

Questions about Ukraine

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In this essay, Ukrainian philosopher and feminist activist Daria Saburova uncovers the roots of the present Ukraine-Russia conflict.

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To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc.-to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution. So, one army lines up in one place and says, "We are for socialism", and another, somewhere else and says, "We are for imperialism", and that will be a social revolution! [...] Whoever expects a "pure" social revolution will never live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is.

— Lenin, *"The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up"*, 1916

On September 30, Putin endorsed Russia's annexation of the regions of Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, following the bogus referenda held between September 23 and 27, repeating the scenario already tried out in 2014 in Crimea and the Donbass. This coup de force comes in the context of a major counter-offensive by the Ukrainian army in the Kharkiv and Donetsk regions and aims to justify the "partial mobilisation" of Russian reservists announced on September 21.

While this new episode of "popular self-determination" should shed some light on what happened in 2014, some voices on the left are still accusing Ukraine of having provoked the current military escalation. This article looks back at the events of 2014-2022 to answer several questions that continue to tug at the heartstrings of the radical left and hinder its solidarity with the Ukrainian popular resistance. These questions concern the separatist movement and the war in Donbass, the Minsk agreements, the politics of the post-Maidan government, the advance of the far right and the prospects for the left in Ukraine.

1. From the annexation of Crimea to the war in Donbass

Civil war or war of aggression?

On February 27, 2014, a few days after the fall of [Viktor Yanukovych](#) following [the Maidan \(or Euromaidan\) revolution](#), a group of armed persons took control of the Parliament and cabinet offices of ministers in Crimea. The next day, the "little green men", soldiers dressed in unmarked military uniforms, took over the airports of Sevastopol and Simferopol, as well as other strategic locations on

the peninsula. More than two-thirds of the Ukrainian troops stationed in Crimea and 99% of the security personnel switched to the Russian side (Stepaniuk, 2022: 90). Barely three weeks later, following a hastily organised referendum, Putin signed the act of incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation (d'Anieri, 2019: 1).

In April of the same year, in eastern Ukraine, separatist forces took control of administrative buildings in Donetsk, Lugansk and Kharkiv, and called for referenda on independence for these regions. Although the Ukrainian authorities quickly regained control of Kharkiv, they were unable to recover the separatist regions of Donetsk and Lugansk, and the counter-revolution was at risk of spreading to other cities in the South-East.

The Ukrainian government responded to the creation of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (which declared their independence in May) by launching an "Anti-Terrorist Operation" (ATO) with fighting that lasted until February 2015, when the Minsk II agreement was signed. Although this agreement contributed to a significant reduction in the intensity of the fighting, it suffered, as we know, the same failure as the first agreement of September 2014. Before the February 2022 invasion, the war had already claimed more than 13,000 lives and created nearly two million refugees (Melnyk, 2022).

The questions most often asked in connection with these events concern the nature of the conflict in Donbass and the inevitability of its expansion: was it a civil war, a war of Russian aggression against Ukraine or a war that could be characterised as inter-imperialist from the start? Could the continuation of the war in the Donbass and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine have been avoided if the Minsk agreements had been effectively implemented?

If we look for a purely descriptive answer to the first question, there is no doubt that the war in Donbass can be characterised as a civil war, as a part of the local population actually participates first in the [anti-Maidan demonstrations](#) and then in the pro-Russian separatist movement. The fact that the warring parties might receive external assistance does not change the validity of this description: civil wars generally involve external intervention in one form or another. However, on the political plane this issue quickly goes beyond the simply descriptive or theoretical aspect and becomes partisan, because it is a question of respective responsibilities that in turn determine political stances towards the Donbass conflict (Marples, 2022: 2; Goujon, 2021: 79).

Thus, Putin has always denied Russia's military involvement in the Donbass. The term "civil war" to describe what is happening there is part of the ideological arsenal of Russian propaganda. On the other hand, on the part of the Ukraine and the European institutions, the term "civil war" is banned even as they recognise the participation of the local population in the separatist movement. The war in Donbass has been described since 2014 (and officially since 2018) as a "Russian war of aggression", to emphasise not only Russia's military involvement in a civil war that was already underway, but also, and above all, its decisive role in triggering it (Cherviatsova, 2022: 29). It is not denied that the local population joined the separatists, but they are seen as mere puppets of the Kremlin.

