

“People are showing solidarity”: A Ukrainian youth speaks

Thursday 17 March 2022, by [KOVALCHUK Yaroslav](#), [REIMANN John](#) (Date first published: 13 March 2022).

Here is a video of an interview with Yaroslav Kovalchuk, who lives in Ukraine. Below is a transcript of the interview. Yaroslav explained the issue of nationalism - its limited impact and how it arose, including the role of the fascist Azov Battalion. He talked about the economic situation before the invasion and his hopes for the future. He also explained the new mood of solidarity that's developed... and much more.

John Reimann | Oakland socialists was privileged to interview Yaroslav Kovalchuk, who lives in western Ukraine. We started off by him sending a message of greeting to some Burmese refugees here in the Bay Area, who organized a rally for Human Rights Day in Burma, in which they also recognize the crisis in Ukraine.

Yaroslav Kovalchuk | Anywhere in the world, we face dictatorships sort of trying to limit our freedom, either by military coup, as it happened in Myanmar, or by direct military action, as it happened in Ukraine now with Russian invasion. But regardless of location, there is international solidarity, of defending freedom. And I'm more than happy that people who are from different parts of the world realize it. And I also just want to say that I feel solidarity with their fighting for their freedom against authoritarian regime. So I hope things will change for the better in Myanmar, as well as in Ukraine.

John Reimann | And we know that it's not only political repression, but poverty, hunger, homelessness, all that is forms different forms of repression.

Yaroslav Kovalchuk | Ukraine is one of the if not the poorest country in Europe. And with the Russian invasion, I'm certain that will deteriorate the situation. One of the professors that I know called Ukraine, the most North northern state of the Global South. And [they think] that you probably not facing that much of poverty.... Since annexation of Crimea and war in Donbass, the situation in Ukraine deteriorated in terms of people, meaning public health care and general poverty, I would say that war just amplified all the bad tendencies that were in Ukraine and made them even worse. But I would say it's maybe also an opportunity for us after it's over to rethink the policies that we had before, that we may [see] more social solidarity, that people maybe will care much more about each other because right now we [see] people volunteer, ready to sacrifice their resources, their time for others who are in need. So I do hope that this something that will change trends and policies that were before the war. And it's very early to talk about it.... I know a lot of leftist activist who went to serve in the military to defend the country who volunteer so they understood they may be trade union activists. But all these people just channel all of their resources for the war cause to defend Ukraine.

John Reimann | How do you explain why the trade unions and and a left, maybe socialist movement did not develop prior to the the invasion?

Yaroslav Kovalchuk | In the '90s and into in early 2000s. Ukraine had several socialist leftist parties in the mainstream politics that in one way or another became victims of oligarch politics. So we had socialist party, we had communist party, but communist party just served some oligarch interest, and socialist party just imploded and then was destroyed by the oligarchs in the end.

And the problem with trade union activism is I think, general problem of most post Soviet states. You have this state controlled trade unions that sort of control everything and then you try to create your independent trade union and it's hard to do it required resources, so many activists who I know[in] the last days, they feel that there is a lot of work to do, and a lot of obstacles to do that, especially for grassroots activism, not talking about mainstream politics, and how you can affect that. So, I mean, there are social conditions for Ukraine, maybe to the people quite often support leftist politics. And then other parts of the story that the Soviet Union sort of discredited leftism as a label, although people support many leftist policies. So that's another obstacle people face. But yeah, that's, as I said, a very complex issue. But people were slowly doing something on the ground. It's an open question what they could do in the mainstream politics, but there was several initiatives, at least that I personally know activist that tried to do something and have some limited successes.

John Reimann | As I understand it, the main industrial area is in the East, including in Donbass. And so, that would, under normal circumstances be the heart of trade union activity. So how did the situation in Donbass with the two breakaway, so called republic's and so on, did that have an effect on developing a working class movement and also trade union, trade independent trade unions?

