

# Ukraine, Palestine, and internationalism

Friday 3 March 2023, by [SMITH Ashley](#), [STARODUBTSEV Vladyslav](#) (Date first published: 2 March 2023).

**Ashley Smith of the Tempest Collective interviews Vladyslav Starodubstev on the one-year anniversary of the war about the struggle for internationalist solidarity in Ukraine and Palestine.**

The end of February marked the one-year anniversary of Russia's imperialist war in Ukraine. Here Tempest's **Ashley Smith** interviews Ukrainian socialist **Vladyslav Starodubstev**, who will be speaking on a [panel organized by the Ukraine Solidarity Network \(US\)](#) and hosted by Haymarket Books on February 25, 2023. Starodubstev discusses socialist strategy in Ukraine, a principled approach to internationalism, and how the international Left can build solidarity among the exploited and oppressed from Ukraine to Palestine.

**Ashley Smith: The Ukrainian left faces a challenge of both joining the resistance to the Russian invasion and seizure of Ukrainian land and staking out an independent position from the elites and the government. What's your approach in general, and what are the key arguments and initiatives that you make?**

**Vladyslav Starodubstev:** We are acting in accordance with our program and principles. We are in solidarity with what the government does to help Ukraine win the war. We support what Volodymyr Zelensky's government does on the diplomatic, political, and military front to ensure unity in the war effort. At the same time, we are fighting against its anti-labor and anti-social policies, corruption, and ideological Thatcherism.

This is important because the government does act in a way that weakens Ukraine's ability to win. In fact, some of its decisions are so incompetent, misguided, and ideologically driven that they can appear almost as unconscious sabotage. There are many such examples, from lowering taxes on the rich to deregulating the economy, undermining workplace rights, attacking trade union rights, making cuts to social services, and failing to provide housing for millions of people, including internally displaced people. Even worse, despite demands from social movements for the government to build new munitions factories to build up our defense forces against Russia, the government put budget cuts before military preparedness, compromising our ability to defend ourselves.

Such criticism of the Ukrainian government is in fact commonplace. So, it's strange for us to hear that one needs to "criticize Zelensky's government." We and many other Ukrainians do that all the time, underscoring the fact of democracy in our country as compared to Russia, where such criticism lands you in jail. We are loyal to democratic institutions, but that doesn't mean that elected governments don't deserve criticism and open protest. In fact, criticism and protest is a part of our loyalty to democracy!

We are supporting the current government in terms of military and diplomatic unity for the victory of the war. But we are highly critical of it in most other areas, especially its neoliberal domestic policies, which disrupt unity in the war effort. They fracture our society, cause social instability, and

increase poverty. And we oppose them energetically.

The same goes for its questionable international positions on Israel or China. For instance, the Ukrainian government initially seemed prepared to abstain on a United Nations resolution condemning China's horrendous policy toward its Uyghur minority in Xinjiang. [Popular pressure on the government forced it to reverse its position](#). This is just one example of how political pressure from below prevented the adoption of harmful and corrupt decisions.

Such activism is essential to correct and control the government, ensure democracy, and fight for social prosperity. Members of Sotsialnyi Rukh are involved in all these efforts. Even during the war, our organizing has not stopped for one day, even as we all stand united against Russia's invasion and its occupation of our land. It is essential to do both. We are fighting not only for our survival and independence, but also for a society with the democratic space for criticism and dissent and economic conditions that guarantee better lives for our country's majority.

**AS: One of the areas where you are likely to come into conflict with Zelensky's government is over its attempt to curry favor with reactionary, oppressive states, in particular Israel. First, why is Zelensky so determined to strike an alliance with Benjamin Netanyahu's government, especially when it has maintained friendly relations with Vladimir Putin? Second, how have you challenged this and expressed solidarity with Palestinian's struggle for national liberation?**

**VS:** Ukraine's relations with Israel and Palestine are, to say the least, strange. Ukraine has recognized Palestine as a sovereign state. It has a Palestinian embassy, diplomatic relations with the Palestinian Authority (PA), and was a member of the [Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People \(CEIRPP\)](#) until it withdrew in 2020. Ukraine didn't announce this departure, so it is fair to say that the reason was geopolitical.