The separatist movement: what is Russia's involvement?

It has to be recognised that both these aspects of the conflict are present, and the question should rather be about the relationship between them. It is certain that the separatist movement would not have succeeded in gaining a foothold without a minimum of support from the local population, or rather without lack of support for the post-Maidan regime and for the Donbass liberation operation launched by the Ukrainian government in the spring of 2014.

There are no viable opinion polls regarding the territories under separatist control. But it should be remembered that in these territories, the [Party of Regions](#) and its leader Viktor Yanukovich, himself a native of Donetsk, won more than 80% of the vote in the second round of the 2010 presidential elections. A large part of the predominantly Russian-speaking population conceives of itself as “ethnic Russian”, shares nostalgic feelings for the USSR—both in its positive socio-economic aspects and in its socially and politically conservative aspects—and that the entire region is economically dependent on links with Russia (Marples, 2022: 3-4).

The events of 2014 can thus be understood as the culmination of a process over the previous decade in which the different fractions of Ukrainian capital invested in and exploited real divisions in identity and economy. By accentuating these divides each fraction could profile itself in the electoral game, relegating to the background the socio-economic and political concerns common to the working classes in all regions of Ukraine.

This was not always the case. The ethnocultural and linguistic theme of the “two Ukraines” only became central in politics after the 2004 elections between Viktor Yanukovich and [Viktor Yushchenko](#). At the same time, the [Communist Party of Ukraine](#) (CPU) was marginalised as an independent player in political life and entered into coalition with the Party of Regions. From 2004 onwards, Ukrainian political life would thus be permanently structured according to the division between, on the one hand, the national-democratic, liberal and pro-European camp claiming a West-Ukrainian identity and, on the other, the paternalist, Russian-speaking, pro-Russian camp, claiming a South-East-Ukrainian identity.

This divide also takes the form of a struggle over historical memory: some claim to be part of a national liberation movement with [Stefan Bandera](#) as a national hero, while the others emphasise the “Great Patriotic War” against fascism. Each side develops a diabolical image of the other: western Ukrainians are stigmatised as the heirs of Nazi collaborators, eastern Ukrainians as nostalgic for the Stalinism responsible for the death of several million Ukrainians during [the famine of the 1930s](#). This domestic dynamic is accompanied on the geopolitical level by a rise in tensions between Russia and the West, which end up crystallising in a special way around the Ukrainian question (Gorbach, 2022).

According to polls, the majority (55.2%) of the population of Donbass was against signing the free trade agreement with the European Union, with preference (64.5%) for the customs union with the Russian Federation. According to a poll conducted in December 2013, only 13% of respondents said they supported Euromaidan, while 81% said they did not (Risch, 2022: 10-11). The majority attitude of Donbass residents towards Maidan ranged from indifference to hostility, reinforced by the class contempt that pro-Maidan forces were experiencing towards themselves.

Yet Maidan had the potential to unite not only bourgeois democratic forces, but also the working classes of the whole country around common demands. Although they were less massive, there were also pro-Maidan demonstrations in the Donbass, protests against corruption, the abuses of the police state and the dysfunctional legal system, and in favour of the values associated—rightly or wrongly—with Europe, such as democracy, respect for the law, civil and human rights, as well as higher wages and living standards.

However, this potential was suffocated, on the one hand by the entry into the movement of far-right groups that imposed a nationalist agenda on the Kyiv Euromaidan, and on the other hand by the effort of local authorities in the East to discredit the movement (Risch, 2022; Diagtiar, 2014). As happened in Kyiv, local representatives of the ruling party responded by forming militias to intimidate, discredit and disperse the protests. And as in Kyiv, they organised and financed anti-Maidan/pro-government demonstrations. Finally, the radicalisation of the demonstrations in Kyiv

that led to the overthrow of the regime, as well as to the interim government's repeal of the law on regional languages adopted two years earlier, reinforcing the media's belief that Ukrainian nationalists would bring disorder to the Donbass, oppress the Russian-speaking population and, through the country's radical pro-European reorientation, threaten the region's socio-economic balance.

