

Gilbert Doctorow: Dispatches on the Situation in Russia as Ukraine War Broadens its Scope

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[Gilbert Doctorow](#)

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RT 'Cross Talk' on what the completed referendums signify

Panel discussion of the referendums and coming reintegration into Russia of the Donbas, Kherson and Zaporozhie

I take pleasure in sharing the link to the just posted *Cross Talk* show hosted by Peter Lavelle and with the participation of the widely read journalist Pepe Escobar.

[September 29, 2022](#)

Draft evasion in today's Russia

Draft evasion, escalation of military operations and other highly topical subjects in today's Russia

My good friend and "comrade in arms" in the anti-war community, Ray McGovern, yesterday published an article on how *The New York Times* is stoking the war in Ukraine and goading the Biden administration to be ever more aggressive and irresponsible. Ray went on to remind us of the ignominious role played by *NYT* news reporters and their editorial board in promoting the Vietnam War, from the Tonkin Gulf Resolution that heralded the start of the real US engagement to the bitter end, all without a word of apology or regret in later years.

As a member of the Vietnam War generation in the USA, mention of that war brings up for me two words of great importance in the Russia that I see around me on this three week visit to St Petersburg: draft evasion and escalation.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the "partial mobilization" that was announced by the Kremlin in the past week is the number one item of news and discussion in the social networks here as well as on radio and television broadcasting. As I mentioned a day ago in my coverage of the national radio station *Business FM*, there is extensive examination on air of the implications of the call-up to military service for business and society in general.

A great deal of attention is directed at exemptions from service for various categories of the population, primarily, by relevance of their work to national defense and technological sovereignty. In this regard the most widely discussed industry is IT. The public is being told that software programmers are absolutely needed in their present workplaces to further the import substitution program. But does that extend to individuals and companies developing software for video games? And what about the owners-managers,

the finance directors, the legal department heads of IT companies that do serve the defense industry and/or technology more broadly? As we hear on air, these other members of staff are also critical to the viability of the companies and so to the national interest. Without them the companies in question just fold.

Another related issue widely covered in the media here is draft evasion, in particular, by those leaving the country clandestinely by plane, by private car across the land frontiers, and even by electric scooters which move straight to the head of the queues at the border crossings. The Georgian border is now being closed by authorities in Tbilisi. The border with Kazakhstan is being closed down to auto traffic. But there is still the Finnish border, where 7 hour lines are forming.

Media reporting tells us that some 300,000 Russian males eligible for call-up, which now extends to age 55, have already fled the country. The significance of that number, if it is in fact reliable, depends on who these draft dodgers are: if they are skilled and experienced, say in computer programming and communications, then the loss is significant; if they are hair dressers and farm hands, then the loss of 300,000 in a population of 145 million is a drop in the bucket.

Those who are departing to evade the call-up are being denounced as "rats" by socially prominent personalities before the radio and television microphones. Ordinary women interviewed on the streets of Moscow or other multi-million cities across Russia tell members of the opposite sex to "be men" and do their duty.

I have no doubt that the European elites shudder at this very traditional appeal to sexist stereotypes that underlie national defense and patriotism. But such appeals definitely have resonance in Russia today. My 50-year old main taxi

driver, infantry captain in the reserves, has little doubt he will be called up, if not in this first "partial" mobilization then in the general mobilization that is sure to follow once Russia declares war on Ukraine, which may be within the coming two weeks. And what does he say about it? "I already have the best years of my life behind me. I am ready to go and, if necessary, to die for my country." Verbatim and without a hint of jingoism. It sounds a bit like the charming "my country write [sic] or wrong" that my grandfather Max, who emigrated to the U.S. from the Russian Empire in about 1910, wrote to me in the 1960s. Both expressions were heartfelt and merit respect.

