

Self-determination for Ukraine!

Wednesday 29 March 2023, by [BOJCUN Marko](#), [ISMAIL Sacha](#) (Date first published: 11 January 2023).

Marko Bojcun spoke to Sacha Ismail about the threat of conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Marko is an independent writer and former academic; his books include *The Workers' Movement and the National Question in Ukraine: 1897-1918* and *Towards a Political Economy of Ukraine*. He is a supporter of the [Ukraine Solidarity Campaign](#).

The current crisis can be looked at from various perspectives, immediate and longer term. The war in Ukraine has been going on for eight years now. People are dying every day. 14,000 Ukrainian soldiers and civilians have been killed. We don't know how many on the Russian side. There are 1.9 million internally displaced people, forced to leave Russian-occupied Crimea or eastern Ukraine. Meanwhile the war is exacting a drain on the Ukrainian economy and the state budget, further undermining the social security, education and health systems. This is to say nothing of the impact in Russia, whose government does not reveal the true number of its own fatalities.

I think there is a strong likelihood of this war escalating into something even more serious.

We are seeing the Russian project of regional imperialist expansion and the American project of integrating East Central Europe into its own international order coming up against each other on the eastern border of Ukraine. The problem will not go away until that imperialist rivalry is overcome. I don't believe it will be overcome by the big powers cutting a deal over the heads of the Ukrainians. There is a core issue of self-determination for Ukraine as a nation and as a state.

Do you see the threat to Ukraine as symmetrical?

No. Military aggression has come from the Russian side – the occupation of Crimea and its incorporation into the Russian Federation against the will of the majority of its population, the presence of Russian troops on the border, the support for the separatist movements in Ukraine's Luhansk and Donetsk provinces. The Russian state's objective is to force the Ukrainian state to subordinate its foreign, military and economic policy to Russia.

On the other side, Western military support for Ukraine is miniscule. The Western support is really from international financial institutions, which have extended very big loans to the Ukrainian government and private businesses. Their basic goal is to keep these loan repayments going. There is little in the way of productive investments into the Ukrainian economy unless they are tied up with Western firms acquiring assets and expatriating their profits.

So what is the issue with NATO membership?

NATO says that membership is open to Ukraine, but Ukraine has not been invited to join. A country can't be admitted to NATO if it has an unresolved internal territorial dispute. Ukrainian membership is simply not on the agenda.

Russia is claiming that NATO is a threat to its security because NATO states have supplied, for instance, anti-tank missiles and drones which are used to defend the border against Russian

incursion. This really is minimal support. Prominent NATO leaders in Europe have said they would not come to the defence of their own member states in the Baltic if they are attacked by Russia – and certainly not Ukraine or Georgia.

What Putin actually wants is for the Americans to enter into a direct bilateral relationship to cut a deal on Ukraine. Ideally he wants the Americans to pressure the Ukrainian government into accepting a state entity – the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics – inside their territory that is answerable to the Russian state.

What is the American project in Europe today? It isn't what it was after 1989, or after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, when the US was extending its area of influence into East Central Europe, dominating the foreign policy of European states in return for their economic integration to the global market through the European Union. I don't think there is evidence of the USA pushing any further today through NATO or the EU, any evidence it has the military capacity in the region around Ukraine or the political will or a coherent broader project for that. However, Russia does have the military capacity, the political will and its own coherent project to incorporate Ukraine into its sphere.

Some on the left compare US military capacity in general terms to Russia and China and say the US is absolutely dominant as the global power. I don't agree with that way of posing the question. One cannot be all powerful everywhere at once. Moreover, what's decisive is the actual situation, the balance of forces in Ukraine and the wider eastern European region.

Why is the conflict heating up now?

Putin sincerely believes that Ukraine is not a nation, that the Ukrainian state is a kind of political fiction and so certainly the Ukrainians have no right to self-determination. He sees the Ukrainians, and the Belarusians as well, as the part of the Russian nation. He said this as far back as the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest and as recently as the 5,000 word essay he wrote in July 2021. I think he wants to end his time in office with a legacy of having reincorporated Ukraine into the Russian sphere of influence at least. Putin has said that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest catastrophe of the 20th century; he wants to reverse it by reconstituting the Russian state as a great power.

