

Why Russians Long for the Soviet Union

By [Victor Davidoff](#)

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If you read Russian news and follow Internet debates, you'd think that Russia was on the verge of civil war if you didn't know better. Like in other civil wars, the front line runs between colleagues, friends and even family members. The division is over the annexation of Crimea and attitudes toward Ukraine.

"Old friends break off relations, children have stopped talking to their parents, and I've even heard about divorces. It is insane," the prominent psychologist Lyudmila Petranovskaya [wrote](#) on her LiveJournal blog.

For many Russians, particularly for those who were born after the Soviet collapse, the Soviet Union is just a mythical golden age of a great power that could provide stability to several generations.

President Vladimir Putin set the aggressive tone of the debate in his Crimea speech two weeks ago by calling the new Ukrainian authorities "neo-Nazis and Russophobes." Moreover, he called Russians who are opposed to the annexation "national traitors," a term that Hitler notably used against those who disagreed with him. His words were instantly echoed in official mass media and pro-Kremlin blogs.

In the State Duma, a group of legislators accused Ilya Ponomarev, the only deputy who voted against the annexation of Crimea, of "treason" and demanded that he be stripped of this mandate.

The Crimean front line crossed the usual party divisions. Apparently, Russia only has two parties: the party of war and the party of peace. The popular, once-liberal municipal deputy Yelena Tkach shocked many supporters when she demanded that the Constitution be amended to allow a new law to punish "national traitors" by stripping them of their citizenship. Meanwhile, whistleblower Alexei Navalny, who many consider to be a nationalist, came out squarely against the annexation of Crimea and supported Western sanctions against Putin's inner circle.

Left-wing leaders vociferously criticized the "oligarchic regime" one day and supported it wholeheartedly the next. Even Sergei Udaltsov, the Left Front leader on trial for charges that he organized riots in 2012, [wrote](#) an appeal to Ukrainians supporting the Kremlin plan for self-determination in eastern Ukraine.

"I was born in the Soviet Union," wrote Udaltsov on his movement's website, "and it will always be my homeland. Those who destroyed it and their supporters today will always be my political opponents. The rebirth of the Soviet Union in new forms is necessary, crucial and urgent."

Komsomolskaya Pravda journalist Ulyana Skoibeda, whose claim to fame is the scandal last year when she regretted that the ancestors of today's Jewish opposition activists hadn't been killed by the Nazis, [was ecstatic](#) over the Crimean annexation.

"As I listened to Putin's speech about Crimea, I hugged my child close and said, 'Look, son. You will remember this for the rest of your life,'" Skoibeda wrote. "Entering a conflict with the whole world to defend your rights and interests — that is the U.S.S.R. And being willing to live in poverty — that is also the Soviet Union. So what if Russia has been kicked out of the Group of Eight? The Soviet Union always lived in isolation. My homeland is back."

A large swath of the Russian population shares Skoibeda's views. Almost everyone who supports using force against Ukraine sees it primarily as a path to resurrecting the Soviet Union. This may be explained by the fact that the majority of these people never lived in the U.S.S.R. and do not remember it. For them, it is just a mythical golden age of a great power that could provide stability to several generations of Russians.

Soviet dissident Valeriya Novodvorskaya [responded](#) to them on the site Grani.ru, which is now officially blocked by the government but still available to Internet users who can access the site using simple, evasive measures. "Supporters of Putin have chosen the Soviet Union. So let us go back to 1990, when you could only buy baloney in Moscow and get butter by ration card — 200 grams per month — a time when there were no boutiques, no iPhones, no chic

cafes or foreign cars."

Of course, Novodvorskaya also remembers the repressions of the Soviet period; she was jailed many times for his dissident activities. But for many people, those repressions are part of the Soviet allure. Deputies in the Moscow Duma are planning to send the State Duma a draft law that would punish authors of blog posts critical of the annexation of Crimea for "extremism." Combined with the draft law in the State Duma on building special political prisons for terrorists and "extremists," this law would certainly bring Russia dangerously close to the "evil empire."

Despite all this, attitudes toward Ukraine are not so simple. Although according to a Levada Center [survey](#), 86 percent of the respondents welcomed Crimea's "voluntary rejoining" Russia — the Kremlin's favorite euphemism for "annexation" — only 24 percent supported Russian troops in other regions of Ukraine. Moreover, 83 percent said they were concerned about a military [conflict](#) with Ukraine.

Perhaps that rational concern is keeping Russian tanks out of Donetsk, Lugansk and Kharkiv. Despite the efforts of official propaganda to incite hatred for Ukrainians, Russians have lived with them for too long and there are too many inter-family ties to consider each other enemies.

One of the supporters of the party of peace, veteran rock star Andrei Makarevich, wrote on his Facebook page: "When the national psychosis ends, we will all recall that Ukraine is our neighbor and closest relative, that we were friends just yesterday. And we will realize who made us fight. It was not Ukraine, and it was not the U.S. Guess who it was?"

Today only a few Russians are thinking about that question. But when the period of blindness ends, the answer will be clear to everyone.

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