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Vladyslav Starodubtsev (Sotsialnyi Rukh): 'Today, people are not just fighting for Ukraine but to destroy the Russian regime'

Friday 2 September 2022, by [FUENTES Federico](#), [STARODUBTSEV Vladyslav](#) (Date first published: 2 September 2022).

Six months into Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion, where is the Ukrainian resistance at? What is the general mood in Ukraine regarding possible negotiations and NATO? And what has the war meant for progressive forces in the country?

Speaking from Ukraine, Vladyslav Starodubtsev, an activist with democratic socialist organisation Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement), discusses these issues with Federico Fuentes.

[Note: The interview took place on August 27, just days before Ukraine launched its counter-offensive in the south of the country.]

It is extremely difficult to get accurate information regarding the situation on the ground in Ukraine. What can you tell us about the situation and where the war is at, six months after Putin launched his invasion?

Ukraine is currently facing a lot of serious economic consequences from the war. There is a generalised social collapse: mass unemployment; interest rates have skyrocketed; the housing market has collapsed; there are all kinds of economic problems.

Then there is the ongoing presence of Russia's army. I would say Ukraine did a lot better than everyone expected on this front — I don't think even Ukrainians expected we would do so well in repelling the invading force. The fact that, more than six months into this war, we are still here and still fighting says a lot. We do not have a strong, professional army with modern equipment. That the Ukrainian army has been able to launch counter-attacks on Russian positions was not something we would have expected. What it demonstrates is the level of people's determination to win the war.

For now, the war has become somewhat slow moving, without any significant progress on either side. It has become more positional, with armies shelling each other's trenches, without launching any serious attacks. It is somewhat analogous to the fighting during World War I, except today there are drones and modern equipment. We have a situation where one side launches 10 artillery barrages then stops; then the other side launches 10 artillery barrages then stops; and where, ultimately, the side that has enough ammunition for that extra barrage wins the battle. This is of course putting a lot of pressure on the Ukrainian army, because such fighting is very costly. Ukraine is catastrophically low on shells compared to Russia, which has a lot of Soviet shells and more developed rockets.

Amid this kind of stalemate, there have been increasing calls from outside Ukraine in favour of negotiations as a means to halt the further loss of lives. Those demanding negotiations often argue it is the United States, Britain, NATO or some other foreign power

that is pressuring Ukraine not to negotiate because they would prefer the war to continue to weaken Russia. How do you respond to this?

I would say that, in reality, the situation is the complete opposite. The United States, Britain, France, all of them have been prepared to sell out Ukraine from the start. Even before the war, they made it clear that they did not want to support Ukraine and viewed it as a lost cause. It is well known that in the days prior to the war, these powers were speaking with [President Volodymyr] Zelensky. People in power like [French president Emmanuel] Macron, [German chancellor Olaf] Scholz, were asking Zelensky to negotiate, to come to some sort of agreement in which Ukraine gave something to [Russian president Vladimir] Putin. They also told him US intelligence suggested Russia would be in Kyiv within two days of launching an invasion and that the best solution was for Zelensky to leave the country and prepare for partisan warfare once the occupation was completed. As you can see, this is not how things turned out.

This has put Western powers in an awkward position: not only did they not expect this but, at home, they have faced pressure from their own population who rightly believe Ukraine should be supported. Western powers that have been the main proponents of negotiations, not Ukrainians. Ukrainians feel a very justifiable anger towards these imperialist powers that have been pushing us to make peace with the occupiers. That is why I say the situation is the opposite of what those people claim: the imperialist powers have been pushing Ukraine to sell out its people.

This policy of appeasement will only help strengthen the existing world order, in which the rule of the strongest is enforced, rather than democratic means, and where the countries with the largest armies rule the world. Peace negotiation in Ukraine would motivate other states to carry out similar aggressions, carry out similar genocidal actions, because, in the end, they know that they can negotiate something for themselves out of it.

Such claims represent an awfully colonial way of speaking about Ukrainians, who do not want to be occupied and do not want to give any land to the enemy. After the brutal massacres in Bucha, in Irpin, no Ukrainian is even contemplating the possibility of negotiations. So much so that I would say that now, a lot of people are not only fighting for the restoration of the 2014 borders but for the destruction of the Russian regime. This is the general mood. When people hear someone talking about negotiating peace, they get very angry.

What impact has all this had on Ukrainian attitudes towards NATO?