In my description of how Business FM covers the impact of the mobilization on society and also the issue of lines at the borders, I said the broadcaster was neither pro-Putin, nor anti-Putin, but that is not entirely true. By its nature, such coverage provides useful information to draft dodgers, meaning the Opposition. I mention this to underline the fact that despite the heightened controls on society that the war has brought with it, Russian media are still often honest, transparent and useful in ways that your average Russia-basher in the West cannot conceive.

On the question of escalation, there is less public discussion but a lot of grumbling in the kitchens of ordinary folk that the war is proceeding much too slowly, that Russia should apply the devastating conventional weapons at its disposal to put an end to the fighting one-two-three. The hard-line patriots are calling for Defense Minister Shoigu, who in fact never served in the armed forces, to be replaced by someone with "balls," like Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechnya Republic. Kadyrov sent his forces to the Donbas, where they spearheaded the conquest of Mariupol and are destroying the enemy now by tough urban warfare in other Donbas settlements

War by escalation was the policy which the Kennedy brain trust of the "the best and the brightest" implemented in Vietnam.

From a modest expeditionary force, it led finally to the deployment of more than 600,000 troops in Vietnam and to vastly destructive bombing of that country and neighboring Laos and Cambodia. But to no avail. This seemingly rational doctrine was overturned when Nixon came to power and introduced the “madman” leader guise by his Christmas bombing of Hanoi in 1972. The U.S. then projected the image of a dangerous foe ready to inflict all manner of atrocities on the enemy, and some have argued this helped bring the North to the negotiating table. Regrettably, this approach to war seems not to have caught the attention of Mr. Putin’s inner circle of advisers. I recommend it to them.

But perhaps I am mistaken. Perhaps the mobilization is just a cover, suggesting continuation of the war under its present method of attrition, while de facto preparing the way for a change of tactics to destruction of the Ukrainian command and control at the Ministry of Defense and destruction of the civilian decision making instances by precision bombing in Kiev using unstoppable hypersonic missiles for which the latest air defense installations coming from the USA are useless. Perhaps the mobilization is merely to have ready boots on the ground to occupy and hold the Ukraine following the decapitation of its civilian and military leadership. Time will tell.

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News from the home front: Russia under conditions of partial mobilization

In recent articles I have made frequent references to the political talk shows on Russian state television as an invaluable source of information about the thinking of the chattering classes and, in particular of social and political elites close to the Kremlin. Even an acerbic academic from Rhode Island who left a nasty comment on my site about the value of my latest article on the shift from ‘special military

operation' to open war remarked in his closing sentence that he intends to follow more closely the *Evening with Vladimir Solovyov* program, especially when RT director Simonyan appears as a panelist. So I think I have made my point about television fairly convincingly.

In today's essay, I want to direct attention first to Russian radio, in particular commenting on the national broadcaster "Business FM" which is based in Moscow but has national coverage and puts on air reports from all around this vast country that are of interest not only to stock brokers but to the general public. I listen to them daily over breakfast and their slogan "Radio not in words but in facts" is well justified by the originality of their news management. Politics and politicians are not on their agenda. The impact of new laws, regulations and government programs on the population and especially on the business community is their main interest. Sales figures, company profits, challenges in recruiting and keeping personnel: all of these subjects are dealt with by presentation of concrete facts from concrete companies and localities, and the result is a very informative mosaic. These very serious news items are leavened by humor in their feature sketches under such categories as "Деньги к деньгам," which may be loosely translated as "Money flows to those with money."

Business FM offers little slices of life which tell a big story, such as the remark yesterday that in the last couple of months Russians' purchases of tranquillizers went up by 15% and such sales are 30% above the level of a year ago. That is a pretty good indicator of the nervousness of the general population.

Then there has been reporting from Siberian and other provincial cities regarding how the call-up of reservists is being conducted and in particular how this affects businesses which are losing highly capable personnel for whom they will have to reserve their jobs in the same way they must keep on

hold the posts of women who go out on maternity leave.