Russia needs to subordinate Ukraine to its project of regional expansion because Ukraine's territory, its labour, processing industries for raw materials and its transit facilities for oil and gas provide Russian banks and big business with their most important route to European markets, capital investments and technologies. It is central to the accumulation of capital. Germany is the single most important source of capital investment in Russia and the destination of much Russian foreign direct investment, trade and loans. It is a relationship on which many other countries in the EU single market also depend. That's why German big business continued to press behind the scenes for a rapid resolution of "the Ukraine crisis".

In terms of immediate claims Russia doesn't demand ownership of Ukraine, even the eastern regions, in the same way that it insists Crimea is its territory. It makes more sense for the territories under the DNR and LNR to remain as parts of Ukraine, where they can serve as platforms from which to lever Ukraine's domestic and foreign policies. Putin and others argue about Ukraine being part of Russia on a more general level, part of "the Russian world", as they see it. However, I think they want to move towards a situation where that general goal can actually be realised.

Putin could be in power for a long time, I think he might die in office, but right now, I guess his assessment is that the Biden government is weak and under pressure, internally and in terms of its

position in the world, for instance the withdrawal from Afghanistan and more broadly the global retreat of US power. Putin judges that now is his time to act and get a deal with the Americans over the heads of the Ukrainian state and its people.

What is the left in Ukraine saying?

The left in Ukraine is tiny, and divided between various small groups, mostly organised around publications. I'm not sure it's possible to describe one coherent reality. There are various activities being undertaken. In eastern Ukraine there is an Eastern Human Rights Group, led by Pavel Lisiansky, that is documenting repression in the Russian-occupied territories, criminalisation of those who oppose the occupation, suppression of Ukrainian language and culture in the education system. Meanwhile the Russian government is giving people in these areas Russian citizenship, over 802,000 passports handed out to date. It is bussing people over the border into Russian provinces to vote in its national elections. Thousands of miners, steel workers and others have been given jobs and assisted by the authorities to settle in various parts of the Russian Federation. Elementary democratic rights, including the rights of workers to self-organisation and independent representation, are denied.

In Crimea you have savage persecution of the Crimean Tatars, the prosecution and imprisonment of many who resist or criticise the occupation. People are being imprisoned all the time, particular Crimean Tatars. There are major environmental problems in Crimea as a result of the rapid build up of Russian military bases there. There is an acute water shortage. Russian government ministers have acknowledged that only 40% of Crimeans actually took part in the 2014 referendum on joining Russia. The proportion of people who support Crimea's annexation by Russia is even smaller today than in 2014 as a result of the political, environmental, economic and cultural damage that has come as a result of annexation. Groups on the left, liberal democratic groups and Ukrainian nationalist groups all work to document these kinds of injustices. You've got groups helping internally displaced people, refugees from abroad now living in the country or passing through it, communities on the front line of the war in need of food, clothing, shelter and documentation for their pensions and other social benefits, demobilised soldiers with long term injuries, trauma and struggling to reintegrate into civilian life.

The organisation Social Movement in Kyiv, Kharkiv and Kryviy Rih are involved in labour disputes. Research is carried out and published to inform the public of the massive offshoring of profits and the evasion of taxes by big corporations, national and multinational, that continually impoverish the system of health, education and social welfare. There's a campaign going on right now to stop a wholesale change to labour legislation. The Soviet era labour code is being rewritten by the Ukrainian parliament, undermining and destroying labour protection and the right to union representation. The war is by no means the sole cause for the country's ills. But the war has undoubtedly dug in its teeth and it undermines people's capacity to reproduce the necessary economic, social and psychological requisites for a normal life.

What does the left say about the war itself?

There are groups who oppose the Russian occupation of Crimea and its support for the separatist movements in the East, and who demand the complete withdrawal of Russian forces. However, there's also a Stalinist left, as there is in the UK - groups which speak the language of the left but do not oppose Russian imperialism. I'm not sure which I would say is dominant. Both are very small.