However, none of this means that from the outset there was a broad popular mobilisation for independence of these regions or for their attachment to Russia, nor that the reaction against Maidan meant inevitable descent into civil war. Separatist and pan-Russian organisations ("Donetsk Republic", "Novorossiia Fan Club", "Russian Bloc", etc.) were very marginal before 2014. Until February 2014, their demonstrations condemning the fascist coup, calling for the defence of the Russian Orthodox Church and incorporation of Donbass into Russia gathered only a few dozen people (Risch, 2022: 17). The expansion of the separatist theme was rather the work of local elites and Russian-backed minority separatist forces who were able to exploit widespread popular discontent with the new government.

Interviews with people from the separatist regions reveal, above all, a sense of powerlessness, a feeling of being held hostage to geopolitical games beyond their control, resentment towards all warring parties and a deep desire for a return to peace (Gritsiuk, 2020). This low level of popular mobilisation is in stark contrast to the current resistance of Ukrainians to the Russian invasion, with 98% of respondents to the latest polls giving strong support to the Ukrainian army [1].

It can therefore be said that without Russia's involvement, the mistrust of the Donbass populations regarding the Maidan revolution would certainly not have turned into a civil war. First, there is the immense role that Russian propaganda played in discrediting Maidan as a US-orchestrated fascist coup. The Russian media or media controlled by local pro-Russian elites—the main sources of information for the local population—spread all sorts of false information and rumours about the fate the new Kyiv government was reserving for the Russian-speaking population: that Russian speakers were going to be fired from positions in state institutions and enterprises or even expelled from the country; that the "Banderites" were going to come to the Donbass to spread fear and violence; that the mines in the Donbass were going to be permanently closed and used by European countries to store their radioactive waste; that the Ukrainian market was going to be flooded with genetically modified food products; that the United States was going to use Ukraine as a base for waging war against Russia. In the political crisis of winter-spring 2013-2014, Russia was thus increasingly seen as a guarantor of peace and stability (Risch, 2022: 22-23).

Then there was the direct involvement in the anti-Maidan protests and the separatist uprising under the banner of the "[Russian Spring](#)" of Kremlin advisers like [Vladislav Surkov](#) and [Sergey Glazyrev](#), as well as of Russian special forces. This operation was initially led by the Russian citizen [Igor Girkin \(Strelkov\)](#), later to be replaced by Donetsk national [Aleksandr Zakharchenko](#) in order to give more legitimacy to the leadership of the new republics (Marples, 2022: 3).

Finally, from June 2014 onwards, Russia got involved in the war not only by sending heavy weapons to the local separatists but directly with the participation of Russian army units in the fighting in Ilovaisk in August 2014, in Debaltseve in February 2015, etc. (Goujon, 2021: 80). This military intervention came at a time when the Ukrainian army and volunteer battalions were about to inflict a decisive defeat on the separatist forces. It was the entry of the Russian army into the war that turned the tables, prompting Ukrainian President Poroshenko to start the negotiation process and sign the ceasefire known as the Minsk agreements.

The Minsk agreements: an avoidable war?

It should be remembered that the Minsk agreements came at a time when the Ukrainian government was in a very unfavourable military situation, when Russia was reversing the situation on the battlefield and threatening to continue territorial conquests in the east and south of Ukraine, with at stake the creation of a land corridor from Crimea to Transnistria. At that time, there was already a real fear of a large-scale invasion of the country. Ukraine was therefore forced to accept the terms of the negotiations. For Russia, it was a question of finding a way to maintain a decisive influence over Ukraine's internal and external politics, because with the loss of Crimea and part of the Donbass, the most pro-Russian vote had already left Ukraine.

To secure control over its former semi-colony, Russia was therefore more interested in the reintegration by Ukraine of the separatist territories on condition of the country's federalisation—no strategic decision could then be taken without the agreement of all the members of the federation—than in recognising their independence or in attaching them definitively to Russia, which is what the separatist leaders themselves wanted.

