

Left positions on Ukraine's accession to the EU

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In the following article, Olena Slobodian, activist of the left Ukrainian group 'Sotsialnyi Ruch', suggest how and under which conditions emancipatory forces in Ukraine could support a possible EU accession of the country. She critically examines positions in the Western - especially the German - left that view the entire conflict solely from the perspective of geopolitics and cannot imagine a post-war Ukraine in the event of a Russian defeat other than as a "NATO regime" or "neo-colony".

The article reads as a continuation of her article "[Integration into social rights and higher wages](#)," which also deals with a possible accession of Ukraine to the EU.

The questions of Ukraine's reconstruction after the end of the war and its possible integration into the EU are becoming increasingly important. While EU integration has long been seen as a strategic political goal in Ukraine, this is perceived differently in some European countries.

The potential negative consequences of EU accession are well known: - neoliberal EU policies, structural inequalities between different European regions, etc. This is not new - the integration experiences of other Central and Eastern European or Balkan countries can be used for comparison. In the case of Ukraine, however, it is obvious that the country will in any scenario be dependent on EU material aid for post-war reconstruction. Moreover, in June, Ukraine was granted the status of an EU candidate country, which formally confirmed the political course it has taken. Even if the integration process will be as protracted as in the last eight years, Ukraine would in any case be forced to work closely with the EU. This realisation is crucial if one wants to analyse the situation in Ukraine constructively.

As described in more detail in my [article](#) in the [journal analyse & kritik](#) - which also discusses the pros and cons of possible European integration, the Ukrainian mainstream is extremely neoliberal in rhetoric and practice. Since the beginning of the war, several laws have been passed that severely restrict workers' rights:

- Law No. 7251 allows employers to suspend wages and dismiss workers if they are called up for military service or if the company's property is damaged as a result of the war.
- Law No. 5161 introduces "zero-hour contracts" which effectively abolish the minimum wage.
- Law No. 5371 provides for the abolition of labour protection standards for workers in small and medium enterprises, with the possibility of early dismissal. This may force wage earners to waive their rights themselves.
- Laws 5161 and 5371 also allow employers to include additional grounds for dismissal in the employment contract. They potentially open the door to the abuse of capital's power, which can affect particularly vulnerable groups.

These laws violate Article 22 of the Ukrainian Constitution (which specifies that, when amending

existing laws, the content and scope of existing rights and freedoms may not be restricted) as well as Article 291 of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. These provided, at least in theory, that trade facilitation should lead to full employment and decent work for all.

Even if some of the laws described above are only supposed to apply during the state of war, their repeal is not guaranteed. Particularly in a situation where neoliberal political elites are on one side and a civil society that is very passive in the struggle for social rights is on the other.

Probably many wage-earners who are now fighting on the front lines will return to struggle with much worse conditions than before the war. As a result, a wave of politicisation is to be expected, but not necessarily in favour of the left, which has been marginal so far. Of course, there has been much criticism of social inequality and the low standard of living in Ukraine in recent years. However, this was not at all dominated by the left and not transformed into a political mobilization. Rather, it existed as an independent part of the political discourse that populists of different colours played with when it was to their tactical advantage.

Creating an understanding among wage earners of the need to fight for their own social rights requires a lengthy, systematic and often thankless task, which is currently only carried out by individual actors such as 'Sotsialnyi Ruch'.

The post-war constellation will be difficult enough for the left. It would be unwise and unproductive to focus on a radical reorientation of foreign policy. A much better strategy would be to use the new opportunities and challenges productively. To this end, socially just proposals for reconstruction must be prepared now.

Projections in the German Left

The left discourse in Germany mostly does not go into the details of individual laws and specific political possibilities in Ukraine. The 'debate' revolves almost exclusively around superficial ideology and supposed distribution of roles: is it a proxy war? What role does NATO play? ... The background is clear, because from the German point of view the war against Ukraine is a foreign policy issue.

Unfortunately, such 'debates' are led by people who pretend to have studied the matter intensively. They express radical opinions about a country they don't really know and in which they don't really seem to be interested. We certainly see this concerning the question of possible EU accession. The critics are not interested in understanding the consequences for the people of Ukraine, but only in assembling the 'big picture'. Concrete consequences for the people then quickly become a minor matter. For example, it is not about what consequences integration will have for the rights of wage earners in Ukraine, but only about proving that Ukraine is a 'proxy' which is now to become part of the 'Western bloc'.

In this 'debate', terms like 'colony' have been used recently, as if Germany itself was not one of the most influential countries in the EU!

The real dependencies and possibilities of influence on Ukrainian politics that would arise in connection with EU accession require thorough research and systematic work. However, the debate within the German left so far has mostly been about its own positioning. Clichés and emotionalisation count more here than actual developments on the ground. The extent of 'colonialism', for example, will depend on the actors who then have the actual political power and the resistance they may have to face: Will Ukraine again be used as a country of cheap labour? Will Ukraine be treated fairly or will it be reduced to the role of a controlled agricultural country? Depending on what happens with the Russian regime, will it continue to serve as a shield for the

EU? These questions are of utmost relevance and much more important than general ideological narratives about NATO and its conspiracies against Russia. Influencing potential inequalities in the EU requires strategic thinking, knowledge of the institutional rules of the game and real and concrete power relations, not moralising and superficial historical comparisons.

