the regime are also acting as a deterrent. You can get up to 15 years in prison for simply 'liking' or forwarding 'false' information that contradicts Russian propaganda. By participating in a peaceful protest, the punishment can be up to six years. This is all very discouraging, of course, but the bottom line is that people don't feel that their actions are making a difference – and this comes at a high personal cost. The only thing the Putin regime has succeeding in doing well in recent years is intimidating, suppressing, and manipulating its own people with the propaganda of corrupt media.

Have people resigned themselves to this 'total state propaganda' after the last relatively free media outlets in Russia such as *Echo Moskvy* and *Dozhd* were shut down once the war began?

In my opinion, it is still too early to draw any far-reaching conclusions. The war began just three months ago. The propaganda campaign launched by the Russian state is unprecedented in its massive aggression and intolerance of dissenting opinions. In connection with the mobilisation of the population, those opposed to the war are not only defamed and ostracised, but truly harassed. That's why people with different opinions no longer dare to express them. One strategy for adapting to this atmosphere is an easily explainable conformism. Individuals prefer to take the view that they believe the majority holds when it concerns issues that are not of fundamental importance to them.

If the authorities were then to say that if you don't support a campaign for cannibalism, that makes you a traitor, people themselves wouldn't necessarily eat other people, but they wouldn't have anything against that campaign either. And when necessary, in order not to attract attention, people like this sometimes wave a flag or paint a 'Z' somewhere.

At the same time, however, we see that people's real willingness to make sacrifices for the war is very low. We don't see queues of volunteers waiting to go to the front lines to fight the alleged Ukrainian Nazis. We don't see any major fundraising for the soldiers who are at war. All public support comes down to a willingness to mark a letter 'Z' on the dusty rear window of cars or to hang a Ribbon of St. George somewhere. We're not talking about hysterical enthusiasm like the Nazi campaigns, or a truly patriotic mobilisation, as was actually to be expected on the basis of the propaganda.

Does this mean that even this massive, aggressive propaganda is ineffective?

It is effective, in that it creates the illusion of public approval. The propaganda is based on two pillars: first, anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism in general. Both of these stem from the feeling that our country was defeated as a superpower in the confrontation with the West and from a kind of envy of the inhabitants of the empire that prevailed. From this, there follows an unwillingness to come to terms with the result of this defeat, which also remained largely virtual, intangible. Propaganda must actively spread this image, since the West did not impose humiliating conditions for peace, such as reparations, nor did it install an occupation regime, but instead provided humanitarian aid. This defeat is therefore a subjective, purely emotional feeling of the elites,

who use imperialist nostalgia and resentment and spread them among the people like parasites. Just as Hitler did after the defeat in World War I and in the chaos of the final period of the Weimar Republic.

The second pillar as the basis of the propaganda is, of course, in a complete distortion of reality, that the current fratricidal war of aggression is a continuation of the Great Patriotic War, the German-Soviet War. This one is a sacred cow for everyone who lived in the Soviet Union and thereafter on its former territory, except perhaps the Baltics. There can be no doubt as to the truth behind the Soviet Union's stated intentions and its role in World War II, with 27 million Soviet citizens killed. Thus, here we have a very convenient tool to put the populace into a state of obedience and to justify even the most dubious undertakings of the current government. This was already tried out with the conquest of Crimea: The annexation was explained by the fact that the Nazis were supposedly in power in Ukraine and were oppressing the Russian population there, who therefore needed to be protected. As if World War II is still going on, and no Ukrainians are living there with whom we have always lived side by side for thousands of years – including mutual interpenetration of culture, families, and political elites. And suddenly Nazis are supposed to have come from somewhere and the fight against them justifies the appropriation of entire territories. Because that strategy worked, the technology has now been used to justify the current, inhumane, bloody, and otherwise almost inexplicable campaign. It relies on key stimuli that almost all post-Soviet people respond to, and it succeeded, at least on a rhetorical level.

Why are the mothers of Russian soldiers whose sons were killed in this war silent?After all, that's several thousand dead.