Negotiations took place twice: in September 2014 (Minsk I), then in February 2015 (Minsk II). The Minsk agreements included several points with a security component (ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy weapons, exchange of prisoners, restoration of the Ukrainian border) and a political component (amnesty for those involved in the separatist movement, constitutional reform of Ukraine establishing a principle of decentralisation of power, recognition of a special status for the Lugansk and Donetsk regions, organisation of local elections).

None of these agreements were fully implemented. Their failure is explained by the deadlock in the negotiations on the political side. Ukraine demanded that local elections be organised according to Ukrainian law and under the supervision of independent international institutions after the dismantling and withdrawal of all illegal military formations (separatist forces, mercenaries and the regular Russian army) and the resumption of Ukrainian control over its border. Putin wanted the process to start with local elections and constitutional reform. The other point of disagreement concerned amnesty for the leaders of the separatist republics and the recognition of a special status for the Donbass.

This status implied that the regions should be able to conduct autonomous economic, social, linguistic and cultural policy, appoint prosecutors and have independent judicial bodies, as well as form their own "people's militia". The text also suggested that the central government should contribute to strengthening cooperation between the Lugansk and Donetsk regions and Russia. In concrete terms, the text of the agreements aimed to legalise the status quo: the current separatist leaders would become the official representatives of Ukrainian power in the occupied territories, their military formations would be maintained, and they would officially take control of the Russian-Ukrainian border.

In this form, Ukrainian society could not countenance the Minsk agreements. At most, they provided a temporary freeze to the conflict. It was clear that for Russia the agreements were about acquiring a permanent instrument for interfering in Ukrainian affairs in order to prevent the country from pursuing an independent foreign and domestic policy and to be able to prevent new popular uprisings against the local representatives of its neo-colonial domination. Moreover, these agreements did not provide any solution to the Crimean question (Cherviatsova, 2022). The implementation of these agreements by the Ukrainian government would have surely led to a new political crisis, a new Maidan led this time by the most reactionary political forces. From the point of view of realpolitik, one could always say that the Ukrainian government could have avoided the war by making concessions to Russia. But such a statement amounts to blaming the victim and accepting that imperialist powers can dictate to peoples the conditions of their submission under military pressure.

2. Political and social life in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022

Electoral shifts and neoliberal reforms

In this context of war and impasse in negotiations, the mandate of [Petro Poroshenko](#) was marked by a rampant rightward shift in domestic politics and the strengthening of the militaristic message responding to the demands of the most nationalist fringe of post-Maidan civil society. Poroshenko displayed willingness to wage war until Crimea was recovered, continue increasing military budgets and promote Ukraine's membership of NATO. In April 2019, however, Volodymyr Zelenskyy won the second round of the presidential elections with more than 73% of the vote, and his party Servant of the People, named after the TV series to which Zelenskyy owes his popularity, obtained an absolute majority in parliament with 43% of the vote.

Zelenskyy's election campaign was classically based on anti-oligarch and anti-corruption slogans, and part of his victory was due to his presenting himself as an "anti-system" candidate against the incumbent president who, once again, had taken advantage of his mandate to considerably increase his fortune. But Zelenskyy also ran on a promise to end the conflict in the Donbass. With this vote, Ukrainians clearly rejected the conservative-nationalist program of Poroshenko, who campaigned under the slogan "Army, Language, Faith".

On the Donbass issue, Zelenskyy, who was caught between two fires, was eventually forced to maintain the line of his predecessor: on the one hand, the Kremlin showed no willingness to make concessions in the negotiations; on the other, the national-liberal part of Ukrainian civil society refused to accept a scenario of capitulation to Russia and the separatists.

Zelenskyy started his mandate with an exchange of prisoners of war and withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from some towns bordering on the separatist republics. However, the resumption of negotiations with Russia, when Zelenskyy met Putin in Paris in December 2019, was met with protests in Kyiv supported by nationalist opposition parties, war veterans' associations, and far right groups. In this new round of negotiations, Zelenskyy failed to secure local elections in Donbass preceded by dismantling of the separatist militias, a withdrawal of Russian troops and a return to Ukrainian control of its eastern border with Russia. Negotiations once again reached an impasse and the Kremlin decided to escalate the situation by invading Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

Domestically, Zelenskyy also continued the neoliberal policy of his predecessor, in line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). With this decisive change in geopolitical orientation, the structure of the Ukrainian economy gradually changed, with the share of industrial production traditionally exported to Russia decreasing and that of raw materials and agricultural production exported to Europe increasing (Kravchuk, 2016; Kravchuk, 2018). But the Ukrainian economy was mostly over-indebted and heavily dependent on IMF loans granted in exchange for austerity measures.

