

Ukraine: Interview With The Hungarian Media Platform MÉRCE

Saturday 20 May 2023, by [MÉRCE](#), [TIDVA Artem](#) (Date first published: 13 May 2023).

In his answers, our activist spoke about the history of the Social Movement and the views of its activists, allies and the vector of further development. He also presented his thoughts on our vision of a socially just post-war reconstruction. The need to help and support Ukrainian refugees in Hungary was emphasised.

Why did you come to Budapest, what are you doing here?

A.T.: I came to attend a [trade union conference](#) attended by civil servants' unions from different countries. It was organised by the European Federation of Trade Unions of Civil Servants, where I also work as a trade union organiser.

Did Hungarian trade unions take part in the event?

A.T.: Yes, for example, the United Federation of Electricity Workers (EVDSZ), which is very active in the region and in the international confederation. They were one of the first to offer financial assistance to the Ukrainian trade union of electricity workers. There are many examples of such solidarity cooperation between trade unions, which forms important contacts for the future.

Could you please tell us how the Social Movement was formed?

A.T.: Social Movement was created as a left-wing response to the Euromaidan protests. We began to think about why it was that, although not only the far right but also the radical left took part in the protests, it was the right that was able to earn significant political capital. "The emerging Right Sector tried to convert its presence on the streets into votes, which did not work very well, but nevertheless several MPs began to cooperate with them. Meanwhile, the left-wing movement was divided. Anarchists, Trotskyists, autonomists and many other shades of the left were protesting on the streets, but they were unable to make political capital out of it: to start a political party, get into parliament, etc. So we started to bring together intellectuals and trade unionists who were open to leftist ideas.

We aimed to delve into the work of trade unions and the labour movement. For example, we took part in the protests of Kyiv trolleybus drivers in 2015-16. We also made [videos](#) to draw attention to their difficulties and poor working conditions.

For many years, municipal transport drivers have had problems with late payments and deteriorating infrastructure and vehicles. This is also where the problem of corruption manifests itself. There was money to improve the infrastructure, but it was stolen. Employers created a paper trail of what they spent the money on, but in reality they just kept it for themselves. At some point, employees refused to work in dangerous conditions. They went on a hunger strike. Their independent trade union eventually won, achieving results in several areas.

Our activists also provided legal assistance to workers who were accused by their employer of an illegal strike. Trolleybus operators who were illegally dismissed went to court, won their cases with our support and received significant compensation.

You mentioned that the Social Movement is a political umbrella organisation that includes many left-wing movements. Did this cause any difficulties in developing your political programmes? Could you tell us about the political vision of your organisation?

A.T.: Yes, as I said, there are many different directions represented in the organisation, but we are united by a common anti-capitalist vision. Since the Euromaidan, we have been speaking out on various issues, such as budget transparency. During the protests, we occupied the **Ministry of Education** and demanded that all financial data of universities be made public so that students could see how much the state paid for their education and how much they had to pay themselves. In many cases, it turned out that universities were asking students for money after the state had already paid for their education. Our position was as follows: a transparent budget as opposed to a “commercial secret”!

We also demanded the elimination of the oligarchic system. Our activists have participated in a number of research projects that examined tax avoidance by oligarchs through [offshoring in certain industries](#). We published articles about offshoring in agriculture and iron ore mining on the website of the magazine “Spilne”, which, together with “Mércé”, is part of the ELMO network of Eastern European left-wing media.

“The Social Movement has repeatedly spoken out against the neoliberal transformation of education, healthcare and social services, as well as the privatisation and commercialisation of public spaces. Gender equality is also a priority in our organisation, where the number of men and women on the board is split 50/50.

As we understand it, you are involved in various campaigns supporting progressive struggles rather than working on your own political agenda.

A.T.: We try to support different social movements and give them a broader view of what is wrong with capitalism. We show that the problem is not only with individual employers, but we also help them fight for specific jobs. In this way, we try to put environmental, urban, and feminist issues into an anti-capitalist, political framework. We say, for example, that it is not enough for a company to be more environmentally friendly, it is not enough for more women to work in business, because the state must take on more responsibility in these areas, for example, by giving fathers the opportunity to participate in the upbringing of their children.

We are also working to create a network where different movements support each other. For example, when we work with trade unions, we tell them that some of us are members of the LGBT community, that this is important to us, and we say: “their rights are worth fighting for because their rights are your rights”. We do the same thing in the feminist and anarchist movements - we try to explain why it is important to support the labour movement. Sometimes this creates strange situations when someone says: okay, there are workers here, there are disadvantaged people, you are for workers, but we are also disadvantaged. But working class people are also vulnerable! They are not the poster boys of the last century, they are now, for example, couriers or labourers working as “private contractors” on construction sites.