Yaroslav Kovalchuk | As I said before, probably oligarchs Ukraine killed it in the late '90s, early 2000s, because Donbass was in the '90s, one of the most politically active regions because it's a region of miners, first of all, and miner strikes, actually were quite effective and miners defending their rights in the 90s. But slowly, regionally leads and oligarchs to get under control and in the 2000s, we didn't have any major strikes. From time to time people organize something, but I feel like another problem, and I think it's relevant not only for people's Republic Donbass, but also from other regions of Ukraine: Working class interests were often sort of channeled in different directions because for example, as it happened with Donbass, People Republic, even those grassroots initiatives that were to defend local working class interests were hijacked by Russian imperialism and Russian nationalist ideologies. Russia is one of the main proponents on the international scale of conservatism and authoritarianism right now. So that's that was their interest. And they channeled all even this initiative into Russian nationalism, imperialism, not different political movements of Ukraine, but rather Ukrainian nationalists and their main opponent, so they tried to frame it: "Okay. Now, you, you guys, your main interest is defending, like Russian culture, whatever it is. But you know, the Ukrainian nationalists want your take your culture and your language from you."

That's for many politicians who try to sort of channel this different issue that people have said working class may have. First of all, what they care about is the social rights. But those Ukrainian politician and Russian politicians, and Ukrainian politicians, I mean, just like Yamulovich, tried to frame it as we are defending Russian language and Russian culture. So that's what they've been doing since '90s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, though, they tried to make politics about that rather other thing. So I would say, it happened before Yanukovych and actually that's something that helped him come to power in the first place. He successfully channeled those interesting in that direction saying, "you know, if you don't vote for me, those Ukrainian nationalists will come and force you speak Ukrainian, not Russian." That's not what was happening, but they tried to create fear of that.

John Reimann | The picture is painted here that it was Ukrainian fascists, who were the ones fighting against the two so called breakaway republics, and the Ukrainian fascist alone.

Yaroslav Kovalchuk | I would say that Ukraine has a problem with far right, but not on the scale that's often depicted by Russia, used by Russia. The current president Zelensky actually fired the previous interior ministry, Avakov, who actually was covering for Azov. The Azov Battalion exists, and it has been fighting in Donbass since 2014. But it's only one battalion. And most of the Ukrainian military is just, you know, regular Ukrainians quite often without any ideological affiliation. So, yeah, that's a problem. But it's only one battalion. And it's actually survived because of its patronage that it enjoyed from the former interior minister, while there were other firefighting paramilitary groups, which actually shrank gradually, because they didn't have that patronage.

John Reimann | Here, also some on the left, make a big issue out of Bandera, and that he's considered a national hero, and that sort of thing,

Yaroslav Kovalchuk | You've got one guy who sort of represented and he became sort of a symbol, and Russia used it in 2014. And even earlier, but after Maidan, and many people actually not knowing much about who is Bandera. But saying like, "Oh, Russian says he's bad. So I will support him" But not being actually Ukrainian nationalists at all. So Russia actually played for that, that Ukrainians not knowing much about, is he a Nazi collaborator he was actually that's very problematic figure. But actually, I'd say that's first of all, like Russia's responsibility for that, and some of the Ukrainian local nationalist politicians who are sort of playing into that. So it's mutual, but as I said, it's part of the internal debate. I wouldn't say that people are mass [Unclear]. There, it's still remains a controversial figure. And people when you bring it up, and people start, you know, talking about like, "oh, man, no, he worked for the Nazis." And that's problematic, but he resisted Russia and Soviet Union. And then, you know, people throw arguments, but there is no, consensus or support for this figure. And it still as wit Azov Battalion, that's an issue that should be discussed and is discussed in Ukrainian society. But Russia just opportunistically used it. Russian military actions just play into that. People say, "oh, if Russian say he's bad, probably he's good for us." And people don't go and actually know what, but he as a politician was about.

John Reimann | How do you see things developing there militarily and politically?

Yaroslav Kovalchuk | So far, I feel like the people are here, despite the fact it's more than two weeks, they're cautiously optimistic. Because no one expected the Ukrainian army will be able to defend more than two weeks, losing only one regional center in the South, and Russians not being able to capture any major city. And that's here optimism. But there is sort of another side of it that because Russia adopted this bombardment of residential areas, and many people losing their houses, seeing all this horrible images and basically fleeing from the combat zone. People are scared too. But I don't feel that people are sort of scared to be like, "oh we want to just give up to Russians." No, it's just rather, people are still getting angrier at Russians. They're doing that. They're [the Russians] not just conducting military operations to defeat Ukrainian army but they're attacking civilians for no good reasons. And they are claiming they came to defend us, you know, the first place people are like, No, you need to defend us. And now they're actually killing civilians en masse. And that's grim picture that get people scared of it, but I would say even more angry, especially after successful defense so I can definitely describe [to] you how people [feel] even if some major cities could be lost people are ready to fight.

