

Ukraine: Democratic socialism or barbarism: A reply to Hans-Herbert Kögler

Tuesday 23 May 2023, by [YURCHENKO Yuliya](#) (Date first published: 17 May 2023).

I want to start by thanking the author for this nuanced and thought-provoking text. I have found it useful in organizing my own thinking on the subject of morality and immorality of various positions pertaining to the war unleashed by Russia in Ukraine. In what follows I want to offer less of a review of the piece itself but rather reflect and build upon some of the core propositions laid out in the article. Being a political economist, activist, feminist, ecosocialist and a Ukrainian who was in the country when the war started informs my following comments.

Kögler's position and argumentation is highly compelling. In his attempt to strip back the narratives situated within the domain of international law, self-determination or human rights, he eloquently argues for a purely moral case to support Ukraine; a comprehension 'of a moral feeling and reactions regarding war, especially one left by self-defence...[making] possible a normative response to war as a means of politics as the continuation and realization of morality by other means'. Through such a dissection what was of specific interest to me in the article was what gets revealed by understanding the segments of immorality and 'pseudo-objectivism' that the seemingly neutral, 'moral-abstinent' position means and how it is equally hypocritical, sinister, counterproductive, uninformed and narcissistic. Instrumentalizations for one's excuse from providing help are rather pathetic: self-imposed ignorance of the reasoning of the belligerents via inability to identify 'rationality' resembling that of the observer of this war. Kögler correctly observes that 'nothing makes more sense for both parties directly involved than this war' as Ukrainians fight to survive and exercise national self-determination while Russia carries out its imperialist nationalism project where the space it deems itself entitled to is absorbed and people are either assimilated or annihilated thus denoting a clash of two distinct national projects – one decolonial (however imperfect so far) and one neocolonial.

[Kögler \(2023, p. 6\)](#) observes that the geopolitical perspective adherents and pacifists orient themselves to is a trans-subjective abstraction from the individual to the collective – the states and spheres of interests, which obscures 'the origin and reality of war' in an act of 'devilish deception'. Pacifism, moral distancing and non-resistance in the condition of racist patriarchal and ecocidal capitalist imperialism where the right in all its shades is on the rise are, to my mind, expressions of bourgeois positionality and ideology, an internalised imperialist worldview not unlike that of Putin or Dugin – one can be an anti-imperialist and antifascist or a pacifist, but not both.

Peace at any cost is not just a phoney peace – for Ukrainians it means sanctioning genocide of them in occupied territories, erasure of their collective identity and the diversity of their 'we-understanding' by Russia's annihilation by assimilation. For people of the Russian Federation who oppose Putin it means persecution, torture and even death. The peace demanded is violence. As Clausewitz stated, war is the continuation of politics by other means or, in the words of Foucault, politics is the continuation of war by other means ([Kögler, 2023, p. 2](#)). Indeed, we have seen both in the Russo-Ukrainian relationship since Ukraine's formal independence. And when control and

domination by means other than force failed in the winter of 2013–2014 and Yanukovych had to flee, Russia invaded. There is further perversion in the ‘anti-war’ left who somehow manage to simultaneously recognize Russia’s right to ‘defend its interests’ while denying the right of Ukrainians to defend their very lives or assert their national self-determination, that Russia previously already legally recognized. Further, they deny the right to ask the United States and the United Kingdom for arms which they committed to do in the same Budapest Memorandum in which Russia promised to protect Ukraine from military aggression.

Whose pacifism, what stability and what peace? Anti-imperialism of amoral idiots

A curious question without an answer among those who are against arms supply to Ukraine is: How to arrive at those principles without a military defeat of Russia? [1] [Delanty \(2022\)](#) succinctly observes that, ‘an unfortunate paradox of peace is that it sometimes needs military action to defend it’. Peace between Ukraine and Russia should not be confused and conflated with faux international stability – peace for some nations at the expense of localised wars for others – as the two are not the same, not least since the faux stability ‘permits’ for armed conflicts to play out in the ‘periphery’ ([Delanty, 2022](#)). This dangerous legitimising Cold War-era narrative we see instrumentalised repeatedly by some of the self-declared anti-imperialists and pacifists alike.

Kögler sets out four compelling key principles to be followed as normative preconditions for lasting peace:

1. ‘unconditional recognition of the ethico-political and cultural sovereignty of other nations;
2. the territorial integrity of existing states is to be respected;
3. the normative commitment of cultural and ethno-national recognition of all members of one’s political entity;
4. the transformation of any of the existing identities, territories, rules or commitments must be undertaken in a strictly non-violent, diplomatic or dialogic manner’.