While a significant number of Ukrainian workers are fighting at the front, the government is [eroding labour rights](#) and returning to proposals it failed to push through years ago. Ukrainian trade unions, including your organisation, are protesting against this, and it has

provoked international trade union protests. The left also expresses concern that [post-war reconstruction](#) may not take into account the public interest. How do you see these developments?

A.T.: Yes, it is a big problem, but not a new one. The first protest I took part in as a high school student was against neoliberal labour laws in 2008. Back then, we were attending the reading groups of “Common” and we were told that we had to go because as future employees we had to support the protesters. Every few years, every government has tried to dismantle and “modernise” labour rights.

Former Economy Minister Tymofiy Mylovanov, for example, had the audacity to explain the need to increase overtime payments with a personal story: when he was in hospital with Covid-19, the nurse who was caring for him wringed her hands, wanting so badly to stay at work, but the law did not allow her to do so. So Milovanov came to the conclusion that those who want to work harder and better should be given the opportunity to do so.

Today, for example, the process of dismissing trade union members has been significantly simplified. However, trade unions can still prevent such cases by electing a person as a delegate, in which case employers cannot fire them. So even in times of war, trade unions have the tools to resist the arrogance of employers.

Why is the Ukrainian government doing this now? Simply because it can. Because we are not organised enough to resist it. At Social Movement, we are working to show that resistance is possible. Resistance brings results, and we are ready to support this struggle.

Is the government trying to justify these measures as a war?

A.T.: Of course, now they are blaming everything on the war. For example, they can expropriate trade union property. They argue that they need to increase budget revenues. But the taxation of large companies is not increasing. If they really want to increase the state budget, we could give them some advice on where to get more money.

We see how divided the international left is in its attitude to the war. For example, in an interview published in English, one group accused you of social chauvinism for supporting Western arms supplies to Ukraine and the Ukrainian government. How would you respond to this?

S.S.: They are allegedly for “revolutionary defeatism”, but this is an abstract idea. A socialist revolution is unthinkable right now in the current situation in Ukraine and Russia.

A.T.: And as for the supply of weapons... Our comrades, activists, are now serving in the army. We buy drones and protective equipment so that they can be more effective and survive. If we want the voices of veterans on the left to be heard, we must support those who are fighting now.

We have long-standing trade union contacts in Mykolaiv. After the Russian invasion, we turned to the leftists there: who needed help to evacuate, who needed support on the front line. It seems that at the end of March last year, there was no drinking water in the city because Russian troops had damaged an important water pipeline between Dnipro and Mykolaiv. We started fundraising and bought a seawater desalination device for €10,000. It works quite well, although it is slow. We also transported bottles of water to Kyiv and Odesa, sometimes by car and sometimes with the help of our activists who work on the railway. It's all very expensive, you have to pay a lot for petrol, for example, and the car can only carry 400 litres of water at a time. After the liberation of Kherson, the

supply of drinking water was restored in Mykolaiv. This would not have been possible without HIMARS and other Western weapons.

You said that the Social Movement represents many left-wing tendencies. Did this create any difficulties when you were formulating your position on the war?

AT: Many of our members come from eastern Ukraine, where Russian propaganda is stronger, but they are also subject to more intense bombing. We've had many discussions, but the consensus is that Ukraine has the right to defend itself. Sometimes our activists raise issues such as the right to use the Russian language, which we support. It is true that it is difficult to defend this right now, but we understand their position.

We have agreed not to conflict over issues that we cannot resolve ourselves at the moment. This also applies to the war, because we cannot stop it. Why destroy an organisation that is doing a lot of good for the future of the left movement in this society? We all agree on the need for a left party, feminist voices, trade union voices, socialist voices and an anti-neoliberal agenda.

How can leftist groups help you?

AT: That's a good question. There are a lot of Ukrainian refugees coming to Hungary. We would be grateful if you could support them, maybe even give them political education as leftists. We can also help with this by translating materials into Ukrainian. We also need money to rebuild our country.

One of our main demands is to write off Ukraine's foreign debt. It would be very strange if all the money that comes to Ukraine in the form of loans and that we invest in supporting our economy, all the humanitarian aid, eventually went back to Western banks. There are also arguments in the Hungarian parliament in favour of writing off Ukraine's debt.

Our second demand is the fair reconstruction of Ukraine. Several countries, including Hungary, attended the conference in Lugano, where they presented an outline of a plan for the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine. We are trying to follow this process, to observe how these funds are spent, so that they do not just flow out, but create decent working conditions with broad employment, and not "grey" jobs through subcontractors. We must make sure that the workers who are rebuilding our country have everything they need.

There are many left-wing movements in Ukraine that can be supported: trade unions, feminist movements, socialists, greens. They can also be supported directly by the Hungarian people, as the Hungarian electricity workers' union did.

Mérce
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