The German left has so little to offer not only because it considers the people in Ukraine to be irrelevant, but also because it is very comfortable with its own marginal position in society. The grand narratives of geopolitics and 'colonisation' are a good alibi for the marginalised left in the West to cover up how much unpleasant work the left would actually have to do to become relevant again. The result is a situation where leftists, enjoying the comfort of one of the richest countries in the world, do not address their own self-created political situation, while at the same time suggesting to a peripheral country under attack that it should accept the occupation.

The social conditions outside Germany are completely ignored: it does not occur to German critics to ask themselves what systematic refusal to pay wages actually means in a country like Ukraine. Or what it means for one third of all workers in Ukraine to have to eke out a living in a shadow economy without any social guarantees. In Germany, one does not have to reckon with petty corruption, one does not have to rely only on oneself and one's own modest savings if one gets into trouble, because one can count on the social protection of the state. In contrast, many people in Ukraine could only focus on their own survival even before the war. All this leads to a different subjectivity that is less resilient to crisis, but at the same time creates opportunities for political participation.

As the 'debate' so far shows, it seems unlikely that the Western left will learn from its privileges. Anyone with a serious interest in Ukraine, or indeed in other peripheral countries, would first have to overcome this arrogance.

It would be wrong to assume that anti-Ukrainian positions are only voiced by a vocal minority and therefore need not be discussed at all. In fact, these minorities often have their own parties and organisations, in contrast to the often isolated leftists who are in solidarity with the people in Ukraine. Moreover, after eight months of war, it should have become clear how important the media representation side of the war is - 'loud minorities' can gain more influence than the silent and often scattered majority. Therefore, more coordination and organization [of the Ukraine solidarity movement] is needed, otherwise the left reaction to the war on Ukraine will continue to be dominated by anti-Ukrainian voices.

The role of Ukraine in the German debate

For a factual and fruitful debate on Germany's role, one should look at the problems that the war has made visible. Why is German corporatism, which often borders on corruption, not the focus of left criticism? Why is the question of civil society's lack of influence on uncontrolled and corrupt lobbying not on the agenda? One often hears that the authorities' reluctance to supply arms does not correspond to the actual mood of the population. Is this really the case? Why is the fact that a completely wrong and dangerous energy policy was pursued for decades not central? Why is it trivialised as criticism of individual politicians? Why not take more seriously the recurring topic of cyber security and the vulnerability of critical infrastructures to authoritarian regimes? These issues are consistently more important in general discourse than they are in left circles.

A left and emancipatory position on Ukraine must be developed independently and must not be instrumentalised for debates that only spring from ideological and geopolitical traditions. Although there are numerous organisations, associations and institutions in Germany dealing with Eastern Europe, German intellectuals, especially those on the left, have had little to offer. Yes - there are studies and research on Ukraine - but these are mostly in connection with Russia or only on specific

aspects - the question of Ukrainian subjectivity has hardly been discussed [in this expert milieu].

Today, a decolonial discourse is developing in many countries from Central Europe to Central Asia that were attacked and colonised by Russia in the past. This is happening more and more, regardless of the 'geopolitical' affiliation of the individual countries - people in EU countries like Poland or Lithuania understand the Russian colonial discourse just as much as people in Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan, who are increasingly dependent on Turkey or China. And all these people certainly have more expertise than the German left, which does not want to burden itself with research into Russian colonialism. Understanding this initial situation as a fundamental problem of the entire post-Soviet space is evident and much more useful than, for example, the constant search for 'hidden' right-wing extremism in Ukraine.

This context also helps to understand why, also from an emancipatory point of view, EU accession can be a strategic goal for Ukraine. As I point out in my article in AK magazine mentioned at the beginning of this article, European social systems and respect for workers' rights can serve as a model for further development in Ukraine. There are already some Eurosceptic voices - many refugees have had frustrating experiences in EU countries, for example, due to bureaucracy, difficulties in the housing market or in the health system. More and more people are asking themselves what is so good about Europe when it is so difficult to rent even a small room in Berlin or you have to wait months for a specialist appointment. Interestingly, Ukrainians perceive basic health care to be more accessible in their home country than in Germany.

Of course, these perceptions are only partly justified, because at a basic level, the European social systems are much better than the Ukrainian ones. Also, housing and health care policies in Ukraine are increasingly commercialised, and the state pursues neoliberal policies with no strategic goals other than commercialisation itself. In a [separate article](#), these differences are analysed using the example of health care. However, personal experience leads to a certain demystification of Europe in Ukrainian society. What consequences this will have remains to be seen. Will we seize the opportunity to avoid the mistakes of European neoliberalism or will the pendulum swing towards Euroscepticism in favour of an 'own' and familiar, supposedly less bureaucratic, neoliberalism. If Ukraine's own experiences and the widespread neoliberal discourse are added to the arrogance of the Western left, Euroscepticism will only increase and neoliberal policies will be all the easier to legitimise.

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Translated from German by MJ

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