Those who demand peace have no plan besides calls for talks while the talks proposed are to take place in a domain devoid of normative principles, such as those set out above. The answer though does exist: in the fight for universality of norms and universality of sanctions for their violation, both nationally and internationally; the fight for making the global security disorder orderly; democratising the UN security council and creating a collective democratically run institutional infrastructure for addressing international security issues – military, climate, health, food, social and economic.

The global left have largely failed Ukrainians for some 9 years of this war ([Artyukh 2022](#); [Bilous, 2022](#); [Ferguson 2023](#); [Krishnan 2023](#)) and that has serious political consequences for the viability of the project necessary to resuscitate Ukraine’s suffering people and economy and those of Europe and the rest of the world. Ukrainians, scholars and experts of Ukraine, various solidarity drives and campaigns, for example, the UK Ukraine Solidarity Campaign (of which I’m part), European Network of Solidarity with Ukraine, and the United States have all appealed to the ‘anti-NATO/USA’ groups to no avail. The late Marko Bojcun a socialist historian of Ukraine was ignored by campists for years. Stop the War (StW) coalition, Code Pink, *New Left Review*, DSA International Committee and now Lula (and many more) all failed in their amoral position of demanding peace at any cost while ignoring Ukrainian voices, apart from occasionally instrumentalising the Ukraine Pacifist Movement’s (UPM) Sheliashenko [2] and sociologist Volodymyr Ishchenko, who are in no way representative of popular opinions of Ukrainians, nor scholars or experts of the problematic of the conflict. Ishchenko, in an *NLR* piece titled ‘Ukrainian voices?’ (2022d), gifted campists with a licence to ignore and dismiss Ukrainian people and scholars altogether by sneering at horizontal solidarity networks and (associated) researchers based in wartime Ukraine’s main cities; all while himself

being based in Germany. It seems the irony of being a Ukraine expert who echoes campist sentiments and by his own blessing becomes a tool for silencing his very expert kind was lost on Ishchenko. Earlier in 2022 he engaged in questioning the London and Washington intelligence on imminent invasion and equally their failure to prevent the invasion and negotiating with Putin 'more actively' before professing 'painful compromises' that might be 'necessary' over Crimea and Donbas (2022a, 2022b, 2022c) seemingly forgetting that Russian troops were in other regions by then too and had other openly declared aims in the war ([Putin, 2021](#), 2022) or that this sort of 'compromise' stated in Minsk I and II led to a new invasion, not to a lasting peace) – a 'phoney peace' ([Delanty, 2022](#)) that can never last. Yet the 'anti-war' brigade continues with deliberate manipulations, wilful ignorance, invoking hunger in low-income countries and ecological damage of the war as arguments for peace at any cost – all to keep their self-delusion alive. One might ask: Why the lack of support for pacifism in Ukraine? Well, because pacifism is a bourgeois luxury in a state of enduring a neo-imperialist invasion. It is not the pacifism of Ukrainians nor the lives to be saved that StW and the likes campaign for, but to preserve their own purity in their anti-NATO stance. Not even the overwhelming evidence of genocide perpetrated by Russia that keeps accumulating is enough to convince those appealing for 'peace negotiations'. [3]

Another screaming example of deliberate disengagement and selective listening by the 'anti-imperialist' left is an email exchange between the Ukrainian culture studies scholar Olga Bryukhovetska and Noam Chomsky where the latter expressed 'arrogant dismissal and intellectual gaslighting' and stated that she simply fails to comprehend what is what. Bryukhovetska asked Chomsky why he won't listen to Ukrainians. He insisted that he does all the time yet repeatedly ignored prompts to give any names. Instead, he twisted the narrative and defended his position on military non-assistance to Ukraine by insisting he listens to those unnamed Ukrainians regularly, leading her to conclude he was lying, and had not then nor had any intention to listen to Ukrainians ([Bryukhovetska, 2023](#)). Such gaslighting and whataboutism are very common. Achcar notes 'the essence of [such] argument is the legitimization of aggression, shifting of focus from Russian imperialism to the American one, and eventually, pushing all sides to immediately start negotiations in which Ukraine won't have political subjectivity' (in [Shumakov, 2023](#)). With this kind of 'left', how is one to fight for social justice?

