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**Russia**

# **“Everything is falling apart. Because of Putin's aggression!”**

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**Kirill Buketov, today 52 years old, was a factory worker and then became a history teacher. He is now in Geneva as a trade unionist. After the fall of the Soviet Union, he participated in the creation of independent trade unions in Russia. There was an atmosphere of renewal and hope. But today, he declares: “All the achievements of our civilization are collapsing.” He was interviewed by Jonas Komposch.**

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**You are among those Russians that actively oppose the war. What does it feel like when the Ukrainian ambassador to Germany says, “All Russians are now our enemies”?**

It hurts. Today, all Russians feel that all our culture and all the achievements of our civilization are collapsing. Everything is falling apart. Because of Putin's aggression! It's terrible to have to witness that. But I fully understand the anger of the Ukrainians. And yet, we can only stop this war together.

**You were originally a history teacher. How do you explain this war?**

This is typically the reaction of a colonial empire that falls apart. Every empire responds with violence when its colonies seek to liberate themselves. Take France's Algerian war. Or Britain's war against the Indian independence movement – two violent responses to the desire for self-determination. And unfortunately, imperialist wars have always started with significant support among the population of the colonial empires.

**So, you were expecting a war?**

No, this scenario just seemed too terrible to me. Almost no one saw it coming. But someone predicted war as early as 2014: Boris Nemtsov, the opposition leader who led the 2014 peace protests. In Russia at the time, millions of people protested against the annexation of Crimea and the camouflaged intervention in Donbass. The streets were full of Ukrainian flags. Then they had Nemtsov murdered in the street. Poisonings of opponents followed, non-governmental organizations were prosecuted as “foreign agents”, independent media were harassed, critics of the system forced into exile, political prisoners tortured. Recently, the state even banned the world-famous human rights organization, Memorial. The invasion of Ukraine followed two weeks later.

**Something we don't understand: why does the big Russian trade union federation FNPR support the attack on Ukraine?**

Because the federation is an integral part of Putin's imperial project! All the mass demonstrations that the Kremlin needs for its propaganda are organized by the FNPR. Sometimes the ruling United Russia party, of which all FNPR leaders are now members, helps out. In 2012, Putin thanked it for these services by attending the Moscow trade union parade on May 1.

**But the unions have nothing to gain from the war!**

Of course not, the Russian working population is already suffering the economic consequences. And it's going to get

even worse.

### **So, the FNPR is corrupt?**

Yes, and has been since 2008. Then workers at the Ford factories near St. Petersburg went on strike. It was the first major strike movement for wage increases after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. And it was a success! That is why a period of repression began. The state wanted to put the unions back under its control. Attacks were perpetrated against strike leaders, the secret services attacked trade unions, so much so that the head of the FNPR, Michael Schmakov, made a deal: the union's leaders must now work to prevent strikes. In return, they probably gained easier access to workplaces to recruit members. But it's not just the fact that the FNPR has sold out. Schmakov and others are personally convinced that the war against Ukraine is just.

### **Why are you so sure?**

Schmakov's statements are increasingly fanatical. Recently, I spoke with a friend from the DGB, he was quite shocked. Because he had just called Schmakov. He wanted to convince him that the unions could not support wars. And that the FNPR should at least take a stand for a ceasefire. “No way!” Schmakov apparently shouted in the handset.

### **And didn't you once work for this same Schmakov?**

In the Russian trade unions, in the early 1990s, a process of renewal began. Many wanted to replace the sclerotic bureaucracies of the Soviet era with democratic structures. The leader of this reform movement was Michael Schmakov. He really had great persuasive power and was considered, in the West too, as the great hope. In 1993, he became president of the FNPR. At the time, I had already participated in the creation of the independent trade union information network KAS-KOR. We thus succeeded in countering state disinformation against major miners' strikes. Schmakov liked this and he brought me to the newspaper of the Solidarnost federation in 1994.

### **Today, this newspaper makes war propaganda ...**

At the time, it was still a progressive newspaper! And for freedom of expression, it was the best time we've ever known. With our orientation, I increased the circulation from 1,000 to 30,000 copies in three years.

### **So, you had to start from almost nothing?**

There was no trade union tradition at all! Stalinism had eliminated the trade union movement - physically. When, as a young mason, I participated in the new workers' movement at the time of *perestroika* [\[1\]](#), we did not find any former trade unionist who could have passed on their experience to us. Moreover, this was not the case in the other countries of the Eastern bloc. A certain tradition had survived there.

### **Already at the time, many employees were clearly suspicious of the FNPR. Why?**

The FNPR was the heir to the Soviet organizations that supervised the workers. They were neither representative nor democratic organisations, so they were not real trade unions. Rather, they were apparatuses focused on the distribution of social services and financial aid, to prevent their members from starving to death. At the same time, these organizations had a function of ideological control. They were to prevent any independent initiative by workers.

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The FNPR undertook to reform these structures, but in many places encountered resistance from the privileged who benefited from them. Some workers, especially among sailors, miners and transport workers, therefore, did not believe in this reform undertaking. They certainly wished Schmakov success but preferred to found their own unions.

**You mean the trade unions of the Russian Confederation of Labour (KTR), the organisation that is now courageously opposing the war?**

Exactly. But these unions remained divided for a long time. On the one hand, there was the Russian Confederation of Labour and on the other hand the All-Russian Confederation of Labour. It was very confusing. It was only under the effect of increasing repression that the federations merged in 2009. Today, many members of the KTR are under great pressure. Recently, for example, 5,000 teachers publicly stated that they do not want to make war propaganda in their schools. They now face violent repression.

**And the FNPR is content to overlook this?**

Quite the contrary. Independent trade unions have long been a thorn in the side of the FNPR. That is why Schmakov instructed his men to take up leadership positions in global trade union federations. They can thus block all applications for membership by independent federations. The fact that genuine unions now have problems is therefore entirely in his interest.

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[1] The process of “restructuring” from 1986 under Mikhail Gorbachev.