It is interesting, because Ukrainian people now simultaneously really love NATO and really hate NATO. Before the war, NATO told Putin that Ukraine would never be allowed to join. This was once again confirmed by Scholz in a recent interview, where he said he told Putin exactly this. Many view this statement as giving Putin a green light to invade — which it was — because in the face of a real possibility of war, NATO just compromised and sought to appease Putin as much as possible. Because of this, people really hate NATO. They feel that NATO only wants to pursue its own interest. At the same time, a lot of people understand that if Ukraine had been in NATO in 2014, none of this would have happened. All this creates a very strange discussion around NATO: some people idealise NATO and, at the same time, hate NATO.

But I do not think Ukrainian people will need NATO if we win this war and the Russian regime collapses. The question of NATO is not as important today as it was before the war, when the general concern driving support for NATO was to stop Russian aggression. This worst fear has now come true, so joining NATO is not so much a major issue now.

What can you tell us about life in Russian-occupied Ukraine?

The situation in the occupied regions is one of occupation — it is a fascist occupation. This means repression, mass killings, holding hostage the families of political activists, repression against the LGBTQ community. It is a terror state where anyone who carries out political activity is brutally repressed. A lot of trade unions have been destroyed or forced to accept new labour contracts that are much worse than Ukrainian labour contracts, and all strikes are banned. A lot of ordinary people just went missing: they left home and never returned. There is also a lot of open looting and rapes carried out by Russian force. So the conditions are very dire.

In the occupied territories, Russian authorities have been pushing radical policies of assimilation. They have practically banned the use of the Ukrainian language and enforced the Russian language everywhere, including in schools and public administration. From September 1, when the school semester starts, the Ukrainian language will no longer be taught at any school in the occupied regions: no studying Ukrainian, no Ukrainian literature, not even within the subject of foreign literature. Russian authorities are inviting people, such as teachers and political commissars, from Russia to come to the occupied regions and take over positions in the education system and public administration. There is very clearly a forced assimilation drive underway to make everyone Russian. So conditions are awful: it's a fascist occupation.

How do Social Movement comrades believe the situation should be resolved in the Donbas region, given the fears some hold that a withdrawal of Russian troops could leave citizens in the Donbas subject to repression from Ukrainian forces?

First, I do not believe the situation for people in the Donbas could be any worse than it is now; that is not possible, as what they have now is an authoritarian state that relies completely on repression and where all conditions for dialogue are closed off. The people of the Donbas will be better off under any process of reintegration compared to their existing situation.

Second, I do not believe there is any generalised sense of hatred towards people in the Donbas. Of course, there will be a need to bring to justice those people who helped foment this state of terror in the Donbas and participated in the war against Ukraine. But even so, I see a desire on the part of the Ukrainian government to compromise on certain issues. So I don't believe there will be some kind of wave of generalised repression.

That said, reintegration will not be an easy process. For eight years, people in the Donbas have been living very different lives. People there have been living in a state where political discussion and action has been completely prohibited. The political culture in Donbas, compared to generally in Ukraine, is very different now. You also have the people who were forced to flee from the Donbas and left their homes and their previous lives. Then you have the situation of Ukrainians who stayed in the Donbas and have been treated as lower class people, while Russians were privileged. Some time will be needed for people to understand how to live together again after such a long period of living such starkly different realities.

There will be complex issues that need to be resolved too, such as the issue of language. It will not be easy to reconcile all of these and it will take time. But there has been no indication from the government that they are looking to repress the people living in Donbas. And I do not think there are any issues that cannot be overcome, especially if social support is provided to people and the population is allowed to participate in the dialogue.

Despite the war, Ukraine's parliament has continued to consider legislation, some of which has been progressive (for example, on the Istanbul Convention against domestic violence and equal marriage rights) and some reactionary (such as the recently passed anti-labour laws). What assessment does Social Movement make of the Zelensky government?

Even before the war, this has been one of the most popular governments Ukraine has had — which is not saying anything good about it, it was just not as awful as the previous ones. Zelensky's party, Servant of the People, has become the most progressive party in parliament on social issues such as LGBTQ rights, opposing violence against women, and so on. But most of these policies have been promoted with European integration in mind, and not because the party is itself progressive.