Another big blow to solidarity rolled across feminist circles with the publication of the 'Feminist Resistance Against War. A Manifesto' (17 March 2022). Along with my Ukrainian feminist friends and colleagues, I was surprised to see the names of Silvia Federici, Tithi Bhattacharya, Cinzia Arruzza and Nancy Fraser among those who signed it. 'Not in our names....weapons perpetuate war...there is no greater security than peace' they wrote from the peaceful locations where they do not have to test the effectiveness of those slogans for intercepting cruise missiles. Both Ukrainian feminists and the Russian Anti-War Resistance feminist movement publicly condemned that message. I was in Ukraine, in Kyiv, when Russia invaded. I can attest that peace banners are as useful as #thoughtsandprayers Twitter posts. Perhaps, surprisingly, Judith Butler expressed both lack of endorsement for militarism and support of Ukrainians' right to resist, dislike of NATO and their support for Ukraine as the right thing to do. [4] This shows that it is possible to manage contradictions when one chooses to uphold one's values rather than be concerned primarily with personal purity, non-involvement; when one has a luxury to not get or be involved. Ukrainians do not have such luxury. No one in a state of war of aggression does.

The Right to Resist's manifesto of Ukrainian feminists which I too signed has a sober view of reality which embodies core feminist values in its name and text – from armed resistance to socio-economic justice and war crimes tribunals, in Ukraine and globally. It states that 'abstract pacifism which condemns all sides taking part in the war leads to irresponsible solutions in practice' and that there is 'an essential difference between violence as a means of oppression and as a legitimate means of

self-defence'. It calls for 'an informed assessment of a specific situation instead of abstract geopolitical analysis which ignores the historical, social and political context'. Appeals to peace that fail to do the latter appear to suffer not only from denial but also from selective historical amnesia. A verbal promise not to expand NATO to the east is amplified while the Budapest Memorandum that solidified Ukraine's nuclear disarmament and made Russia guarantor of its security is omitted. So is the fact of 92.3% of Ukrainians voting for independence in 1991, or the fact that Russian speakers were not oppressed in Ukraine (in fact it was the Ukrainian language and culture that were systemically oppressed), that there was no coup in 2014 but there was a Russian invasion, and that before that there wasn't majority support for NATO membership in Ukraine nor appetite for it on the NATO side, or that Russia violated the UN charter while it had recognized Ukraine's 1991 borders as sovereign at the time, including the Autonomous Republic of Crimea as part of Ukraine.

The shape of peace to come

Russia's constant lies about troops in Ukraine, downing of the MH17 plane, staged referenda, murder of journalists and politicians are all disregarded by the invokers of negotiations and treaties despite the rallying cries of those who insist on the futility of treaties without the redrawing of the rules of engagement and foundations for peace being set out that would also be acceptable to both parties and enforced internationally. Currently, such agreement is impossible to imagine as the Russian Federation does not recognize Ukraine's claim to sovereignty. So, one must first answer this: What would make Russia accept that claim besides a military defeat? The matter of economic sanctions and their by now growing effect is very important, yet too complex and contested, practically and morally, to discuss here, so let me stay on the subject of military support to Ukraine, the shape and timing of negotiations, and conditions necessary to arrive at peace talks and finally the peace itself. Our focus inevitably must be both on the Russo-Ukrainian relationship dimension and the international legal and security order whose previous unpunished violations, for example, the United States and the United Kingdom, are utilised as tropes of legitimation by Russia. That will mean that criminals of all wars - collective and individual - must be brought to justice. [5] Yet before that can be completed, Russia must be defeated militarily in Ukraine and that means Ukraine must get all the weapons it may need to fight for peace.

Kögler is right to insist on universality; just as [Zizek \(2014, 2022a\)](#) argues for a world order based on the universality of human rights and values that can save both Ukrainians and Russians. Particularism and multipolarity embed danger while a Eurasian 'third way' is a form of today's fascism ([Zizek, 2022b](#)). Nationalism and its varieties are crucial for our understanding of the Russian invasion, its legitimising narratives, as well as for our understanding of the rise of the (far) right parties across Europe and beyond (with a necessary nod to Russia's financial and political support for those and for its perverted monopolisation of USSR/soviet legacy). The reactionary right, including its Russian variant (particularism and Eurasianism), in its attacks on globalism is rooted in a misunderstanding of the world order that is driven by free market capitalism as the order that is captured by a few elites/parties that pursue undemocratic world global society, as ([Worth, 2019](#)) documents. The fallacy of this position is the same as the one with the politics of saving the planet, (post)-COVID economic fallout, or (re)building Ukraine's (post)war economy without 'tackling the faults of neoliberal economics head on' which permits 'the material dynamics of the world order that [they] appear to be attacking remain more likely to survive' ([Worth, 2019](#), p. 188). What is needed is the dismantling of the state-society-capital constellation that through 'dangerous liaisons' created preconditions that facilitated the first Russian invasion in 2014 and an end of neoliberal economics which are presently not on the table. Thus, preconditions for building towards a lasting peace in the Russo-Ukrainian war, nor conditions that preclude possibilities for conflict, including wars, elsewhere globally do not yet exist. Rather to the contrary: conflicts are made inevitable, a matter of 'when', not 'if'.