For one thing, the number of dead and wounded on the Russian side is being kept top secret. That is why Putin created the law on special operations, which makes 'peacetime' casualties in special operations state secrets. That's why the war is not a war for Russian officials. In a war, such figures must be made public. Only once, two months ago, was it said that 1,500 soldiers had died – while Ukraine is now talking about 30,000 dead Russian soldiers. But the worst thing is that the mothers of the dead are not reliably informed and live in the belief that they will see their sons again.

It is mainly people from poor regions who fight, for whom war is the only way to feed their families. This also explains the appalling looting at the front. The standard of living in eastern Ukraine is something of a revelation for these people. The death of soldiers continues to be compensated with money, several million rubles, which the state can still

afford.

Disinformation, obfuscation, and bribery are thus the temporary guarantors of stability as we see it. The dead and wounded come mainly from remote regions of Russia, which are invisible to the Russian media – of course, they are also deliberately ignored. Everything is fragmented, so people don't see the connection to anywhere else. So, the sense of a catastrophe is lacking.

Nevertheless, there will be tens of thousands of soldiers returning home with obvious injuries; with 30,000 dead there will also be 100,000 wounded. And these people cannot be fooled either, they saw death around them, they themselves were forced to kill. They are aware that they fought for nothing and were not taken care of. Even if they were brainwashed by propaganda in the beginning, afterwards they saw what they really faced. They will be hardened by the loss of their health and their comrades: what impact that will have on the power structure is difficult to predict.

Did the conquests, for example of Kherson or Mariupol, revive people's longing for a new USSR?

There has always been Soviet nostalgia. It has not been revived, but rather it is the fuel of the neo-imperial policy of today's Russia. By exploiting this nostalgia, Crimea and the rebel Donbas and Luhansk republics were annexed. There has always been a sense of lost imperial greatness. This isn't something specific to Russia – it's the same with other empires that have lost their colonies and are in the process of dissolution. It's always painful and even exists in parts of British or French society, despite all the education there. Or with the Hungarians, who are contemptuous of some of the Balkan peoples.

In our country, ordinary Russians do not have the opportunity to feel respect for their human dignity in everyday life. They are powerless, helpless, bitter, poor, and oppressed. At the same time, they do not dare to make suggestions to the authorities, as the authorities mercilessly retaliate against any attempt at resistance. In this way, people replace their longing for human dignity with a sense of belonging to a great power and they transfer their needs to the nation. When an ordinary Russian sees how Russia instils fear in its neighbours, for example when tanks and rocket launchers thunder across Red Square on 9 May, it compensates for the feeling of personal humiliation and powerlessness in one's own everyday life. This is why people are so susceptible to propaganda.

Why do so many Russians even outside the country support this so-called 'special operation'? After all, they have access to other sources of information.

It is not enough to have access to the truth. You must want to believe in it. The fact is that many Russians living in the West have not really been able to adjust to life under the conditions there. Due to the initial feeling of being subjects of a great empire, they then become condescending and dismissive towards the countries that they visit. They refuse to learn the language well, to adapt. In doing so, they make themselves second-class citizens. For this reason, they settle for revanchist statements from Russia. These give them the hope to feel like citizens of an empire again and to be able to take revenge. In general, I make the observation that wherever a Russian goes – and this can also apply to Russian Germans or Russian Jews – he votes for right-wing extremist political forces – for example Trump in America or nationalists in Israel who pursue an uncompromising policy against the Palestinians. The point is that in the Russian Federation or Soviet Union, these people felt they were part of the power, and that conveyed emotions to them.

A major problem for many Russians right now is the issue of collective responsibility.Are Russians responsible for Putin, even though they fought against his regime?

