

'The war has revolutionised politics in Ukraine'

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Six months into Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, where is the war effort to repel the occupying force at? What is the general mood in Ukraine regarding possible negotiations? And what has the war meant for progressive forces in the country?

Speaking from Kyiv, Vladyslav Starodubtsev, an activist with Ukrainian democratic socialist organisation Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement), discusses these issues with *Green Left's* Federico Fuentes.

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

What can you tell us about where the war is at?

I would say Ukraine has done a lot better in repelling Russia's invading force than everyone expected. I do not think even Ukrainians expected we would do so well. That the Ukrainian army has been able to launch counter-attacks on Russian positions demonstrates the level of people's determination to win the war.

For now, the war is more positional, without any significant progress on either side. Both armies continue shelling each other, but without launching any serious attacks. This is putting a lot of pressure on the Ukrainian army, because such fighting is very costly and Ukraine is catastrophically low on shells compared to Russia.

There have been calls outside Ukraine for negotiations, with the idea raised that foreign powers are pressuring Ukraine to continue the war to weaken Russia. How do you respond to this?

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 in the days prior to the war, [French president Emmanuel] Macron and [German chancellor Olaf] Scholz were asking [Ukrainian president Volodymyr] Zelensky to give up something to Putin.

Western powers have been the main proponents of negotiations, not Ukrainians. But this policy of appeasement will only motivate other states to carry out similar aggressions, knowing they can negotiate something for themselves out of it.

Ukrainians feel justifiable anger towards these imperialist powers pushing us to make peace with the occupiers. Ukrainians 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. Now, people are not only fighting for the restoration of the 2014 borders but for the

destruction of the Russian regime.

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

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. Many viewed this statement as giving Putin a green light to invade — which it was — because faced with a real possibility of war, NATO sought to appease Putin. Because of this, people really hate NATO.

At the same time, a lot of people understand that if Ukraine had been in NATO in 2014, none of this would have happened.

But I do not think Ukrainian people will need NATO if we win this war and the Russian regime collapses. NATO is not as important 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 fascist occupation: 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. Russian forces carry out open looting and rapes, and a lot of ordinary people just go missing. The conditions are very dire.

Russian authorities have practically banned the use of the Ukrainian language and enforced the Russian language, including in schools and public administration. They are inviting people from Russia to take over positions in schools and public administration. There is a forced assimilation drive underway.

How does Social Movement believe the situation should be resolved in the Donbas, given fears a Russian withdrawal could lead to repression by Ukrainian forces?

First, the situation for people in the Donbas could not be any worse than it is now. What they have now is an authoritarian state where all conditions for dialogue are closed off.

Second, there is no generalised sense of hatred towards people of the Donbas. Of course, there will be a need to bring to justice those who fomented this state of terror in the Donbas and participated in the war against Ukraine. Even so, I see a desire on the part of the Ukrainian government to compromise on certain issues. So I do not believe there will be generalised repression.

That said, reintegration will not be an easy process. For eight years, people in the Donbas have been living in a state where political discussion and action is completely prohibited. You also have the people who were forced to leave their homes and previous lives. Then you have Ukrainians who stayed and have been treated as lower class people while Russians were privileged.

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 these issues and it will take time. But there are no issues that cannot be overcome, especially if social support is provided and the population is allowed to participate in the dialogue.

What is Social Movement's assessment of the Zelensky government?

Zelensky's party is progressive on social issues such as LGBTQ rights and violence against women. But most of these policies are promoted with European integration in mind.

On the economic front, Zelensky's party is absolutely neoliberal — and this war has provided it with the opportunity of a lifetime to push through every unpopular legislation it has dreamt of.

They have adopted neoliberal legislation to weaken the power of collective labour contracts and trade unions. They are pushing tax reform that would set tax rates at 10% for income tax, 10% for company tax and 10% for goods and services tax.

The Zelensky government has also passed laws to promote privatisation. This runs contrary to what wartime governments do, which is centralise the economy and mobilise people to produce what is needed to win the war. Instead, in wartime Ukraine, factories producing military equipment have closed, been under financed or privatised, and workers are being fired.

Rather than nationalise the economy, the government has continued pursuing its neoliberal, oligarchical, pro-business agenda. In this regard, they are absolutely sabotaging the war effort.