Unfortunately, a lot of the government's actions are guided by stereotypes and geopolitics. Many Ukrainians wrongly see Israel as a role model—a "war democracy" faced with autocratic states around it. For some people, Israel and Palestine are a civilizational identity issue: they see Palestine as "Russia-aligned," while Israel is seen as part of "the Western world." Worse, some even compare the PA's role with the Russian occupation of Donetsk, Crimea, and Luhansk. That can lead both the government and the people to take terrible positions.

Nevertheless, Ukraine's diplomacy has actually upheld positions consistent with recognition of Palestine and its claims. But not without contradictions. Just recently, Ukraine [voted in committee in favor](#) of a UN resolution calling for an International Court of Justice investigation into Israel's occupation, but [did not attend the General Assembly vote](#) "in order to give a chance to the relationship with Netanyahu." The vote in committee is actually consistent with previous votes and cannot be explained as a "pressure on Israel to support Ukraine." Still, there are enough exceptions that are the product of geopolitical compromises to preserve "healthy relations" with Israel and also in order to get weapons to fight Russia.

Sotsialnyi Rukh, in contrast to the government and its contradictory positions, is guided by universal principles of human rights and recognition of oppressed nations' right to self-determination, democracy, and social freedom. We apply these to all nations, regardless of geopolitics. Thus we consistently stand in solidarity with Palestine and its struggle against Israel's occupation. We regularly post [statements and articles](#) in support of Palestine, and try to inform Ukrainians about Israel's crimes against Palestinians.

We know that the PA position on Ukraine certainly isn't good. But that is no justification to withhold

our solidarity. We hope to play a role in educating Ukrainians about what should be a natural sense of solidarity between peoples, each in their own distinct ways oppressed by imperialism and under occupation.

**AS: You were recently on a program with Bill Fletcher, Ramah Kudaimi, and Rafael Bernabe on [The Real News Network](#) about solidarity among oppressed nations in struggles against imperialism. One of the questions that you addressed was the disproportionate attention garnered by Ukraine compared to other nations like Palestine. Often this is used by campists and others to “whatabout” Ukraine, counterposing its struggle to those of other oppressed nations, especially those under the thumb of the United States and its allies. How do you approach this issue? How can these struggles be seen as complementary rather than in conflict?**

**VS:** It is true that Ukraine now gets a lot of attention in the media and in the world, far more than other oppressed nations. Those of us in Sotsialnyi Rukh recognize this. For us, it is a responsibility to use this attention to widen the scope of the struggle.

I perfectly understand the frustration that people feel when their experience is downplayed while Ukraine’s is amplified. There are certainly double standards that flow from [geopolitics and racism](#). That inequality of attention can sow distrust and dishonesty. We in Sotsialnyi Rukh see as one of our tasks to ask the question, “Why such an unequal approach?”, expose the inconsistency, and use the world’s focus on our struggle to highlight those of others.

We show that the world’s dominant powers and the media do not have an approach of universality, of support for human rights, democracy, and liberty without exception. Such violations of universalism even impact Ukraine. For example, sections of the establishment in the West give undue attention to Putin’s demands, worry about “him losing face,” and ignore Ukrainians and our demands. Against this, we must argue for a principled universalism, regularly violated by all the dominant powers. In doing that, we can provide an alternative that builds global solidarity.

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That’s why we bring attention to other struggles like those in Syria and Iran. Ukrainians tend to identify with them more than with the “civilized” West. We have protested together and helped each other in the past and today. We have had a lot of campaigns of solidarity with Syrian people. And Syrian communities abroad were among the first to organize solidarity with Ukrainians. The same is true for Iranians. In tragic conditions, people are building bridges with one another based on similar experiences and traumas. Such solidarity can be very empowering.

