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# Meet the Political Blogger Speaking to Young, Anti-War Russians. His Views Might Surprise You.

By Moscow Times Reporter

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**Alexander Shtefanov / Instagram**

Blogger Alexander Shtefanov rose to fame in 2023 after filming an anti-war documentary from occupied Mariupol called "Ordinary Denazification." He was designated as a "foreign agent" and expelled from university shortly after.

Despite the risk of prosecution, he stayed in Russia and would regularly debate supporters of the war. It was only in 2024, after receiving threats from pro-war activists, that he was forced to move abroad.

He has since become a popular voice for young Russians interested in politics, with over 500,000 YouTube subscribers and millions of views on his documentaries about the war in eastern Ukraine that started in 2014, the Maidan Revolution and other political and historical

topics.

Unlike many other exiled anti-war Russian opposition figures, he argues that Crimea should remain part of Russia and that the 2014 annexation reflected the will of local residents, even though the referendum took place under Russian occupation and was not recognized internationally.

He also sympathizes with Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine and says that Kyiv could relinquish the Donbas region to end the war, despite polls on Ukrainians' support for the potential handover of the Donbas region in exchange for peace being mixed.

Shtefanov spoke to The Moscow Times about how he sees a just end to the war in Ukraine and whether young Russians are tired of the Russian opposition's current leadership.

**MT: You are on Russia's list of foreign agents as well as the Myrotvorets list, which is an unofficial list of people seen as enemies of Ukraine. What do both sides dislike about you?**

**AS:** I am on Russia's list of foreign agents because I oppose the war and criticize the Russian government, Putin and his system. I don't like the war he is waging; I believe it is destructive for Russia.

I am on the Myrotvorets list because I do not take a pro-Ukrainian stance. Yes, I criticize the war and the Russian authorities. But by criticizing the Russian authorities, I am not necessarily supporting the Ukrainian authorities. In my speeches, I have also criticized the Ukrainian government and do not believe that the 1991 border is an appropriate solution to this conflict.

**What is wrong with the 1991 borders?**

Returning to the 1991 border means that, without asking the local residents, we simply give all these territories to Ukraine and submit to Ukrainian law. At the same time, I have doubts that the people of Crimea support Ukraine and its return.

**What is your criticism of the Ukrainian authorities?**

In 2022, Zelensky adopted an uncompromising approach because he was confident that he could win the war on the battlefield. He believed the promises of his Western partners, believing they would give him as many weapons as he needed to defeat the Russian army. I think this strategy has been a complete failure. Zelensky should have attempted a peaceful settlement while Russia was still afraid that it might fail on the battlefield.

Another reason to criticize the Zelensky administration is the recent corruption scandal, which revealed some very unpleasant facts about the Ukrainian president.

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**How did you feel during the annexation of Crimea in 2014?**

I was 15. Overall, I felt positive about it. I saw it as an expression of the will of the Crimean people. Over time, my view of these events became more complex, more ambiguous.

**Should Russia have annexed Crimea?**

If I had to make that choice now, I would be against it. Annexing another country's territory is a very dangerous move. It is dangerous for the local population and dangerous for both countries. It risks war.

It seems to me that Crimea's presence as part of Ukraine had a kind of healing effect on the country. It forced Ukrainian politicians to be more moderate, because they had to take the 2.5 million pro-Russian voters in Crimea into account. I think that if Russia wanted to influence all of Ukraine, it was in its interests for Crimea to remain part of Ukraine.

**You entered Mariupol from the Russian side and shot an anti-war film. How did you manage that?**

I met some volunteers who were going there with humanitarian aid, and I went with them.

As far as I know, it's even easier to get there now than it was then. Now you don't even need to go through all the red tape with the volunteers. Mariupol is now a city deep in the rear, and you can get there without any particular problems — you can drive there from the Russian side, for example.

**Did the volunteers know about your anti-war stance?**

I didn't articulate my position directly. But I suspect that some of them may have known about it from my YouTube videos. But they needed people, so I went as an assistant.