In March 2015, the IMF granted Ukraine a €16 billion loan against the backdrop of the economic crisis into which the country had been plunged since the events of Maidan and the start of the conflict in the Donbass. The conditions of this loan traditionally included a series of structural reforms to reduce public budgets (Dutchak et alii, 2018). These reforms included increasing the price of natural gas for the population, reducing the number of positions in the public administration, and increasing the retirement age (Chernina, 2017a). The reform in the sphere of health provided for a change in the way health institutions are financed, according to the principles of self-financing and profitability, thus attacking the principle of free and universal medicine inherited from the Soviet Union (Chernina, 2017b; Chernina, 2020). On the user side, the reform foresaw the generalisation of private health insurance.

In education, the reforms begun in 2014 involved the “rationalisation” of the system by reducing the number of universities and schools through closures and consolidations, with deplorable consequences for access to education in villages and small towns. The reform of the scholarship system reduced the share of students who had access to it. As in the health sphere, the principle of university autonomy was being promoted (Muliavka, 2016; Chernina, 2017c). Finally, the Zelenskyy government passed a law to end the moratorium on the sale of agricultural land, which had dated from the fall of the USSR. The creation of a genuine market in agricultural land open to foreign investors had been a long-standing condition of Ukraine’s creditors, but was never implemented until 2021 (Soroka, 2019).

Some of these reforms had already been partially initiated, others only envisaged by pre-Maidan governments. Ukraine had been borrowing from the IMF since the 1990s, but in practice no government ever implemented all its conditions for fear of an explosive social situation. The political crisis of 2014 and the war in Donbass have finally opened the road to these reforms, allowing them to be presented as inevitable, as part of the war effort and of the process of European integration

The situation of displaced persons from Donbass

According to the last census in 2001, there were 7.3 million inhabitants (15% of the Ukrainian population) in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The war that started in the spring of 2014 resulted in almost two million refugees. According to official statistics for 2019, 1.38 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) were registered in Ukraine and several hundred thousand in Russia. Officially, the majority of IDPs resided before February 2022 in the Ukrainian government-controlled territories of the Donetsk (488,000) and Lugansk (217,000) regions, as well as in the capital (149,000). In fact, a large proportion of the displaced persons, the majority of whom are women and pensioners, have returned to the occupied territories because of difficulties in finding housing, work, access to social assistance, etc. The status of internally displaced persons has allowed them to return to their country of origin. The IDP status has also allowed them to continue receiving Ukrainian allowances and pensions that had to be sought locally every month. By May 2019, 1.2 million people had crossed the line in both directions (Gyidel, 2022: 111).

The Ukrainian state failed to anticipate the refugee crisis: six months after the start of the war in Donbass, there was still no legal framework for the reception of IDPs. The law establishing the legal status of IDPs was only passed in October 2014. This status allows access to financial assistance—largely insufficient to live on [2]—and to specific social services, but it also restricts civil rights: IDPs are not allowed to vote in local elections on the pretext of their registration as temporary residents. Despite the provision of a number of temporary housing units that soon turned into ghettos, there has been a total failure to provide durable housing: only sixty-three families out of 1.2 million IDPs have benefited. The abandonment of the Donbass refugees by the state was accompanied by their stigmatisation in the media and distrust of potential “separatists” by part of the Ukrainian population, which in some cases resulted in discrimination in employment and in the rental market (Gyidel, 2022).

At the same time, dozens of voluntary organisations, including those created by the displaced persons themselves, such as the [Vostok SOS](#) organisation, were formed to take over the functions of the state: humanitarian aid, assistance in finding housing, work, support in administrative procedures, legal support (Kozlovska, 2014). Generally speaking, Maidan has had the effect of significantly increasing citizen involvement against a backdrop of a lack of confidence in the state and its inability to resolve urgent humanitarian problems. In this respect, a change can be noted compared to previous decades. In the face of disaffection with the welfare state, the 1990s were marked more by individual strategies of non-political personal initiative, limited to narrow circles of the private sphere, whereas the post-Maidan era has been marked by the constitution of a vast

network of civic solidarity initiatives on the scale of society as a whole.