In my view, the correct position for socialists is that the question of eastern Ukraine and Crimea is a matter for the Ukrainian people to resolve, not something that foreign governments have any right to interfere in. What would I say if I were a citizen of Ukraine? There obviously does need to be some

form of reconciliation between the opposing groups that have developed in eastern Ukraine over a long period – groups with different perspectives for the societies they live in. But these negotiations can only be meaningful if there is a full withdrawal of Russian forces from that area and from Crimea. How can you negotiate between two or more groups when someone is holding a gun over the negotiations? You can't resolve things democratically or peacefully if coercion is an ingredient in the process.

The Ukrainian military action in the eastern areas is overwhelmingly defensive. The Ukrainian state didn't start this war. There are no Ukrainian troops or Ukrainian-backed forces on Russian territory. Ukraine never threatened Russia. It's all the other way.

There is a Russian minority in Ukraine, a substantial one, 20% overall and moreover its concentrated precisely in those two parts of the country. But Russian people have been there for well over 150 years; they are part of the society. They have not been discriminated against as a minority. On the contrary, historically they have been a privileged minority in Ukraine. The Ukrainian language and culture were discriminated against in the Russian empire and then in the USSR from Stalin's time to the end of the Brezhnev era. I recommend reading Ivan Dziuba's *Internationalism or Russification?*, a critique of Soviet nationalities policy. It is widely available in English translation. I don't give credence to arguments that Russians in Ukraine face discrimination as a national minority today.

The governments of the "people's republics" in Luhansk and Donetsk are not independent governments. They are appointed and financed by the Russian Federation. Their policies are set by the Russian government. There are institutions within Russian ministries that are responsible for running these so-called republics. When the Russian state doesn't like who is leading them, it replaces them, and when it can't, it assassinates them.

What is the character of the Ukrainian government?

Well, there's an elected parliament and presidency – it's quite a strong presidential system. There's a range of political parties, which by and large, are instruments of powerful financial and oligarchic groups. There is no mass social democratic or labour movement party. However, contrary to the fantasies of the pro-Russian left in the West, the far right is a fairly marginal force. It has attracted no more than 2.3% of the popular vote in any national election. Compare that to Germany, to Austria, to France.

What are the debates in Ukraine about the war?

I think it's important to look at popular public opinion, which is not necessarily well reflected in parliament. The overriding sentiment in Ukrainian society is a desire for peace and an end to the war. There is a debate always going on about how to achieve this peace. President, Zelensky has said he is willing to negotiate with Russia to bring the war to an end. A significant proportion of society supports that idea. There are disagreements within the public, and between political parties, about what kind of platform negotiations should be conducted on. Some believe the [2015] Minsk II accords are a satisfactory basis for negotiating an end to the war and reincorporating eastern Ukraine into the body politic of Ukraine.

Others reject that, making the point that Ukraine was forced into that settlement after military intervention by Russia. It introduced autonomous governments that undermined the sovereignty of Ukraine. Then there is a nationalist and far-right element that argues vehemently against any negotiations with Russia until it withdraws completely. Understandably, some elements of the left argue something similar, while others take the opposite position – so it is quite complicated.

What's your view?

It depends what the negotiations are about. For instance, there should be negotiations over exchanging prisoners of war. There is the issue of political prisoners in Russia who have been jailed for protesting against Russia's war – obviously that is an issue for the Russian left and Russian society to take up but I think it's legitimate for the Ukrainian side to raise it too.

There needs to be a negotiated withdrawal of military forces from the areas where the fighting is taking place. Not just a ceasefire but withdrawal to a significant distance from the border and the creation of a no-fly zone. Primarily the Russian forces but there could also be withdrawal of Ukrainian forces to allow a peace deal. Ultimately Ukraine must regain control of its side of the original border with Russia. There have been attempts to do this before which have always failed. It was supposed to be withdrawal of the heaviest weapons first, then medium-range, and so on. It kept falling apart, with both sides blaming the other. In any case it clearly can't be done without negotiations.

But on the question of the internal political arrangements and the laws governing Ukrainian society the Russian state should have no role to play whatsoever, either directly or through the DNR and LNR "republics". Those questions should be exclusively within the remit of the Ukrainian people, for their elected representatives to resolve. It is a basic issue of self-determination.