**Weren't you afraid to stay in Russia after the documentary was released? The authorities could have brought a criminal case against you for spreading 'fakes' about the army or 'discrediting' the army.**

They could have, but luckily they didn't. I was scared for a while. I received threats. But I didn't want to leave.

**What do you remember about Mariupol?**

I went there twice, at the end of 2022 and in the summer of 2023. Back then, it was just a pile of ruins, among which tens of thousands of people were wandering around in confusion.

Things in Mariupol are better now. Some houses have been rebuilt, and some new ones have been constructed. Russia is obviously investing a lot of money there. They want to show it off. I spoke to dozens of people in Mariupol and other cities in the so-called Donetsk People's Republic.

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**You argue that the war must end immediately on any terms, most likely by freezing the conflict. Given the latest news about the Trump administration's peace plan, do you think Ukraine should give the Donbas to Putin for the sake of peace?**

Ukraine of course has no interest in giving up parts of itself. Ukraine's leadership will naturally seek to avoid complying with such demands [to give up part of its territory in exchange for a truce].

But the question is: do ordinary Ukrainians want this? It seems that for many Ukrainians, the option of handing over parts of the Donbas to Putin for the sake of peace already seems quite acceptable.

However, they do not believe that this would lead to lasting peace. If Ukrainians were confident that the war would definitely not resume if the Donbas were handed over to Russia, they would agree to it. Because it would be worth it.

But they have no such guarantee. Therefore, it is natural that the demands to give the Donbas to Putin seem unacceptable and are unlikely to be met by the Ukrainian leadership.

I think this peace plan will be another fiasco.

**And what do you think should happen with the territories that are currently occupied or claimed by Russia?**

Ideally, a series of fair referendums should be held so that people can vote on whether to join Russia or Ukraine. But this is simply impossible in today's reality.

I don't know what should happen. Freezing the conflict along the current lines seems like the best option. In a more ideal scenario, perhaps we would consider holding referendums under international observation, allowing civilians who fled to escape the war to return.

However, another reason why this is unfeasible is that tens of thousands of people have nowhere to return to. Entire cities in Donbas have been reduced to rubble. How could we possibly gather all of Avdiivka's pre-war residents and allow them to vote? How many of them would want to go back?

It's all terra incognita.

**Your opponents from another part of the anti-war opposition argue that Putin must be defeated now, or else there will be a new war in a few years. You disagree with this. Why?**

It is simply unclear what victory over Putin means. How realistic is it? What does this future entail? Does it include the 1991 borders? Or the borders prior to February 24, 2022? Does it mean a regime change in Russia or not?

Similarly, it is unclear what it means to prevent Putin from winning. At what point can we say that Putin has lost?

The meaning of victory over Putin is unclear, as is the likelihood of it occurring and of a recurrence of war in either case.

In this scenario, it seems ethically correct to choose the quickest end to the war.

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**You also oppose paying reparations to Ukraine. Why?**

The idea of reparations is simply unrealistic. It is irrelevant. It is impossible to force Russia to pay them. Calls by the anti-war opposition for reparations to Ukraine are counterproductive. They harm the opposition figures themselves and discredit the anti-war movement within Russian society. For ordinary Russians, the issue is just a scare tactic created by state propaganda. When opposition speakers call for reparations, they are merely echoing Russian propaganda.

Perhaps in a few decades, the issue of reparations could be seriously discussed. But right now, it is pointless.

**Your views differ from what we might call the 'mainstream' of the exiled anti-war opposition. At the same time, you seem to be popular, especially with Gen Z. Does this mean that young Russians are disappointed in the old faces of the Russian opposition?**

Of course, there is enormous disappointment in the old guard of the Russian opposition, and this is understandable. They were forced out of the country. Because of this, opposition politics has largely moved to YouTube and social media.

This is one of the reasons why Maxim Katz has become one of the most influential opposition politicians, although many older Russian opposition politicians previously did not want anything to do with him.

He became one of the most influential opposition figures simply by setting up content production on his YouTube channel. It's the same story with me.

This made me visible and gained me popularity. In a situation where there is no public politics in Russia outside of YouTube, outside of Telegram, outside of social media, content creators come to the fore.

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