

# The War in Ukraine: Agenda for the Left

Friday 22 December 2023, by [KYSELOV Oleksandr](#) (Date first published: 21 December 2023).

**The situation on the military front is grim. Despite certain tactical achievements, high hopes for the counter-offensive were not fulfilled. Instead, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief, has openly acknowledged a stalemate. The national polls indicate emerging exhaustion. The global community is losing interest, aid packages are stalled, truck haulage is blocked. Winter is here, and so are Russian missile strikes at the energy infrastructure.**

It is not better politically, either. Ukraine's left, which looks more like a constellation of NGOs, activist groups, and local union leaders than a coherent movement, is effectively sidelined and marginalized. The mainstream opinion corridor resembles a weird mix of linguistic chauvinism and unrestrained neoliberalism. Rally 'round the flag' effect decreases but still holds: the president, the army, and volunteers enjoy [the highest level of trust](#). The predominant majority of the Ukrainian population [don't want elections](#) citing their costs, limitations of the martial law, the lack of safety, and the inability of a significant share of Ukrainians to vote.

## Who or what to fight for then?

It would be naive, of course, to demand unreserved solidarity from the international left. There is so much injustice in the world, and standing with Ukraine does not always look that appealing. After all, one doesn't have to dig deep to find there public officials [instrumentalizing fear](#) and [steering hatred](#) or corporate lobbyists dreaming of [destroying everything social](#). Likewise, it is easy to point to the aspiring neo-feudals eager [to keep the borders shut](#) so their serfs won't escape or the middle-class xenophobes calling for [disenfranchisement of residents of the occupied territories](#). In some truly Orwellian fashion, president Zelenskyi himself unequivocally [backed the occupying power of Israel](#), as if forgetting how his own country is suffering from pseudo-historic claims by its neighbor.

Needless to say, no solidarity is expected with such figures. But keep in mind that many contrasting fates are entangled today. The left ought to act for the working people! The farmers from Kherson who till the mine-laden soil. The train drivers from Kyiv who deliver vital supplies on run-down trains. The underpaid nurses from Lviv who attend to the sick and the wounded. The Russian-speaking miners from Kryvyi Rih who fight to protect their hometown. The construction workers from Mykolaiv who clear dangerous rubble to build anew, but struggle to feed their families. Support them, the invisible majority, whose voice is rarely heard but who have nowhere else to go. The establishment, on the contrary, should be watched as closely as possible.

## How to support?

Numerous initiatives have already taken root, each being an example of what is possible. International advocacy efforts of [European Network in Solidarity with Ukraine](#), resolute backing by the [Nordic Green Left](#), united voice of the Danish trade unions, speaking tours of the [Ukrainian labor leaders](#), capacity building for [Sotsialnyi Rukh](#), syndicalist [organizing of Ukrainian workers](#) in

Stockholm. The scope of potential action is vast, but some points come up consistently in the discussions.

*Raise your voice on how your tax money is spent!* Ukraine's dependence on external support is hardly a secret. Nobody wants their taxes to end up in somebody's bank account in Switzerland rather than serve those in need. Then, it is only logical to pressure for including social clauses in aid conditions and public procurement or point to unfair practices where they exist. Aid for reconstruction should go hand in hand with green jobs, [living wage](#), union oversight, contractor's liability, protected employment, and a healthy and safe working environment!

*Call for debt relief!* Ukraine's external debt [exceeds \\$93 billion](#). Over the years, borrowing was an easy way out for governments to avoid challenging the status quo and meddling with oligarchs. Most recent loans already have stricter requirements aiming at counteracting state capture, and [things are changing](#). But the amount of debt hanging over is already used as a pretext for justifying austerity. Moreover, it [reproduces dependency](#), where rebuilding is funded by new loans. What is earned is spent on repayment instead. One could question how fair it is for the people of the devastated land to pay for the ruling class's faulty policy decisions at all. Yet even more important is to remember the main lesson from the success of the Marshall Plan: war-torn countries need grants, not loans.

*Do not ignore the problems with democracy and human rights!* When the invasion started, citizens of all social backgrounds lined up in front of the recruitment centers. Almost two years later, [it is no longer the case](#). The primary tool for military recruitment is mobilization [with all its troubles](#). But for people to risk their lives, they must be sure that it is fair and that they or their families will be cared for if something unfortunate happens. They must be offered the stakes in defining the country's future. But why would the government care if there is an easy way out? Under the pretext of the defense duty, en-mass round-ups on the streets or public transport will continue to proliferate unless you pay attention.

The same goes about solving a demographic challenge after the war or reintegrating Donbass and Crimea. Not closed borders, not ramped-up propaganda, but decent wages, affordable housing, and social security could convince people to stay or return. Not arrogant moralising, trustworthiness tests, or re-education camps but mutual respect, recognition of human dignity, and shared responsibility for rebuilding could enable reconciliation.