Important solidarity initiatives are also emerging in support of the fighters and ex-combatants in the Donbass. At the time of the outbreak of the conflict, the Ukrainian army was very impoverished, badly equipped and undertrained. In April 2014, only 4% of soldiers had basic protective equipment such as helmets and body protection. To alleviate the situation, more than thirty volunteer battalions were formed to reinforce the regular army. At the time, the existence of these battalions was based solely on voluntary solidarity initiatives that provided uniforms, equipment and means of subsistence to the combatants (Stepaniuk, 2022). These solidarity practices have expanded today: while Western aid is mostly in the form of heavy weapons, the army and territorial defence units continue to depend on massive mobilisation of citizens for the purchase of basic protective equipment, medicines, drones, cars, etc.

The problem of the far right

The issue of volunteer battalions naturally brings us to the issue of the far right in the Ukrainian army, given that the “Azov” battalion has received a disproportionate amount of media attention both in the Russian media and in Western anti-imperialist literature. It has become the partisan political issue par excellence. The invasion of Ukraine on February 24 was presented by Putin as a denazification campaign, in the wake of the “fascist coup” thesis promoted as early as 2014 to discredit the popular uprising against Yanukovych, on the pretext of the far-right presence in the demonstrations.

Unfortunately, part of the international left has uncritically taken up the propagandistic rhetoric of the Putin regime. As a result, when trying to appeal for international solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance, it is very tempting to bend the stick in the other direction, going so far as to deny the existence of the far right in Ukraine, or at least to minimise the spread of its networks within society and institutions. Such a counterpropaganda strategy, adopted by national-liberal forces, should not be ours. It is a question of having a realistic view of all the components of the armed resistance, without making our support for the resistance of the Ukrainian people conditional on the predominance of a purely class line within it.

The rise of the far right is our great shared danger today, in Ukraine as elsewhere, and the French left is surely best placed to understand this. For an internationalist left that does not lose hope in and conviction about the need for major social transformations on a planetary scale, the challenge is not to abandon the Ukrainian people on the pretext that there are a handful of neo-Nazis in the ranks of the army. Rather, it is to reflect on how solidarity with the popular anti-imperialist movement—in particular with its anti-capitalist, trade unionist, feminist, and anti-racist component—can help to marginalise the extreme right and prepare the ground for social struggles to revive on a progressive basis.

To achieve this, we must first understand the specificity of the far right in Ukraine. At Maidan, the neo-Nazi groupings were a minority, but a minority that was the best organised and the best prepared for violent confrontation with the forces of order, which gave them a high profile within the movement. But unlike in France, the institutional far right has not had any electoral success since 2012. The Svoboda party fell from 12% of the vote in the 2012 parliamentary elections to 4% in 2014, then to 2% in 2019. This is partly because the entire political field has shifted considerably to the right in the post-Maidan context and the patriotic-nationalist rhetoric of far-right parties has become commonplace in the face of the Russian threat. But this electoral dynamic also reveals the lack of hegemony of the far right in contemporary Ukraine, its ideology being in open contradiction with the pro-European orientation of the majority component of the Maidan camp and with the deep concerns for political, economic and social justice of the large part of the population. The danger

that these various organisations represent lies rather in their orientation towards street violence and the extension of their networks into the repressive institutions.

To give just a few examples, “Azov” is not just the name of a battalion, it is the name of a network of structures and projects of all kinds: in 2016, it formed the [National Corps Party](#), ran its own veterans’ organisation, had its own sports sections, holiday camps and paramilitary organisation “National Militias” (Gorbach, 2018). The [organisation](#) has also formed a paramilitary group called “Municipal Guard”, officially funded by the Kyiv City Council, which delegated to it during the COVID crisis certain surveillance and policing functions in support of the municipal police.