I imagine this applies to Zelensky's vision for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction...?

Yes. Zelensky is pushing for the most neoliberal reconstruction possible. It wants to create a "Wild West" neoliberal economy and sell off as much of Ukraine as it can.

Unfortunately, there is no public discussion on alternative proposals for reconstruction. We, as Social Movement, are strongly promoting our vision for a social reconstruction. But there is a lot of work to be done. Given the media is completely focused on the war, it's very hard to even start this discussion.

That is why we need to pressure the 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.

How does Social Movement view the European Union and its recent offer of membership to Ukraine?

Most of the left in Ukraine is supportive of European integration. We understand all the problems associated with the EU. Ukraine has suffered the negative consequences of the EU Association Agreement, which led to the removal of protectionist measures and the collapse for our trade.

Ukraine has experienced the worst aspects of the EU; what we have not yet experienced is its good elements. For example, the EU has a lot stronger labour protections and rights, and more socially progressive policies, than Ukraine.

Ukrainian membership could be very important for the future of the EU too, as it will have to change its policies to facilitate Ukraine's entry. This will create possibilities for reimagining another Europe and developing social progressive, even socialist, alternatives to the neoliberal EU project.

If Ukraine wins this war, we will need to rebuild. But any reconstruction will be impossible if we have to follow EU competition laws that prohibit state investment. So we need to start fighting now for integration on the basis of special conditions that allow Ukraine to carry out a social reconstruction. We can point to the example of Denmark, who joined with special conditions.

But we should be clear: the EU does not want to accept Ukraine. They have consistently created barriers because they do not want to spend more money on integrating Ukraine. They have

established their power relations when it comes to Ukraine and want it to stay that way.

How has the war affected everyday politics? What opportunities has it opened for Social Movement?

There is a quote from Franz Fanon regarding how wars and revolutions create a sense among people that they can govern themselves due to 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.

People have found new ways to cooperate and organise; they feel a lot more empowered. This has revolutionised politics and this will translate into more popular activity after the war, because this feeling will not disappear.

The left has become stronger and more accepted as a result of the war. When the Maidan revolution occurred and the war started in the Donbas in 2014, the left was generally viewed as traitors who support Russian imperialism.

Now that left organisations are participating in the war effort, this argument has collapsed. This has created a very good environment for left-wing politics.

What demands should leftists in Western countries raise? How can they offer practical solidarity to Ukrainian people?

The Western left should continue pressuring their governments to support Ukraine, because it is in the interest of their governments to sell out Ukraine. They do not want the problems created by Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

The left should continue fighting to accept all refugees. The treatment of Ukrainian refugees should be raised as a basis for arguing all refugees deserve support.

There is the question of sanctions. We need to sanction Russia so that they cannot pay soldier's wages or manufacture military equipment. If they cannot pay for this, the war will stop.

The left should also campaign against the neoliberal actions of our government, 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, it will lead to a reshaping of the existing world order. There will be discussions regarding what any new economic and security architecture should look like. All of this will create opportunities for promoting a socially progressive vision for this new world order. And this needs to start with Ukraine, by speaking out about problems such as debt, reconstruction, etc.

The left needs to think through what a democratic world order could look like: not one based on compromises between imperialists at the expense of smaller nations, but one where differences between major powers and smaller states are greatly diminished; where the latter are given a voice and have a democratic way to protect themselves.

Lastly, leftists can come here and provide direct support and aid. There have been good examples of trade union convoys providing solidarity and aid to workers on the front line.

The most radical way to support Ukraine is to come here to fight. People talk about the Azov battalion, but if there was a battalion made up of international left volunteers, everyone would talk

about left support for Ukraine. Unfortunately, by always talking about Azov while never providing support, the left helps promote the idea that only right-wingers support Ukraine, which is nonsense.

Finally, the left needs to rethink itself and create practical solidarity with the people, rather than try to speak over others. This situation has been a big challenge for us: to see how the left can reimagine itself and do things the left should be doing — fight for the emancipation of people and build international solidarity.

This war has created new connections and new possibilities for a different kind of international solidarity. These possibilities should be developed and I hope they will.

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P.S.

[This is an abridged version of a longer interview, which can be read at [LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#).]

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