On the economic front, however, Zelensky's party is absolutely neoliberal; it has a market fundamentalist orientation. And this war has provided it with the opportunity of a lifetime to push through every unpopular legislation they have ever dreamt of. The war has given them carte blanche to do whatever they want. For example, they have adopted completely neoliberal legislation to deregulate labour relations, which has weakened the power of collective labour contracts and trade unions. Due to their market fundamentalist outlook, they view trade unions and any form of economic democracy as harmful to economic development and see a need to destroy unions. They are now realising this dream.

They have also adopted tax reform and are pushing for another round of tax reform, which they refer to as "10-10-10", and which would set tax rates at 10% for income tax, 10% for company tax and 10% for goods and services tax. It would be impossible to finance anything on the basis of such a taxation system, especially in times of war, so the end result will be no healthcare, no social services, no education, no public transport, no military industry.

The Zelensky government has also passed laws to promote privatisation in the middle of the war. This runs contrary to what almost every wartime government has ever done, which is to centralise the economy and mobilise the people to produce what is needed to win the war. For example, during World War II, there was a coalition government in Britain involving different parties that worked together to pursue a social vision. They even let Labour into the government and let workers play a role in their factories. The bourgeoisie at the time understood they needed to compromise with workers in times of war, because they needed social peace and social stability. This was crucial to the war effort. So workers mobilised and produced as many weapons as they could. But our government thinks that there is no need to produce any weapons because the West will give us everything we need. So in wartime, factories producing military equipment are being closed, under financed or privatised, and workers are being fired.

Our government is completely sabotaging the war effort: it has decided not to nationalise the economy, instead it has destroyed the war economy and decided to continue with its neoliberal, oligarchical pro-business agenda. They are not orientating Ukraine's economy to meet the needs of the people or to produce military equipment. They are using the war to impose their libertarian and market fundamentalist vision of the economy. They are pushing hard to entrench privileges for business, making use of the fact that trade unions and the media cannot do anything because of the war. In this regard, they are absolutely sabotaging the war effort.

I imagine this also applies to Zelensky's vision for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. Or has there been any significant push back on this?

Yes, the same is true for post-war reconstruction. The Zelensky government is pushing for the most neoliberal reconstruction possible. It wants to create a kind of "Wild West" neoliberal economy and sell off as much of Ukraine to the West as it can. This, of course, is an awful scenario.

Unfortunately, there is currently no real public discussion on alternative proposals for reconstruction. We, as Social Movement, are strongly promoting our vision for a socially progressive reconstruction. A lot of people in Ukraine don't understand what the difference is, but when you explain it to them they get on board with the idea of a social reconstruction. But there is a lot of

work to be done, because at the moment the government has monopolised this discussion. Given the media is completely focused on the war, it's very hard to even start this discussion.

Ironically, at the moment, it is the West saying to the Ukrainian government that it is being too radical in its economic measures and that it should consider some more Keynesian measures and implement certain social policies. They are saying: "Even by our standards you are absolutely awful". This is a big challenge, and we need to have a big discussion. We are working on this issue as it's absolutely crucial. That is one of the reasons we need to pressure the Ukrainian government on social issues, such as with the campaign around the anti-labour laws, because if we do not, we will end up with a very neoliberal reconstruction, where the sole focus is on the well-being of the most privileged.

In light of your comments regarding how some Western countries are viewing Zelensky's policies, how does Social Movement view the EU's offer of membership to Ukraine? And what position does Social Movement have towards EU membership?

Most of the left in Ukraine is supportive of European integration. We understand all the problems associated with the European Union and its neoliberal policies. In fact, Ukraine has already suffered the negative consequences of the European Union Association Agreement and trade agreements, which led to the removal of protectionist measures for Ukrainian businesses and state corporations and resulted in the collapse of our trade. In that sense, Ukraine has already experienced the worst aspects of the European Union; what we have not yet experienced is its good elements.

For example, the European Union has a lot stronger labour protections and rights compared to what currently exists in Ukraine. It also has a lot more socially progressive policies that Ukrainians would benefit from through integration into the European Union. So I would not say that European Union integration will necessarily harm the possibilities for Ukraine to reform in a more progressive direction, as the European Union is a lot more progressive than Ukraine is at the moment: EU membership would actually be a barrier to our ruling class adopting some of its most reactionary policies.