According to reports by the Marker Monitoring Group, the primary victims of extreme violence are feminist and LGBTQ+ activists, as well as far-left activists. Organisations such as S14, National Corps and [Right Sector](#) systematically attack March 8 demonstrations, Pride marches and conferences and exhibitions on left-wing issues, etc. Numerous attacks have been carried out against the Roma community, the Jewish community or Holocaust memorialists, and people considered “marginal”, including the homeless, political opponents and journalists deemed insufficiently patriotic, all this with relative indifference from the police (Marker Monitoring Group, 2021; 2022).

The active participation of radical nationalists in the armed resistance against the Russian invasion contributes to the legitimisation of their organisations. At the same time, even within the armed formations that are known as neo-Nazis, only a minority actually adheres to the ideology of their core. As the research of Coline Maestracci, who conducted dozens of interviews with Azov fighters, shows, those who sought to join from 2014 onwards were mainly attracted by the battalion’s effectiveness in fighting Russian aggression (Maestracci, 2022).

The Ukrainian left in the face of war

Given the complexity of the issues at stake, it is not surprising that the Ukrainian left found itself very divided when faced with the events that unfolded from November 2013 to spring 2014 and beyond. But first we need to determine which organisations we are talking about, as some parties claiming to be part of this political family have long since lost connection with any emancipatory agenda.

This is the case of the CPU, the successor of the Soviet CP, which held a strong position until the early 2000s. In 1998 legislative elections the CPU obtained 25% of the vote and in 1999 its candidate Petro Symonenko faced Leonid Kuchma in the second round of the presidential elections. However, since the proclamation of Ukraine’s independence, this party has never been an anti-capitalist and progressive party. At most, it played on the nostalgia of its electorate for the USSR by promoting a social conservatism that in the 1990s formed the consensus among the political elites who were seeking to mitigate the social impact of savage privatisation. Basically, the CPU represented a convenient opposition party that could channel social discontent without posing any real threat to the oligarchic power in place. The party’s leadership effectively integrated into the ruling class by participating in its patterns of corruption and by building up its own comfortable fortunes.

For the reasons already mentioned, the political polarisation around the pro-Russian vs. the pro-Ukrainian/pro-European axis contributed to the marginalisation of the CPU. Under Yanukovich, the CPU formed a coalition with the ruling party, notably by voting for the repressive laws of January 2014. During Maidan, together with other pro-Russian parties and organisations, the CPU participated in the organisation of counterdemonstrations in Kyiv and other cities in eastern and southern Ukraine. Local CPU leaders approved the use of force by the riot police to disperse

protests, echoing the Russian propaganda message about the “fascist coup” and rejecting “European values” with homophobic and racist slogans. According to Denys Gorbach, the Ukrainian CPU is ideologically closer to right-wing populist parties such as Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National than to progressive left-wing parties, mixing as it does economic protectionism and a discourse on the superiority of Slavs with pro-natalist, anti-LGBTQ+ and pro-Orthodox Church messages (Gorbach, 2016).

The same conclusions can be drawn about the Socialist Party of Ukraine and the Socialist Progressive Party of Ukraine. In this context, it is easy to understand why the average Ukrainian today declares himself or herself to be “anti-communist”: not because the working classes have definitively given up on the ideal of social justice, but because “communism” is mainly associated with pro-Russian nationalism, the police state, social conservatism and the worship of Stalin. After the fall of Yanukovych, the symbols and rhetoric of the CPU fell under the decommunisation laws passed in May 2015, but the party continues to field individual members in local elections. It is permanently banned following the invasion of Ukraine, along with other “pro-Russian” parties.

The “new left” that is independent of the institutional parties was deeply divided, firstly over the analysis of the Maidan and secondly over the war in the Donbass. On the one hand, the Stalinist party [Borotba](#) (“Struggle”) saw Maidan as a revolt of the national-liberal petty bourgeoisie. Borotba ended up siding with the anti-Maidan in the eastern and southern cities, whose first demonstrations were marked by an eclectic mix of communist, pan-Russian and clerical slogans. Several of the party’s activists died in the [tragic fire at the trade union headquarters in Odessa](#) in May 2014. Today, some of its activists still live in Donetsk. Some have been arrested by the separatist powers, others have become openly pro-Putin or have gone into exile in Russia or Europe.