There could be peacekeeping forces deployed in the region to help bring the fighting to an end. Logically, such forces should be stationed along Ukraine's original border with Russia and all foreign forces and weapons removed from the theatre of war. But Russia insists it is not participating in the war, that it wants to facilitate an end to the fighting as a neutral party, to what it defines as an internal conflict in Ukraine. On the basis of these claims of its neutrality it will insist on contributing Russian troops to UN peace keeping forces and locating these forces inside Ukraine along the separatist statelets' front lines with the Ukrainian army. That would simply conserve the confrontation and allow Russia to keep supplying the separatist statelets through their common current border. The Ukrainians rightly say that Russia is a party to the conflict, which means it cannot be part of a peacekeeping force under UN rules. But Ukraine's war is with Russia which has armed the separatist insurgency. If Russia stopped arming and otherwise supporting the DNR and LNR the conflict could be resolved by peaceful means.

Is there a tension between advocating peace and advocating Ukrainian self-determination?

It doesn't contradict self-determination to say it would be a good thing if people weren't being killed every day, if the level of tension was reduced, if the economic drain was ended. At the moment there are old-age pensioners who have to cross the frontline of a war every month to pick up their miserable small pensions. People's basic needs can be restored only if there is peace.

There is talk in the US about "sanctions" against Russia to deter it from invading Ukraine. What's your assessment of this and what should the left say about it?

I take such talk to mean that the US will not intervene militarily on behalf of Ukraine and that its threat of economic sanctions is really directed elsewhere. This is a coded signal to Russia that the US can impede the commissioning of Nord Stream 2. In other words, it can use the Ukraine crisis to damage Russian-German economic relations, which fits in with its wider European strategy to keep these two countries apart. I can't see any value to the left in taking any position on the face of such a threat. Rather, it should impress on us the need to develop our own strategy to preserve peace in Europe, to transform the relations between its peoples on the basis of the values we uphold.

What do you think is likely to happen next, and what should the left internationally do?

We need an international movement to bring this war to an end. Who on the left will join in such an anti-war movement? Well, in many parts of the world the left is in a much-weakened state and deeply divided. Campism, that is siding with one power bloc over another as the more “progressive” rather than siding clearly with the oppressed, is a disease that has weakened the left’s moral authority and ability to speak on all kinds of issues. But in so far as we can talk about “the left”, we’ve got to change the narrative away from the objectives and interests of states to what people in Ukraine and Russia for that matter are living through as a result of the war. The people dying, the people displaced, four million Ukrainians forced to work abroad because they can’t get a job in their own country partly as a result of the war. We need to talk about all this and have a narrative that focuses on the people, not the big powers – and on that basis find ways to practically support the people. Internationally, the left should be building an anti-war movement to stop the great powers fueling the war.

In terms of what happens next, from 12 January representatives of Russia and the US will enter into talks. Putin’s main goal is to force a solution over the heads of the Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian people. If he can win significant concessions along those lines from the Americans, he will be pleased. The minimum would be to get the Americans to persuade or coerce the Ukrainians to go back to the Minsk accords, and to get Crimea off the agenda altogether.

There are things the Russians might concede to help get their way on this. The Americans are worried about the Russians and Germans strengthening their relationship and increasingly sidelining the US from European politics and security. As I mentioned there’s the issue of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which will greatly strengthen Russian-German economic cooperation once it is fully operational. If the Russians make a compromise, for instance to keep gas moving through Ukraine as well as through the new pipeline, the Americans might agree to pressure Ukraine to return to negotiations with the separatists, to give up Crimea for good or to accept further limitations on its sovereignty. Thus the USA and Russia might try to solve the crisis on their terms as they fight to gain or to retain an upper hand in Europe.

However, if you look at the history of the 20th century, the big powers have never really resolved conflicts involving smaller states and stateless nations. They will not resolve the Ukrainian conflict without the Ukrainians, who will not accept the status quo. They have made their choice to be an independent people. They will resist. The conflict can only be resolved with their direct participation. Unless it is resolved, I fear it has the potential to escalate and seriously undermine peace in Europe.

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