Another very interesting look at the home front is the broadcaster's interviews of Russians who are crossing the land borders to Finland – where there is now a waiting time of more than three hours each on the Russian and Finnish border control points. The journalists go into the details of whether those departing are being asked about their military status, about their reasons for leaving, etc.

Business FM has also reported on the impact of Russians leaving to avoid the draft on the apartment rental prices in their key destinations such as Istanbul and Tbilisi. The impact appears to be negligible.

Finally, I heard this morning a fascinating set of interviews with the leaders of voluntary organizations in Moscow working to provide the military forces with materiel that is not available in sufficient supply out in the field because of mismanagement in the defense hierarchy. These shortages include headgear and body armor, warm clothing, and more.

All of the above is not pro-Putin or anti-Putin but a realistic composite picture of life in the home front in times of mobilization.

Now I propose to switch over to anecdotal but also telling details from my own experience living in Petersburg for the past couple of weeks. I can point first to the dramatic decision earlier today of the prospective Buyer of our dacha in the south of Petersburg, already under contract of deposit, to suspend the deal, first in the hope of squeezing a further discount from us due to post-mobilization uncertainties and then with demand for more time to see the fall-out of the referendums in Donbas. Yes, ordinary Russian business women, like our fairly shrewd Buyer, are spending sleepless nights worrying whether in these turbulent times it is better to own bricks or to have liquid cash in rubles under the pillow. But

such uncertainties and contradictions have always existed. As an argument that it is always 'the best of times and the worst of times,' I think of the French sterling silver forks and knives bearing hallmarks from 1791 or so that we bought in antique booths in the Brussels weekend market on the Sablon: even in the midst of Revolution some folks were ordering silver sets for newlyweds.

My experience as a shopper in supermarkets in the economy, middle class and luxury ranges reveals changes from what I have reported several months ago. "ПРОМ УПАК" is replacing Sweden's Tetra Pak on milk and other liquid foodstuffs. The QR code is replacing the strip codes on every variety of store products. I assume that is due to some licensing issue.

French, Spanish and Italian wines are present on store shelves in much reduced offerings, as are wines from even "friendly" countries like Chile. Surprisingly, friendly South Africa has dropped out of the wine market, perhaps over difficulties with payment. Meanwhile Russian sourced wines from the Krasnodar region and the Crimea now take up 80% or more of shelf space. To be sure, in luxury shops, the Russian wines can be excellent, but at prices well above the European peers they replace, and the Russian wines in economy and middle class stores can be of highly variable quality for the same price.

The owner of a high-end wine shop on Vasilevsky Ostrov told me that he continues to receive shipments of top level chateau wines from France, and some are coming via third countries including China. But there is no way of knowing how long this will continue. He has hedged his bets by stocking up on the priciest and most sought after wines from the Russian south.

Otherwise, the assortment and pricing of meats, poultry, fruits and vegetables in the Russian stores at all market levels are unchanged from what they were some months ago.

A visit to the city's most prestigious shopping center on Nevsky Prospekt where the anchor store was and still remains the Finnish retailer Stockmann's provided further insights into the way the home front is adapting to the sanctions and to the departure of foreign companies from this market.

At the Food Court on the 4th floor, I enjoyed a couple of hamburgers in McDonald's replacement as fast food operator "Вкусно – и точка" (Tasty – period). Quality and price were both unchanged. Then on the ground floor I followed up with a visit to the Starbucks replacement, which is named "Star Coffee." All the design elements remain the same as before and my coffee Americano was excellent.

All the design elements of the Apple store just opposite Star Coffee also are unchanged. To be sure, the store legend "Apple Reseller" now reads "Premium Reseller." The product assortment seems to be unchanged. I asked about the i-phone 14 and was told that it is available by advance order and will be arriving in shop as from the first week of October. The price for the model on offer is a stunning 238,000 rubles, which comes to about 4,000 euros.