Moreover, by integrating into the European Union, Ukraine — as the largest country in Europe geographically — would be able to participate in the politics of the union. Currently, all decisions are being adopted somewhere else, without any consultation with us. Integration will create a new space for doing politics and we, as the left, will try to use this space. I think Ukrainian membership could be very important for the future of the European Union too, as it will have to change its policies to facilitate Ukraine's entry. This, in turn, will create possibilities for reimagining another Europe and developing socially progressive, even socialist, alternatives to the neoliberal project of the European Union.

For example, we know that there are negatives to EU membership, such as the law on competition. We also know that if Ukraine wins this war, we will need to rebuild the country. But any reconstruction will be impossible if we have to introduce competition laws that prohibit state investment in infrastructure, in production, in job security. So we need to start fighting now for European integration on the basis of special conditions to allow Ukraine to carry out a social reconstruction.

But we should be very clear: the European Union does not want to accept Ukraine. They have been constantly creating new barriers to Ukraine's entry, because they absolutely do not want to spend more money and time in integrating us. They have already established their power relations when it comes to Ukraine and want it to stay that way. All of Europe's privileged classes are fighting against Ukrainian integration. The European bureaucracy will oppose any integration of Ukraine, with or

without special conditions. They will continue to invent new, imaginative barriers and enforce new conditions to keep Ukraine out. And if Ukraine is adopted, they will seek to exploit Ukraine as much as possible and offer as few compromises as possible. They are already doing this, saying you can only join on this or that condition. But we can point to the example of the Danish people who joined the European Union with a lot of special conditions. Such conditions should be granted to Ukraine for its reconstruction to allow it to rebuild a social state after the war.

Social Movement was started to provide an alternative for Ukrainian working people to oligarchical politics. How has the war — and the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians to meet the Russian threat — affected the pre-existing Ukrainian political routine? What opportunities, if any, is it opening for Social Movement?

The war has changed Ukrainian politics dramatically. There is a quote from Franz Fanon regarding how situations of war and revolution create a sense among people that they can govern themselves due to finding themselves in the situation of having to organise collectively to fight against their oppressor. This is what we are seeing in Ukraine: people are organising themselves as volunteers in the army, in the factories, everywhere, all of which has built a strong sense of solidarity and cooperation among society. People have found new ways to cooperate, new ways to organise, and they feel a lot more empowered. They understand that it is them who are at the forefront of this war effort, not the ruling class, and that without them there would be nothing. This has revolutionised politics and I think this will translate into more popular activity after the war, because this feeling will not disappear just because the war ends.

Another effect the war has had is that the social bases of existing Ukrainian political parties have collapsed. Before the war, you had mostly pro-Russian and pro-European parties. Now, there is no such divide. Parties will need to find new issues and new ways to win over voters and get elected. So a lot of new discussions will arise; people will not just be talking about the same old pro-Europe/pro-Russia divide.

I would also say that, with the war, a lot more people have become sceptical of the idea of the West and of neoliberalism. Generally, before the war, many people would say: “The West is so great, we need to be like the West” and they supported policies that were adopted in Germany or the United States. But now, especially with all this drive for compromises with Russia and seeing that Europe is not really helping Ukraine, people are losing faith in the European world. People now view them as traitors who are not helping us to win our just war of national liberation. They say: “Why should we follow them, we don’t want to be like them.”

The left has also become a lot stronger and more accepted as a result of the war. When Maidan revolution happened and the war started in the Donbas in 2014, the left was generally viewed as traitors, because we had, unfortunately, a lot of Stalinist, pro-Russian leftists and no strong anti-imperialist left: the left was viewed just as people who supported or wanted to compromise with Russian imperialism. Now that Social Movement, as well as other left organisations — anarchists, socialists, social democrats — are all participating in the war effort, this argument has collapsed and people are now saying: “OK, the left are for Ukrainians, they support us and worry about our problems. They are with the people and not against the people.” This has created a very good environment for building support for left-wing politics and developing a left-wing political subject, which does not currently exist because of the failures of the left to support the people around Maidan and the war in 2014. Now, everything has changed and people, even those with a nationalist outlook, have become a lot more open to the left.

Western leftists are often uneasy about supporting Ukraine due to their own government’s stated support for Ukraine? What are some demands leftists in Western imperialist

countries could be placing on their governments? How can leftists in Western imperialist countries offer practical solidarity to Ukrainian people?