John Reimann | What's your view of the US and other NATO countries providing arms for Ukraine.

Yaroslav Kovalchuk | To be honest, before this all started, I wasn't a big fan of NATO. I still consider it an imperialist force. But its influence here, for some reason, I consider positive because it's hard to imagine that Ukraine would survive without Western arms. Sure, it's in their own interest. And maybe some Western imperialism is mixed here. But being a person on the ground, I can see how you can use it to fight another imperialist that's better than [the one] that's right in

your face and ready to invade your territory and actually, more directly destroy your freedom. So when you can use it, and I would say that's something that I couldn't imagine I would say a year ago, I support NATO's policy of giving arms to Ukraine. That's something that really helps Ukrainian army to be successful. Definitely, I expect some influence that they would enjoy, but there is a room to fight it. And you know, for conventional politics in how we participate. So not idealizing NATO and saying that's like heaven and like, "Oh, they're so great", but being thankful for the help, and keeping in mind our political rights too.

John Reimann | Right. Are you all are people there in any contact with people inside Russia?

Yaroslav Kovalchuk | Some Russians say it's something unimaginable and they feel ashamed that it's horrible, that's going on right. And they do not support Putin. I heard people saying that you have Nazis in power, and that people trying to explain them, "no, no, no, we got like our president is basically a Jew. And he actually didn't have any policies that would support any Ukrainian nationalists. But it's hard to convince people who believe first of all Russian TV. And in my case, most of my cousins, most of my friends are leftists, or at least liberal left from Russia. And they're already critical about Putin regime. And they demonstrate solidarity. And actually, some of them donated money to support Ukrainian refugees. So that's also a tragedy in this situation, that societies were very close to each other and Putin decided to create a chasm that I don't know how deep it will go, and basically dividing some families.

John Reimann | Do you have some other observations you'd like to add?

Yaroslav Kovalchuk | I would be more happy if it was under better circumstances. But people are showing their sympathy and solidarity with Ukrainian people fighting against Russian invasion. That's something that also inspires us to continue whatever you do just to fight back, so I think me definitely, but other Ukrainians [also] appreciate any support that people give to Ukrainians. That's it.

John Reimann | Well, sometimes it takes a great shock to wake people up, you know.

Yaroslav Kovalchuk | Yeah.

John Reimann | And when we started this discussion, you commented that it's up to us Ukrainians to decide, or something to that effect, how we want society to move. But we know that it's never in reality [how it works.], Big business, or what I would call the capitalist class, operates internationally. And just like you explained how Putin, who's representative of the Russian oligarchs operates internationally in the US also. And so my view is yes, is up to the workers in every country to make their decision, but we also as a working class, are international and we have to operate internationally also. What's your thoughts on that?

Yaroslav Kovalchuk | Ah, I agree. And something of for me was always important to overcome this national boundaries that we often have. And you know, to fight a bigger evil or... I agree with you capitalism, and we have just different phases of it in a way with you know, with Putin being you know, more authoritarian proponent or China or you know U.S. you having a different approach. But yeah, in any conflict that we have on our planet, we should always look for people defending their rights to decide for themselves what to do and how we can help them but also building international ties that will help us build a global, just society. Ukrainian fight on the one hand, yes, it's a conflict between Ukraine and Russia. But on the other hand, I see it also as more global conflict between authoritarianism and, you know, either political or like companies or whatever, like trying to crush local communities and to subdue them to their own interest. That's something that we all can build our international solidarity on and support each other. So I heartily agree with you...

John Reimann | and and learn from each other also.

Yaroslav Kovalchuk | Yeah.

John Reimann So, on that note, I want to thank you very much Yaroslav, for taking the time. And I hope that we will stay in touch in the future.

Yaroslav Kovalchuk Okay, thank you very much for this interview.

John Reimann

Yaroslav Kovalchuk

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P.S.

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