Russia threatens rupture of diplomatic ties with US amidst growing frictions within the oligarchy

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The Russian Foreign Ministry summoned the US ambassador Monday and issued a protest note, threatening the rupture of US-Russian diplomatic ties because US President Joe Biden called Russia's Vladimir Putin a "war criminal."

In its statement, the Foreign Ministry stated that Biden's statement had "put Russo-American relations to the brink of collapse." The ministry also warned the ambassador that Russia would respond with harsh resistance to the "hostile actions" of the US.

The statements by the Kremlin came clearly in response to the massive intervention of NATO in the Ukraine war—the military alliance has shipped billions of dollars' worth of weapons to the Ukrainian military and neo-Nazi forces—and an open economic war against Russia.

Both the economic and military warfare are accompanied by stepped-up efforts at regime change in Moscow. The US has long built up figures in Russia's oligarchy and upper middle class, most recently the now imprisoned Alexei Navalny, a far-right Putin critic, falsely presenting them to a US audience as "democratic" opponents to the Putin regime, to prepare the ouster of Putin through methods of a palace coup within the oligarchy and state apparatus.

The goal is to install a regime that would grant imperialism direct access to Russia's vast raw material and social resources, and no longer represent an obstacle to the geopolitical ambitions of imperialism in Europe and Asia.

The outbreak of the war has produced a rapid breakup within Russia's ruling oligarchy and the upper middle class. Claims by Ukrainian intelligence that a "coup" is underway with Alexander Bortnikov, the head of the secret service, the FSB, discussed as the potential replacement for Putin have not been independently confirmed. But there are many indications that these frictions extend well into the state apparatus.

Several oligarchs that have traditionally been close to Putin, including Oleg Deripaska (net worth $2.2 billion), Mikhail Fridman ($12.2 billion) and Pyotr Aven ($4.4 billion), have publicly denounced the war and called for it to end. Socialite Ksenia Sobchak ($5 million), the goddaughter of Vladimir Putin and a former presidential candidate, has also joined the "billionaires and millionaires for peace" coalition.

Hundreds of thousands of members of Russia's upper middle class have left the country, most of them for the Baltics, the Caucasus and Israel. This includes Russia's most famous talk show moderator, Ivan Urgant, who makes an estimated $5.6 million a year, and many academics from the country's most prestigious institutions.

There has also been a wave of resignations in Russia's state-owned media, including Russia Today and TV Channel 1. In a widely publicized incident, Maria Ovsiannikova, a former editor at Channel 1, made a public protest against the war during the prime time news show.

Following her protest, Ovsiannikova was interrogated for 14 hours and received a 30,000 ruble fine, at the time the equivalent of about $275, barely qualifying as a slap on the wrist. In a video on social media, Ovsiannikova had called on people to join the anti-war protests and expressed support for Alexei Navalny.

She has since been able to give interviews to many international outlets, including the German *DerSpiegel* and CNN. The treatment given by the Kremlin to Ovsiannikova is an indication that the Russian government is well aware of the fact that her positions are shared by substantial sections in the ruling class and upper middle class.

While most outlets affiliated with the pro-US liberal opposition—including Ekho Moskvy and the TV channel Dozhd'—have been banned and a strict regime of censorship imposed, the business paper *Kommersant*, Russia's equivalent of the *Wall Street Journal* or *Financial Times*, has run several stories and pictures on social media that indicate that at least sections of its editorial board oppose the war.

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Last week, the newspaper's Twitter account posted an interview with Russia's head of military intelligence, Sergey Naryshkin, with an image of Naryshkin in front of a poster saying "Nuremberg"—a not-so-subtle allusion to suggest he was responsible for war crimes.

The vice-head of *Kommersant* 's parent company, Andrei Kolesnikov, has written multiple articles on Putin's major speeches on the war that, while abiding by all censorship rules, were couched in a sardonic and scathing tone, making clear that Kolesnikov opposed Putin's line.

Contrary to their rhetoric, the political aim of these forces is everything but "peace." They are advocating not an "end to war," but an alignment of Russia with NATO. This would be accompanied by regime change operation which would not only mean further dictatorial and austerity measures directed against the working class, but also likely involve civil war and the breakup of the country along regionalist, ethnic and religious lines.

Putin's pro-imperialist critics are not speaking for the millions of workers who are barely making a living, are opposed to the war and are now facing unemployment and possible starvation because of the sanctions. Rather, they represent sections of a very wealthy upper middle class and oligarchy that has emerged out of the restoration of capitalism and the destruction of the Soviet Union, and confronts the working class with bitter hostility.

Russia is one of the most unequal societies in the world. As of 2020, the country's 10 percent owned 87 percent of the country's entire wealth; a figure that has no doubt increased during the pandemic. Whatever the sharp frictions within these layers over the Putin regime's reckless turn to war, they essentially represent the same class interests.

There is little question that Washington is playing the most active role in furthering conflicts within Russia's ruling elite and upper middle class. Ovsiannikova has been celebrated as a hero by the same bourgeois Western media that has supported the 13-year-long illegal persecution and torture of Julian Assange.

The former US ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, now a fellow of the right-wing Hoover Institution at Stanford University, is tweeting regularly in Russian, openly appealing to sections of the oligarchy and Russian generals to turn on Putin.

The Putin regime has responded to the staggering economic and political crisis produced by the war by taking its promotion of Great Russian chauvinism and militarism to a new level. In a meeting last week with leading regional politicians, Putin warned that anyone who opposed the "military operation in Ukraine" (the term "war" is forbidden in Russia) would be considered a "national traitor" and face imprisonment.

On Friday, he appeared at the Luzhniki sports stadium in Moscow to an audience of 80,000 people. Speaking for eight minutes in front of banners "For a world without Nazism" and "For Russia," Putin presented the war as a necessary step to prevent "a genocide" against Russians and one that ensured the "unity" of the nation.

Using the rhetoric of "blood and soil" and quoting from the Bible, he praised Russian soldiers for fighting and dying "shoulder to shoulder." He ended his speech, which was interrupted by loud chants of "Russia, Russia, Russia," by referencing the 18th century Tsarist naval commander Fedor Ushakov: "He once said that these thunderstorms [of military battle] would glorify Russia. This is how it was in his time; this is how it is today and will always be!"

At the event, neither Putin nor anyone else was wearing masks, ensuring the rally was a superspreader event. Though declining from the horrific Omicron surge in January and February, the pandemic is still taking a colossal toll. New cases top 20,000 a day and over 1 million are estimated to have died (out of a population of 140 million). Yet the Kremlin, like governments around the world, is using the war to make the pandemic disappear from the news, dropping even the most limited mitigation measures, and thus ensuring a future rise in cases and deaths.

Workers must reject both the bogus "peace" faction of Russia's oligarchy, which seeks a direct alignment with US imperialism, and the reactionary Great Russian chauvinism and militarism of the Putin regime. They can only oppose this war through the means of class struggle and the building of a socialist antiwar movement, fighting in alliance with their class brothers and sisters around the world, above all in Ukraine and the United States.

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