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Ukraine's democratic socialists say Western leftists should support sending them weapons to fight Russia's 'imperialist aggression'

Wednesday 23 March 2022, by [DAVIS Charles R.](#) (Date first published: 22 March 2022).

As a socialist, Vladyslav Starodubcev found plenty to criticize in the “neoliberal” administration of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, like a proposed reform to the country's labor laws that would have made it easier for employers to fire workers for any reason.

But speaking from Kyiv, the sound of artillery fire in the background, the 19-year-old Starodubcev — a leader of the left-wing [Sotsialny Rukh](#), or Social Movement, a small party of democratic socialists that has largely focused on grassroots anti-capitalist actions as opposed to electoral politics — said there was no question which side he and comrades were on once Russia launched “this horrible war” in their country.

“I took a decision on the first day of the war that I'm staying,” he told Insider. His family chose to escape Ukraine's capital, leaving him alone in their apartment, where he seeks refuge in the living room when cruise missiles are hitting the city. “It's hard to sleep because a rocket can just fire on my building and it can happen in any moment.”

But, he added, “I'm staying because I want to take my part in this situation to defend my country, to help people in need. And if Ukraine will be occupied, to resist this occupation.”

For him, resisting Russia's invasion means helping distribute humanitarian aid, such as food and medicine. For other socialists, it's “joining the war effort to support the army.” And for now, that means supporting the government, Starodubcev praising Zelenskyy for having “united the country” with his [media-savvy defiance](#).

'Russian leftists are less pro-Russian than Western leftists'

That doesn't mean there aren't criticisms — in the [besieged city of Mariupol](#), for example, he thinks the state could and should have done more to prepare the population for a Russian attack, the city being an obvious strategic target, and now a humanitarian disaster.

But he cringes at the response from some on the left, abroad.

While many left-wing parties have condemned the invasion of Ukraine, that condemnation has often been couched in what he sees as excuse-making — in a belief that the Kremlin's war of aggression was provoked by the West, as opposed to being a product of revanchist Russian nationalism.

Just before speaking to Insider, Starodubcev was on a call with members of Podemos, the populist left-wing party in Spain and the junior partner in a ruling coalition with the Socialist Party.

“They pushed this agenda that, ‘We’re against sending weapons.’ They’re sabotaging other parties in Spain trying to help Ukrainians — it’s just a stupid, very horrific policy,” he said.

“They have this idea that Russia is defending against NATO expansion and they just have their reasons to attack — that’s plain wrong and stupid. This idea of not sending weapons because it can prolong war is just misunderstanding Russian policies,” he said. “Russia’s goal here is to install a puppet government and just destroy Ukraine as something sovereign, doing independent policies from the Kremlin. So their argument is just for occupation.”

Ironically, or perhaps not, “Russian leftists are less pro-Russian than Western leftists, 100%,” Starodubcev said. “They understand their government a lot better than [DSA](#) or [Podemos](#) or [Stop the War Coalition](#) in Britain. They’re strongly opposing Putin. They’re strongly opposing the war — they’re trying to sabotage it.”

Socialists in Ukraine are calling for concrete actions, such as canceling the country’s foreign debt — now [nearly \\$130 billion](#), almost 10 times what it was in 2000. That is not controversial among leftists elsewhere.

But what Ukraine needs now is support for the armed struggle against Russian militarism, Starodubcev said.

Ukrainians against ‘imperialist aggression’

“Of course, we are supporting sending arms to Ukrainian resistance and Ukrainian army,” he said. “I think that many socialists should push their government to send planes, to send anti-air or anti-tank weapons, to defend the Ukrainian people.”

“It’s a war of the Ukrainian people against imperialist aggression,” he added. “And it’s very strange to me, the response of the Western left, which just ignores the fact Ukrainian people are fighting for their lives — for their independence.”

Outside Ukraine, cable news and leftist discussion groups have spent an inordinate amount of time debating what Starodubcev and the US government alike see as a nonstarter: [a no-fly-zone](#).

That’s a [stated demand of Zelenskyy](#) that would entail members of NATO potentially shooting down Russian planes in Ukraine — a direct conflict between nuclear powers.

“I mostly avoid this debate about no-fly-zone because it’s really unreal — it won’t be happening,” Starodubcev said. It’s also not necessary, he added, with Zelenskyy asking for it possibly just as a tactic to get what he really wants: the ability to impose one itself.

The country does not need any foreign military boots on the ground or NATO planes in the sky. It “needs fighter jets and anti-air equipment to defend its cities from bombs and rockets,” Starodubcev said. “I think that Ukraine can hold — if it would have enough guns.”

Staying put to send a message

In the meantime, he plans to stay put, committed to helping build a socialist Ukraine from the ashes of war.

The left in Ukraine itself is not particularly strong, even if its policies on healthcare and organized labor are popular, and it was made weaker by its popular association with Russia. When Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014, it did so with the support of Ukraine's Communist Party. And while that party is not particularly progressive — combining social conservatism with nostalgia for Stalinism and a Soviet empire — it tarnished the broader left in the eyes of a population that has embraced Ukrainian identity.

That, in part, is why Starodubcev is remaining in Kyiv. It's the right thing to do, he believes (though he does not judge those who have left), but it's also a sort of propaganda of the deed: showing that Ukraine's right-wing nationalists — a real problem, he concedes, made worse by war but [overblown by Russian propaganda](#) — do not have a monopoly on patriotism in a time of war.

It's also why he insisted that his real name be published, even if it potentially puts him at risk if Moscow ever does seize the capital.

“In this situation, for our position to be heard, it's better to use our real names because we are trying to [show] that the left is voting for arms delivery” — and standing against a foreign invasion of Ukraine, he said. Besides, “I don't think there's a lot of risk, because Russian intelligence is pretty stupid, I would say.”

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