On the other hand, some left-wing nationalists joined the volunteer battalions to fight the separatist forces, such as the activists of the [Autonomous Resistance](#) (“Avtonomny Opir”), as early as 2014. The Autonomous Resistance was basically a national socialist movement. However, the organisation began to turn left from 2013 onwards, breaking with far-right organisations, and placing the class struggle rather than the nation at the centre of its political analysis while retaining its specific West Ukrainian identity with a strong nationalist dimension (Gorbach, 2015). It has developed an eclectic ideology and activity that combines the glorification of Stepan Bandera’s Ukrainian nationalist organisation and participation in the torch marches, organising [Nestor Makhno](#) memorial marches and participation in May Day and trade union demonstrations.

The progressive radical left, with the goal of uniting different grassroots socialist, feminist, trade unionist, environmentalist, and anti-racist initiatives, is represented in Ukraine by an organisation called [Social Movement](#) (“Sotsialnyi Rukh”). It was launched in 2015 by the Trotskyist organisation [Left Opposition](#) (“Liva Opositsia”), which itself came out of the [Organisation of Marxists](#) (“Organizatziya marksistiv”), that worked alongside Borotba until 2011. Social Movement is part of the radical left which at the time gave critical support to the Maidan, identifying with the working classes who took part in the demonstrations with the desire for justice—justice in the sense of respect for the law by the ruling classes who themselves make it, but also in the sense of social justice. Its activists took part in the demonstrations and were involved in many citizen initiatives. The anarcho-syndicalist federation [Autonomous Workers’ Union](#) (“Avtonomna spilka trudyashtikh”) and the student union [Direct Action](#) (“Pryama diya”) also took part in the Maidan events, organising actions of their own, such as the occupation of the Ministry of Education.

Given the complexity and the situation in the Donbass, the positions of this left on the war were however marked by a certain hesitation. On the one hand, while emphasising Russia’s responsibility for the outbreak of the armed struggle, it expressed its opposition to the more belligerent parts of Ukrainian society and their exclusively nationalist project, hoping that a diplomatic solution could be

found for the peaceful and inclusive reintegration of Donbass and Crimea, on the basis of a dialogue with the local populations and, in addition, of conditions that would allow Ukraine as a whole to maintain independence from Russia.

On the other hand, the radical left took care not to defend “revolutionary defeatism” nor strongly criticise the Anti-Terrorist Operation against the so-called people’s republics of Donetsk and Lugansk, which had in the meantime become territories of lawlessness totally dependent on Russia. The activities of Social Movement have mainly focused during these years on the fight against corruption and tax evasion, neoliberal reforms and privatisations, attacks on workers’ rights, and for the advancement of the rights of LGBTQ+ people and the environmental agenda. The organisation has close contacts with independent trade unions and has often come out in support of strike movements by, for example, health, transport and mine workers.

The invasion of Ukraine marks a new turning point that buries any plans for peace negotiations in the framework of the Minsk agreements. The recent annexation of the four regions of southern and eastern Ukraine proves that the Putin regime has not and never had any intention of negotiating the status of the newly occupied territories and that it will not back down in its desire to subjugate Ukraine unless it suffers a defeat on the military front—which the lightning counter-offensive of the last few days gives reason to hope for. From February 2022 onwards, the organisations of the radical left will resolutely engage in resistance against the occupation, joining the general popular momentum to defend the right of Ukrainian society to exist and exercise its self-determination.

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P.S.

Translated from [the French original published on the *Contretemps* web site](#).

References in brackets and footnotes are in the original text, while website links have been added to provide access to relevant background information.

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<http://links.org.au/questions-about-ukraine>

Footnotes

[1] https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/trinadcatyy_obschenacionalnyy_opros_vneshnepolitic_heskie_orientacii_18-19_iyunya_2022.html?fbclid=IwAR0kGFoGk_OXKGsp0o3Ne680Jz1RKGpB0wqq2XpISX6hbHu8AJYEhAY6-FE;

And: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/08/11/7362903/>

[2] 40 euros per person and 120 euros per family, see ministerial decree of October 1, 2014.