Zizek wrote another piece on the subject in 2014 when the protests against predatory oligarchy forced Yanukovych to flee while the Russian annexation of Crimea and campaign in Donbas were met with a lukewarm international response, which allowed the core of the regime of neoliberal kleptocracy to remain intact ([Yurchenko, 2018, 2021](#)). He makes an important observation on the regional and, by extension, global politics.

Only by leaving behind the decaying corpse of the old Europe can we keep the European legacy of égaliberté alive. It is not the Ukrainians who should learn from Europe: Europe has to learn to live up to the dream that motivated the protesters on the Maidan. The lesson that frightened liberals should learn is that only a more radical left can save what is worth saving in the liberal legacy today. ([Zizek, 2014](#))

Zizek warns in that piece that unless there is ‘a public display of fraternity, with organisational networks established between Ukrainian political activists and the Russian opposition to Putin’s regime’..., ‘a truly emancipatory dimension’ of the protests would be jeopardised and ‘we will be left with a conflict of nationalist passions manipulated by oligarchs’ – which is largely what happened; this same mistake cannot be made again.

The nebulous telos of EU(-rope), its values ([Yurchenko, 2018](#)), needs to obtain the shape promised by the values it declares foundational – they must embody a redistributive vision. Indeed, an ‘alternative hegemonic project that looks to construct an opposition to neoliberal capitalism geared around a democratic socialist political economy is desired’ ([Worth, 2018, 2019](#)). It would need to be built around the ‘notion of peace as a core value of EU integration’ that is completed with democracy and prosperity, rooted in economic and political cooperation ([Delanty, 2022](#)) extrapolated to an international reality for the lasting peace discussed by Kögler to be. The solution is too big and too radically left for most to swallow ([Zizek, 2023](#)), yet the choice is sharply between socialism and barbarism.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] This is a variation on the term I owe to Leila Al Shami in her critique of campism, their blindness to all but western imperialism and west-blaming in the Syrian war.

[2] UPM consist of precisely three (3!) people with record ranging from absent to anti-Semitic and Putin-apologism in various combinations ([Street, 2022](#)). Inclusion of such ‘pacifists’ and presenting them as representative of an ephemeral ‘pacifist movement’ displays desperate scraping for legitimation by including Ukrainian voices for purely instrumental purpose.

[3] See [Diamond et al \(2022\)](#).

[4] A full dissection of her arguments is impossible here due to space limitations.

[5] [Kögler \(2023, p. 23\)](#) states that ‘the past as well as the present of normatively unacceptable acts and interventions is to be revealed and reconstructed in all transparency on both sides, as the involved war crimes are to be reported, as Amnesty International (AI) did vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine’. I must object here, not on the grounds of disagreement with the statement that all war crimes must be prosecuted, but with how AI conducted itself in the specific case of Russia’s war in Ukraine and the scandal that surrounded their conduct. AI conduct is problematic in a way that is not unlike those who do not support helping Ukraine for the reasons eloquently outlined in the essay subject of this symposium; indeed, there were instances of deliberate avoidance of impartiality and abuse of mission in the name of impartiality as if that is possible in a clear case of no equivalence between the parties involved. Breach of conduct of practice as well as omission and dismissal of expertise and input from the Ukrainian office of AI led not only to resignation of top experts but also to a deliberately biased report based on data ‘collected on the territory of [Russia-run] filtration camps and prisons’ (where respondents are compelled to make statements that can’t put their lives at further risk at Russian army’s hands) that was also subsequently picked up by Russian propaganda and weaponised to justify the atrocity committed in Ukraine by their troops, to further denigrate the fictitious ‘enemy’ they fight in Ukraine and thus legitimise the invasion ([Upshtein, 2022](#)). Blaming Ukrainian troops for locating too close to civilian targets when not knowing the reasons for it and neglecting to assess whether locating further away was possible or safer for said civilians takes ‘irresponsible reporting’ to a whole new semantic level. Russia shells civilian targets indiscriminately daily, many civilians refuse to evacuate and cannot be made to do so too in accordance with numerous laws and conventions; so: How are the soldiers to protect those civilians when stationed away? A thorough investigation must be carried out and should war crimes be established upon it, perpetrators must be brought to justice.