First, the Western left should continue pressuring their government to support Ukraine, because it is in the interest of their governments to sell out Ukraine. They do not want any of these problems created by Putin's invasion of Ukraine; they want to continue business as usual with Putin. They want Russia's gas, they want new contracts, new trade deals, they want to appease their capitalists. Because of this, they want to backtrack on their stated support for Ukraine. The left should be mobilising on the streets to pressure them to continue supporting Ukraine. The left should be the ones saying: "If you won't help Ukraine, then we will oppose you and we will be the ones who stand up for Ukraine to demand more support". We, as the left, need to fight for a more democratic world, not a world based on military invasions and the imposition of the will of the strongest.

The left should also continue fighting to accept all refugees. They can use the exception that Ukraine's situation has created to say: "OK, we have this situation in Ukraine. But we have similar situations all around the world: What's the difference with Syria? What's the difference with Palestine? With any country that is undergoing conflict, war, repressions, occupation? Why should Ukraine be made into an exception?" The treatment of Ukrainian refugees should be raised as a basis for arguing that all refugees should be supported. The conflict in Ukraine has shown up the racism of most Western governments and this needs to be highlighted.

Then there is the question of sanctions. If stronger sanctions are not imposed on Russia, then there will be many more deaths, many more refugees, much more social collapse, much more hunger. We need to sanction Russia so that it cannot afford to pay for soldier's wages or more military equipment. If they cannot do this, then the war will stop. So we need to continue pushing for sanctions.

The left should also campaign against the neoliberal actions of our government, for example the anti-labour reforms, because the left needs to not only fight against imperialism but for its vision of a post-war future, and not just for Ukraine. If Ukraine wins — and I hope it will — this will lead to a reshaping of the existing world order, particularly if the Russian regime collapses. Think about it: we will need to rebuild our country, and to do that we will need to reform the European Union. Moreover, we will need to do something about Russia. There will need to be a discussion regarding what any new economic and security architecture should look like and how it should deal with similar problems in the future, as well as problems such as debt.

All of this will create opportunities for pushing for a socially progressive vision for this new world order. And this needs to start in Ukraine and now, by speaking out about all of these problems — debt, reconstruction, etc — because the world's eyes are currently on Ukraine. If Ukraine is reconstructed along neoliberal lines, then the ruling classes will use this model to propagate the adoption of similar policies in their own countries. But if Ukraine is rebuilt along social lines, it sets a precedent. So this is a very important fight.

There is also the question of international political structures, such as the United Nations. The fact that this war happened demonstrates something is wrong with the existing structures. The left needs to think through what a democratic world order could look like. Not a world order like the one Noam Chomsky proposes, based on compromises between imperialists at the expense of smaller nations, but one where the difference between major powers and smaller state is greatly diminished; where countries such as Ukraine, the Baltic states, Taiwan are given a voice and have a democratic way to protect themselves from the influence of imperialist powers. This discussion needs to start now.

Lastly, anyone on the left can come here to provide direct support and aid. Ukraine is very poor

country; its army is very underorganised and underdeveloped, so any aid is greatly appreciated. There have been several good examples of trade union convoys that the left has organised to provide solidarity and aid to workers fighting on the front line. Supporting Ukrainian workers in this fight is a very leftist thing to do and a lot more people should be doing this. Perhaps the most radical way to support Ukraine is to come here to fight. A lot of people talk about the Azov battalion, but if there was just one battalion made up of international left volunteers, no one would be talking about Azov; instead everyone would be talking about them and how the left supports Ukraine.

Unfortunately, little of this has happened due to the racism and unjust attitudes of many on the left towards Ukrainians, who they view as all being Nazis or “puppets of NATO”. The left needs to show their support for Ukraine, otherwise they only feed the idea that the left is against Ukraine and that only right-wingers are helping Ukraine, which is absolute nonsense. Unfortunately, by always talking about Azov while never providing any support, the left in the West only helps promote this idea.

Overall, the left needs to rethink itself and create practical solidarity with the people, rather than try to speak over others, as is the general tendency on the left. In Ukraine, this situation has been a big challenge for us; a challenge to see how the left can re-imagine itself and do the things that the left should be doing: fight for the emancipation of people and build international solidarity. But this war has also created a lot of possibilities for the left, in Ukraine and internationally. For example, we are talking with each other even though we are thousands of kilometres away. This would never have happened without this war. All this helps create new connections and new possibilities for a new kind of international solidarity. These possibilities should be developed and I hope they will.

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