Finally, a personal observation about the exodus across the Finnish border. Yesterday, I tried to book tickets for our departure by bus from Petersburg to Helsinki. All seats on all buses of the two competing bus operators were sold out until October 6th, five days later than we had planned to leave. To be sure, there are only five or six buses making this trip each day, and each has only 50 seats. In fact the great majority of those crossing the border are doing so in their private cars. They are the ones suffering the seven hours of lost time spent in queues and in individual processing. Buses such as we will be using go to the head of the line and are typically processed within an hour or an hour and a half, which is a nuisance but not yet a misery.

From 'special military operation' to open war

From 'special military operation' to open war: significance of the referendums in Donbas, Kherson and Zaporozhie

The televised speech yesterday morning by Vladimir Putin and the follow-up remarks by his Minister of Defense Shoigu announcing the partial mobilization of Russia's army reserves to add a total of 300,000 men to the military campaign in Ukraine have been widely reported in the Western press. Plans to hold referendums on accession to the Russian Federation in the Donbas republics this weekend and also in the Kherson and Zaporozhie oblasts in the very near future also were reported by the Western press. However, as is very commonly the case, the interrelationship of these two developments has not been seen, or, if seen, has not been shared with the general public. Since precisely this interrelationship has been highlighted on Russian state television talk shows these past two days, I use this opportunity to bring to my readership the key facts on what turn the ongoing conflict in Ukraine will now take and an updated view of when it will end and with what results.

The very idea of referendums in the Donbas has been ridiculed by mainstream media in the United States and Europe. They are denounced as 'sham' and we are told that the results will not be recognized. In fact, the Kremlin does not at all care whether the results are recognized as valid in the West. Their logic lies elsewhere. As for the Russian public, the only critical remark about the referendums has been about the timing, with even some patriotic folks saying openly that it is too early to hold the vote given that the Donetsk People's Republic, the Zaporozhie and Kherson oblasts have not yet been fully 'liberated.' Here too, the logic of these votes lies elsewhere.

It is a foregone conclusion that the Donbas republics and other territories of Ukraine now under Russian occupation will

vote to join the Russian Federation. In the case of Donetsk and Lugansk, it was only under pressure from Moscow that their 2014 referendums were about declaring sovereignty and not about becoming part of Russia. Such annexation or merger was not welcomed by the Kremlin back then because Russia was not ready to face the expected massive economic, political and military attack from the West which would have followed. Today, Moscow is more than ready: indeed it has survived very well all the economic sanctions imposed by the West from even before 24 February as well as the ever growing supply to Ukraine of military materiel and 'advisers' from the NATO countries.

The vote over joining Russia will likely hit 90% or more in favor. What will immediately follow on the Russian side is also perfectly clear: within hours of the declaration of referendum results, the Russian State Duma will pass a bill on 'reunification' of these territories with Russia and within a day or so, it will be approved by the upper chamber of parliament and immediately thereafter the bill will be signed into law by President Putin.

Looking past his service as a KGB intelligence operative, which is all that Western "Russia specialists" go on about endlessly in their articles and books, let us also remember Vladimir Putin's law degree. As President, he has systematically stayed within domestic and international law. He will do so now. Unlike his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin has not ruled by presidential decree; he has ruled by laws promulgated by a bicameral parliament constituted from several parties. He has ruled in keeping with international law promulgated by the United Nations. UN law speaks for the sanctity of territorial integrity of Member States; but UN law also speaks of the sanctity of self-determination of peoples.

What follows from the formal merger of these territories with Russia? That is also perfectly clear. As integral parts of

Russia, any attack on them, and there certainly will be such attacks coming from the Ukrainian armed forces, is a *casus belli*. But even before that, the referendums have been preceded by the announcement of mobilization, which points directly to what Russia will do further if developments on the field of battle so requires. Progressive phases of mobilization will be justified to the Russian public as necessary to defend the borders of the Russian Federation from attack by NATO.