Thus Sotsialnyi Rukh tries to use the privileged coverage of Ukraine in mass media for two goals. First, to win more support for our struggle and save thousands of lives of those who are living under occupation, mass bombing, and threats of yet another offensive by the Russian state. Second, to promote a universalist approach of solidarity with all struggles of the oppressed and exploited from Palestine to Xinjiang.

**AS: One of the most shocking developments has been the betrayal of Ukraine’s national liberation struggle by countries with their own experience of national oppression, such as South Africa. [Michael Karadjis](#) has importantly explained that they do not represent the will of their people, who have been on the whole sympathetic with Ukraine’s struggle, but**

**that of the elites and their states. Do you agree with that? And what are the interests of those states and elites in Russia and its backer China?**

**VS:** I think Michael Karadjis cleverly exposes some of the problematic positions various states in the Global South have taken on Ukraine. He is certainly right about some states. Some of what he says does not, of course, apply to all of them. Some of the reasons for bad positions are economic and others are the result of lack of information and lack of connection to Ukraine and Ukrainian voices.

Another factor is the Russian state's massive propaganda operation, which pumps out misinformation about Ukraine, its history, and its politics. Such propaganda gets recycled in the mainstream media of some countries and that, combined with Russophile state officials, crowds out objective voices and Ukrainian voices, impacting popular opinion and disrupting what should be a natural solidarity between people with common experiences of national oppression.

We are trying to break through this wall of propaganda by connecting struggles, establishing contact with the internationalist Left, unions, and social movements to exchange ideas and lessons. And we try to reach beyond those forces to mainstream organizations and figures, all to build understanding and solidarity between peoples.

Our members have visited South Africa, Brazil, and India, and people close to our organization regularly visit Palestine. These visits have been key in conveying what's actually happening in Ukraine and explaining what we see as the basis for solidarity. Through such personal and organizational connections, we hope to forge ties and common struggle for a more democratic and just world.

**AS: One final question about international politics. Ukraine has no choice but to appeal to the U.S. government and NATO for weapons to defend itself. That is essential for the armed resistance. At the same time these powers and the European Union have a neoliberal agenda for Ukraine. How do you position yourselves on this? How do you advocate for Ukrainian self-determination against these other great powers that are, for their own reasons, backing your fight against Russian imperialism?**

**VS:** Actually, Ukrainian officials use the [rhetoric of fighting against "foreign control" as a cover](#) to pursue their own neoliberal agenda, which is homegrown, not imposed. In reality, the EU and United States have raised criticism of Ukraine's policies. EU officials often tell Ukraine that its attacks on labor rights violate International Labour Organization standards and "European principles." In fact, [one Ukrainian politician actually complained that the EU](#) should not "dictate how a country should organize its social insurance system.... It seems to me that we should not allow external management in our country."

The U.S. macro-financial help comes with instructions for its social usage. So, the EU and U.S. don't pursue a neoliberal vision for Ukraine, and they are criticizing radical market policies of Ukraine as unwise. But they do not make these criticisms strongly because of the need to preserve unity in supporting Ukraine. Thus, the rhetoric of the EU and U.S. actually helps us, trade-unions, and other social movements to push a progressive agenda.

Even taking into account how neoliberal U.S. politics are, Washington uses language in the case of Ukraine that is rather different than in the United States. Biden, at least rhetorically, tries to be a "New Dealer." Our Thatcherite officials react to such rhetoric by calling it "communist." So, in our context, Biden actually makes our case easier.

And it is made even more so when left-wing forces around the world pressure their governments to

pursue progressive policies in Ukraine. That's how the international Left, especially unions, politicians, elected officials, can play an important role in helping us fight neoliberalism here in Ukraine and globally.

**AS: So, let's talk about how you combat neoliberalism a bit more. Zelensky's government, even as it leads the war effort, continues to press for neoliberal "reforms," including attacks on unions and their right to organize and defend workers' rights and living standards. What do you say about Zelensky's policies? And what have you done in and with unions and social movements to resist these attacks?**

**VS:** We are organizing campaigns, producing research, unionizing workers, and organizing protests to advance an agenda that will strengthen our country's resistance to Russian imperialism. That brings us into conflict with the government over some of its policies that weaken the resistance, as we discussed before. It is our responsibility as the Left to fight against imperialism, but also to fight for the betterment of human lives as well as democratic and social rights. In Ukraine it's all part of the same struggle.