*Support the unions!* They are the only established mass organizations that exist specifically for wage earners. Even if they are not the most militant but overly bureaucratic and helpless or even only semi-alive, there is nothing else. Institutional recognition of unions' special role in postwar development could revitalize them and incentivize a union drive. It would also establish a credible agent to battle corruption and social dumping. Obviously, some trade unions will be immediately taken over by opportunists. But this is also the reason to account for internal democracy and autonomy of their local chapters or the space for independent union activity.

*Agree to disagree!* Some things Ukrainians believe in may seem wrong or irrational to you. You could be correct, but the very same concepts might have different meanings. In modern history, Ukraine only had periods of peace. Its right to exist is openly questioned. Ukrainians have long been disappointed in their rulers and often lack leverage over them other than rising up once in a while. Then, there is no wonder a [greater trust in international involvement](#) exists. Choose your battles and focus on what we have in common!

*Build connections: person to person, city to city, association to association!* The people's movements worldwide have accumulated enormous political experience you can share. Traditional left

narratives are discredited in Ukrainian society because of their misuse. So, the people you connect with may not be politically educated, but this is where praxis matters more—extending your hand to fight together with a small-town mayor who cares about his citizens, a local union leader who is frustrated by indifference and powerlessness, or a recent immigrant who was cheated out of wage. Engaging those already here will be particularly relevant for years and can make a difference. Whether they stay or return, they will be equipped with this new experience.

There may be nothing revolutionary in such simple points. The calculation, however, is that many small steps can lead to incremental change by creating necessary conditions and carving out space for the progressive agenda. But to facilitate this, the left needs credibility and trustworthiness, which would be virtually impossible for those who undermine weapons supply.

No doubt, the left should do more than just send arms, but it is a bare minimum not to oppose. The right to defend yourself is meaningless without the means to fight. Refusing weapons provision is threatening Ukraine's survival as a country. Remember that the availability of arms is not the same as their use. Even if the war ends at the negotiating table, having weapons won't leave Ukraine at Russia's mercy, neither will Ukraine be helpless if Putin decides to violate the truce.

## Fighting until victory?

### *Stalemate*

For the situation as it is, there are no prerequisites for a quick resolution. The Russian army does not fully control any of the regions it occupied, except for Crimea. Yet all of them are now mentioned in the Russian Constitution as an inalienable part of Russia. Ukraine is equally bound by its Constitution. Stepping back and bending down risks provoking serious internal troubles only the right-wing would benefit from. Then, if no force can prevail, a risk exists of sliding into a prolonged, low-intensity conflict. It basically means even more destruction and less hope for the eventual revival. The best discussion to have in this case would be about securing civilian lives, integrating refugees, and lowering consequences for the world by, for example, setting [UN demilitarised zones at the nuclear power plants](#).

### *Russia's defeat*

The best guarantee of future peace is democratic Russia. While Russian imperialism is undoubtedly weaker than its rivals, challenging the US hegemony neither makes it more progressive per se nor a lesser evil for those who live next door. Even before Russia's turn to expansionism, life in Ukraine was marked by their constant interference in the political and economic life, their fight for cultural domination, and their projection of military power, including through having military bases in Crimea.

The [hope has always been](#) that forcing Russia to withdraw would catalyze a change within. This is why Ukraine keeps fighting. But it has costs. Foremost, the undeclared but horrific numbers of the dead and injured. The question is how much longer Ukrainian society can afford such sacrifice and what the consequences will be. In this struggle, support is a matter of raising the costs for Russia, so it folds earlier, and lowering them for Ukraine, so it survives. That's why both [the Ukrainian and Russian left](#) have been calling for stricter sanctions, a full stop to oil and gas imports, and timely provision of modern weaponry.

### *Truce*

The sides might decide to probe a possible armistice. But we have to bear in mind that Ukraine is a

smaller and weaker state, devastated by this war and experiencing serious demographic issues. The greatest fear about a ceasefire is to end up forgotten and alone. Then, nothing would stop Russia from launching another attack whenever they are better prepared. To have the slightest prospect to withstand, Ukraine would have to turn into a military camp and yet still live in a state of permanent insecurity. Precisely this is the most significant factor of the overwhelming support for NATO membership, as a deterrence, as a guarantee of peace. The only possible alternative would be a binding deal of similar effect. More than ever, your credible voice and support would be necessary to navigate this.

## **Hoping for the best, preparing for the worst**

In the end, solidarity with Ukraine doesn't have to be a sign of virtue. It is a rational response. If the legitimacy of the "spheres of influence" is recognized, what choice would smaller states have other than joining one of the blocks? If nuclear powers can dictate their will, who would ever choose disarmament then? If the dependency on fossil fuels allows emboldened autocrats to blackmail the world, what is left of democracy? If Ukraine falls, what would prevent criminal employers and mafia networks in your country from taking advantage of millions of traumatized and dispossessed people?

Ultimately, if the worst thing happens, it will be yet another nail in the coffin of global peace, contributing to the growing instability. In the new world of competing smaller imperialisms, marking the decay of the US empire, we will have to prepare for the darker times and lay the conditions for the eventual revival. The least we can do then is maintain links and not see each other as enemies, even if we end up in the competing camps. Let's follow Joe Hill's advice and not waste any time mourning. Let's organize!

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