The merger of the Russia-occupied Ukrainian territories with the Russian Federation will mark the end of the 'special military operation.' An SMO is not something you conduct on your own territory, as panelists on the *Evening with Vladimir Solovyov* talk show remarked a couple of days ago. It marks the beginning of open war on Ukraine with the objective of the enemy's unconditional capitulation. This will likely entail the removal of the civil and military leadership and, very likely, the dismemberment of Ukraine. After all, the Kremlin warned more than a year ago that the US-dictated course of NATO membership for Ukraine will result in its loss of statehood. However, these particular objectives were not declared up to now; the SMO was about defending the Donbas against genocide and about de-nazification of Ukraine, itself a rather vague concept.

Adding another 300,000 men at arms to the force deployed by Russia in Ukraine represents a near doubling and surely will address the shortages of infantry numbers that has limited Russia's ability to 'conquer' Ukraine. It was precisely lack of boots on the ground that explains Russia's painful and embarrassing withdrawal from the Kharkov region in the past two weeks. They could not resist the massive concentration of Ukrainian forces against their own thinly guarded hold on the region. The strategic value of the Ukrainian win is questionable, but it greatly enhanced their morale, which is a major factor in the outcome of any war. The Kremlin could not

ignore this.

At the press conference in Samarkand last week following the end of the annual gathering of heads of state of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Vladimir Putin was asked why he has shown so much restraint in the face of the Ukrainian counter offensive. He replied that the Russian attacks on Ukrainian electricity generating plants which followed the loss of the Kharkov territory were just 'warning shots' and there would be much more 'impactful' action to come. Accordingly, as Russia moves from SMO to open war, we may expect massive destruction of Ukrainian civil as well as military infrastructure to fully block all movement of Western supplied arms from points of delivery in the Lvov region and other borders to the front lines. We may eventually expect bombing and destruction of Ukraine's centers of decision-making in Kiev.

As for further Western intervention, Western media have picked up on President Putin's thinly veiled nuclear threat to potential co-belligerents. Russia has explicitly stated that any aggression against its own security and territorial integrity, such as has been raised by generals in retirement in the USA speaking to national television in the past several weeks about Russia's break-up, will be met by a nuclear response. When Russia's nuclear threat is directed at Washington, as is now the case, rather than at Kiev or Brussels, the supposition till now, it is unlikely that policy makers on Capitol Hill will long remain cavalier about Russian military capabilities and pursue further escalation.

In light of all these developments, I am compelled to revise my appreciation of what transpired at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting. Western media have focused full attention on only one issue: the supposed friction between Russia and its main global friends, India and China, over its war in Ukraine. That seemed to me to be grossly exaggerated. Now it appears to be utter nonsense. It is inconceivable that Putin did not discuss with Xi and Modi what he is about to do

in Ukraine. If Russia indeed now supplies to its war effort a far greater part of its military potential, then it is entirely reasonable to expect the war to end with Russian victory by 31 December of this year as the Kremlin appears to have pledged to its loyal supporters.

Looking beyond Ukraine's possible loss of statehood, a Russian victory will mean more than an Afghanistan-like bloody nose for Washington. It will expose the low value of the U.S. military umbrella for EU member states and will necessarily lead to re-evaluation of Europe's security architecture, which is what the Russians were demanding before their incursion into Ukraine was launched in February.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gilbert Doctorow is an independent political analyst based in Brussels. He chose this third career of 'public intellectual' after finishing up a 25 year career as corporate executive and outside consultant to multinational corporations doing business in Russia and Eastern Europe which culminated in the position of Managing Director, Russia, during the years 1995-2000. He is presently publishing his memoirs of his 25 years of doing business in and around the Soviet Union/Russia, 1975 - 2000. *Memoirs of a Russianist, Volume I: From the Ground Up* was published on 10 November 2020. *Volume II: Russia in the Roaring 1990s* will go to press in two months.

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