Big business doesn't want to bear its fair share of responsibility in fighting the war. And the government often adopts a Thatcherite ideology that is both detrimental to national unity and frankly incompatible with reality. That brings us into conflict with big business and the government.

As part of our organizing efforts, Sotsialnyi Rukh launched TRUDOBORONA (Labor Defense). It provides legal advice and advocacy for workers. It has won dozens of cases against employers. It also drew up a blacklist of companies that have engaged in profiteering off the war, pressuring them to stop these practices. We also worked with trade unions to force the Ukrainian government to moderate and delay implementation of anti-labor laws. However, we have not yet successfully blocked them. All of this shows that, even in a time of war, we can make progress on social and labor demands against companies and the government.

**AS: In a recent meeting of the European Network in Solidarity with Ukraine, Razem's Zofia Malisz raised a concern that we need already to be thinking and planning around the reconstruction of Ukraine after the war. As we know the U.S. and EU will likely push for reconstruction on neoliberal terms. What kind of reconstruction do you think is needed? How would this be a part of the international struggle against neoliberalism and capitalism?**

**VS:** We must struggle for a reconstruction that puts people and their needs first, one based on planning and cooperation. This struggle should be interconnected with the question of how we organize the economy now—a war-economy—to unite the country and concentrate all resources on winning the war, something that includes addressing people's needs.

For reconstruction after the war, we should look to historical precedents. When World War II ended, many countries adopted ambitious plans of rebuilding and reconstructing more just and equal societies. The New Deal in the U.S. was a model for other countries to organize their economies, and International New Dealers pushed for a bold reformation of the world's economy, but this radical vision was destroyed by the Truman administration and financial capital, so only bits of it were adopted.

At the same time, Britain's socialist government headed by Clement Attlee introduced radical reforms, including the creation of a welfare state, a wide array of nationalizations, expanding available housing, and creating the National Health Service. Of course, Britain or the U.S. cannot be compared to Ukraine, as they were imperial and colonial powers. But reforms they implemented give

us examples for effectively restoring an economy, centered on people and their needs.

We in Ukraine should draw on these and others for our own reconstruction. At the core of ours must be a program of labor and social reforms, government nationalization and planning, social welfare programs, affordable housing, inclusivity, and decentralization. We must block any further neoliberal “shock doctrines” like those that were imposed on post-Yugoslavian states after the Yugoslav wars and on Iraq after the U.S. invasion. Those caused social disaster, not reconstruction.

Ukrainian reconstruction is a fight between two worldviews—one, a social, developmentalist one, and the second, a neoliberal one. We are for the first, while business elites and market fundamentalist politicians are for the second.

Our struggle for a progressive reconstruction is also an international one. If we are able to win, we can set a counter-example to neoliberalism and its austerity-based strategies for reconstruction and recovery. We can provide a precedent for other countries rebuilding themselves. Our fight is thus part of a struggle for a more just new world order.

Of course, I understand that such a social reconstruction isn’t the same as socialism. In fact, it is a quite orthodox way of dealing with postwar recovery. But it is a good starting point to pursue an alternative way of thinking about social, political, and economic issues and, from there, a good first step to opening people to a socialist vision and far more radical reconstruction of society.

In this way, Ukraine opens new doors for discussions about what our world could look like. Russia’s invasion, together with actions of other states in recent years, has undermined the existing world order. At the same time, these tragedies have forced us to fight for human rights, equality, and democracy, for the renewal of the socialist movement, and for its reaffirmation of internationalism and universalism.

That is the opposite of the geopolitical cynicism that dominates a big part of the Left, which excuses or justifies exploitation or oppression carried out by this or that state. Instead of that, we, as a Left, must build solidarity among all oppressed peoples throughout the world, without exceptions. That is the basis for genuine internationalism committed to collective liberation, equality, cooperation, and freedom.

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**P.S.**

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