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Putin's Invasion of Ukraine Has Sparked Anti-War Protests in Russia. They Could Be His Undoing.

As Russian people take to the streets to protest against the invasion of Ukraine, they are feeding a rising domestic political standoff. Putin's legitimacy could well be at stake as the Kremlin opts for its repressive response to dissent.

The Russo-Ukrainian Shared History Myth (and its impact on foreign policy)

In 2016 Putin unveiled a statue of St Vladimir – the medieval ruler of the Kievan Rus' credited with bringing Christianity to the region and [claimed by both Russia and Ukraine](#) as founding father of their nations.

Emphasising a supposed shared history has been a common feature of Putin's rhetoric on Ukraine. The belief in a special relationship between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus has guided Russian foreign policy, as in the 2014 annexation of Crimea and ongoing involvement in Belarus.

Since the Tsars ruled Russia, a patronising paternalistic idea of Ukraine as Little Russia has informed policy and encouraged the crushing of Ukrainian language and culture in favour of Russification.

This belief still pervades the Kremlin; in a 2021 [essay](#), Putin shared his views of the "Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" as "one people divided artificially by borders and outsiders."

This imperialist view of 'historical Russia' (one that ignores the separate history of Ukraine) will continue to guide Russian foreign policy - it is the basis of the worldview of its leaders. Putin's belief that the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 represented the "[disintegration of historical Russia](#)" perhaps signals his intentions.

But, as Putin should be aware, we are not living in the past.

The contrast between public reaction in Russia to military action in Ukraine in 2014 and now in 2022 highlights that the present will not necessarily resemble the past.

Protests and Popularity Ratings

Despite the threats from Russia's security forces, and the historic examples of horrific treatment of protestors, thousands took their anti-war statements to the streets as Russia invaded Ukraine on 24th February 2022. Over 1,800 of these war protestors across 53 cities were [arrested](#) in the first two days of the protest.

Of course, protest is not a new phenomenon in Russia. Nor is the courage of these protestors in the face of arrest and punitive measures. But protests in the history of Putin's Russia have not been commonplace.

Perhaps this has now changed.

In comparison with the annexation of Crimea eight years ago, the anti-war protests in 2022 have been immediate, involving highly public figures, and vividly displayed (and partially organised) on social media.

Equally, this protest is not an isolated moment of dissent. In the past decade, there has been a [rise in the number and scale of protests](#) (minus the Covid-19 period of restrictions on gatherings). In

particular, 2020 saw the escalation of an anti-corruption movement, with [protests over the arrest of Alexei Navalny](#).

Equally, protests erupted over the arrest of Governor Sergei Furgal (who won his election in Khabarovsk against a Putin-backed candidate) and were taken up across the country. Soon the protests expanded to [other issues](#), including authoritarianism in Belarus, the entrenched status quo in Russia, and the environment.

Arguments that these recent protests have avoided directly blaming Putin for Russia's problems are undermined by the [protests at the further entrenchment of Putin's power](#) as the constitution was altered in 2020 to allow Putin to run for further presidential terms.

This is not to argue that any single protest, whether it is anti-Putin or anti-war, could topple the Putin government. Indeed, the 2022 anti-war protests show "[little evidence of a broader groundswell of opposition](#)" and Putin's propaganda machine continues to churn out images of peace in Ukraine and block 'unofficial' reports.

But as protests become more commonplace in Putin's Russia, the regime will need to find another way to deal with them, as arrests are shown to be a cause of protests as much as they are a consequence. The courage of Russian protestors is on the rise.

The Power of Social Media

The ability of social media to impact protests in Russia is currently being tested.

The question of social media's ability to spread the truth of events in Ukraine, when Twitter and, more recently, Facebook are under restrictions in Russia for spreading "[false information](#)", is to be answered.

The [use of social media by protestors and celebrities](#) has increased the visibility of mainstream opposition. It is unusual to see open opposition from public figures, from pop stars and a footballer to journalists and a TV comedian, several of whom are employed by the state.

Equally unusual is the use of social media to protest by family members of the wealthy and influential, including the daughters of Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov and Boris Yeltsin. The [daughter of Roman Abramovich](#) openly called out the "successful lie of Kremlin's propaganda...that most Russians stand with Putin".

The power of social media to inspire and organise protests in Russia is a relatively new phenomenon which will continue to have an impact throughout the 2022 anti-war protests and beyond.

Russia's Political Future?

Protests, fuelled by the disconnect between the people and the actions of a government intent on recreating an imperialistic past and suppressing all opposition, could be Putin's eventual undoing.

The 2022 anti-war protests are a case in point. Peace still seems unlikely, yet it is clear that [war enthusiasm is drying up](#). The Kremlin will continue to find inspiring enthusiasm for what is already being called the "[war without a cause](#)" difficult.

Dmitry [Muratov](#) (editor of *Novaya Gazeta*, a publication defying government censorship) points out that the memory of the Second World War and the fact that many Russians have relatives in Ukraine "holds back even the most rabid supporters of the current leadership".

Equally, the [economic price](#) which continued war against Ukraine will extract will cause suffering and embargoes will threaten access to imported modern conveniences in Russia. It seems likely that anti-war protests are not at an end.

As [protestors in Russia call for more people to take to the streets](#), the question remains about whether protests are increasing for the long term, and what the impact of this will be. For how long can the Kremlin fall back on its repression over reform strategy until the cycle of protest and repression comes to a revolutionary end?

For the present, the transformation from 'No to War' to 'No to Putin' seems a stretch. Protests may be the key to toppling the Putin regime, but this is a long-term trend.

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