On this question, in my opinion, and as suggested by philosophers, it is necessary to separate guilt and responsibility. It is clear that neither the Russians who protested Russia's metamorphosis into a totalitarian state nor those who simply remained passive are to bear the blame. The blame is attached to a particular person who thinks much more highly of himself than he really is. A person who decided on the question of his continued existence at the cost of tens of thousands of human lives will go down in the history books for that reason. Ordinary Russians are completely misinformed because they have been misled in all sorts of ways over the last 30 years, because they are not trusted to have any real influence on politics and are at best compensated with pittances. In the worst case, they are lied to and intimidated by the police and courts. So, I don't see any clear blame on the Russian people themselves.

If we compare the situation with Nazi Germany, support for the Nazis was much higher there. And there was much more enthusiasm compared to Russian support for Putin. At the moment we don't see women crying with joy or millions in the streets like in the Berlin Olympic Stadium. On the contrary, everything is very sluggish. Up to ten million Germans took part in hostilities during World War II and were guilty, while only 160,000 Russians are fighting in Ukraine so far. If all units of the SS and

other special units took part in war crimes committed by Nazi Germany, which is to say, hundreds of thousands of people, in Ukraine we are talking about a few hundred Russian military personnel at best. In other words, despite the efforts of the authorities, the previous degree of responsibility of the Russian people cannot be compared with the degree of responsibility of the German population at that time.

Putin's personal strategy for avoiding responsibility, however, is to shift that responsibility onto the people as a whole. The decision to go to war, taken by him alone at the meeting of the Russian Security Council, has thrown even his inner circle into a state of panic and resignation. The fault lies first of all with one particular person and possibly his immediate environment.

Liability, however, is a different matter. Responsibility does not arise from being a Russian citizen. However, the war is being waged in the name of all Russia and its people – something that Putin and his entourage constantly emphasise, to distance themselves from any responsibility in the future as a clique of potential suspects. That is why I believe that the responsibility of every person with a Russian passport or of Russian origin is, first, to tirelessly remind people that they do not agree with the war. And secondly, Russians must, to the best of their ability, support at least a few Ukrainian acquaintances who are in a difficult situation as a result of the war. In this way, they can at least do something to mend the colossal damage that the Putin regime is currently wreaking in its relations with Ukraine and the wider world.

As a writer, do you feel a special responsibility towards the people of Russia?How have Russian writers generally reacted to the war in Ukraine?

I would like to remind you that in the first days of the war, 2,000 cultural workers signed an open letter against the war. Now the officials are trying in every possible way to pretend that only a few writers such as Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Boris Akunin, Dmitry Bykov and I spoke out unequivocally against the war. In fact, hundreds of authors have said 'No' to the war. Only a few support it and serve the Kremlin. They are something like functionary dandies of the literary professional associations, who are nostalgic for the Soviet Union, but not authors.

As for me personally, I don't tend to overestimate my own impact on people's minds. I think in general that my measure of responsibility as a person who works with language and communicates with the audience through language is to articulate mood and meaning. It must be made clear that public support for a fratricidal, bloody, predatory war is based

primarily on lies. You have to remind people that no one has erased the truth – it still exists.

Regardless of the outcome, what lies ahead for Russia after the war?

I fear that what Putin has done has set mechanisms in motion that have opened up apocalyptic scenarios for the country. Military operations in the middle of cities, executions of civilians, genocide, war crimes, and even civil wars are all taboos. The majority of those dying on both sides speak Russian. This is not a conflict with imaginary Nazis, but a post-imperial civil war over the right to determine how the future of Russia and the post-Soviet space is to be controlled. The fact that a state is disintegrating and we are biting off part of it, while at the same time hostilities could also take place on our territory and be transferred to the territory of Crimea, actually removes all taboos on issues of the territory of Russia itself. Russia is violating the territorial integrity of its long-time ally, actually a co-founder of our empire, thereby legitimising mirror-image reactions. I fear that in the long run this may lead to the disintegration of Russia itself. And this was completely unthinkable before the war began.

This interview was conducted by Ruslan Suleymanov and Roland Bathon.



Dmitry Glukhovsky
Moscow

Dmitry Glukhovsky is one of the leading contemporary Russian authors. He gained international recognition primarily through his dystopian book series Metro 2033.