

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > Ukraine > **Resistance and social movement in a country at war: a brief diary of a trip (...)**

Resistance and social movement in a country at war: a brief diary of a trip to Ukraine

Thursday 12 December 2024, by [MARTINS Catarina](#) (Date first published: 10 December 2024).

Arriving in the morning, Kiev is a European capital like any other. The city is functioning, there are no warnings of air raids, the front line seems far away. The app only paints red some of the areas further east. You will notice that at night it is different and that not every day is like this.

War in an app

The night train from Przemysl in Poland to Kiev in Ukraine is packed with displaced families. Mostly women and children. Some are leaving, some are returning, and some are visiting. Men aged between 18 and 60 are not allowed to leave the country. Of the 40 million Ukrainians, the war has forced the displacement of almost 15 million. Some are refugees in other European countries and some are internally displaced. As we quickly learn, these statuses are not watertight.

To embark, you first have to cross the Polish border. Queues of people, trains of people, on the street, in the cold, already at night. On the way back, in the early hours of the morning, it will be below zero and winter has not yet arrived. There are mothers and grandmothers looking exhausted, children crying and others who do not say a word. Lots of suitcases. This is not a film. This is everyday life on the border of a country at war.

There is an *app* (there is always an *app*) that informs you about air strikes. On the train platform, some people look at the *app*'s map to see what is marked in red, but having the map of drone and missile attacks in the palm of your hand does not help your journey. There is no shelter here. You just have to trust. The train, they will explain to us, does not always follow the same route. We also realise that, even without any stops, sometimes it stops for a while. Sometimes we travel quickly. If you manage to sleep in the sleeper carriage, you will have made better use of your time. The journey takes more than 10 hours and the trains almost always run on time.

Before Lviv, the train stops and the Ukrainian border guards enter. The person in charge of the carriage wakes up the passengers before the soldiers come to collect the passports. We wait, the passports are finally returned and we continue on our way. What will happen to those who are not allowed to continue the journey? We do not know. On the way back, everything is repeated, but the soldiers add a question: do you have weapons? No, we do not.

Life does not wait for the end of the war

Arriving in the morning, Kiev is a European capital like any other. The city is functioning, there are no warnings of air raids, the front line seems far away. The *app* only paints some of the easternmost

areas red. We will realise that at night it is different and that not every day is like this. For now, we go to the hotel, have a shower and breakfast, sort out the day's busy schedule and head to Bucha in the *minivan* that looks like it has driven thousands of kilometres and says "tourists". It is a half-hour drive and we will have to leave the centre of Kiev to see soldiers on the road and scrap war material on the side of the road.

In Bucha, we are welcomed by two local authorities who deal with the reception of internally displaced people. They have already received dozens of delegations like ours. They repeat the message: we cannot wait for the end of the war to begin reconstruction and to help people. We have thousands of displaced people, some since the beginning of the war in 2014. Many more joined after the large-scale invasion of 2022. We depend absolutely on direct international support; what goes to the government serves the war effort. We need houses, nurses and psychologists, energy, solar panels. Only then do they talk about the massacre that filled the news channels.

They take us to the church where they have the memorial and the photographs. They are from there too. Those bodies are their neighbors, their family. They explain that they were killed by Russian soldiers who could not have been more than eighteen years old. At the memorial, they tell us the ages of those who died. In one of the rows, the names of the one-year-old baby and the man who is one year away from turning one hundred. Nothing makes sense. Babies and old people murdered by children. The monstrous fury of weapons [\[1\]](#) .

There are tall trees and a huge peace mural. The wind is freezing. We know that neighbouring villages have experienced the same violence and occupation. We set out to meet those who stayed behind or returned to support them. Along the way, we see the container houses that are the only public housing available in Ukraine. There are displaced people who have been living like this for ten years (and as many winters). Especially the elderly, the sickest, the poorest. Those who cannot leave the country or find work.

Caring in the State without a Welfare State

We returned to the road and to apparent normality. Suddenly, houses destroyed by bombs with a sign: people live here. People sitting on bits of wall. Further ahead, in a housing estate, we discovered our next meeting. In a basement, there is the headquarters of the palliative care association. There are nine women, health professionals, who support more than a thousand patients and their families. They distribute oxygen, articulated beds, wheelchairs, diapers. They serve elderly patients, cancer patients, victims of long Covid, war wounded. They explain their role as follows: the government takes care of those who can survive. We take care of the others. Everyone has the right to dignity at the end of their life.

The president of the association has already been on the front line fighting, and then returned. There is also a front here. It is the only organization that tells us that it does not have international support. After all, no one wants to talk about those who are dying. They live off community solidarity, on local donations: the soldier who went to the front and wants to be sure that someone will support his parents, the mother who has a son at the front and wants to ensure support when he returns injured.

Back in Kiev, we had lunch with film crews caught up in the war in Mariopol. They fled at the last minute, before the total siege. They worked with excluded communities. They talked about their ongoing project on Roma people. They explained that today they use their cinema to raise funds and support the war effort. They support small artisanal factories that produce protective equipment

using 3D printers. Their films are shown at festivals and screenings all over the world and they participate in conversations with the audience via video conference. They have never shown a film in Portugal. They will have a new one next year.

They are concerned about the misinformation in the country. They want us to know that Ukraine has more than one language and that being Russian-speaking does not mean being Russian or less Ukrainian. Even though now, in response to the invasion, some people have chosen to speak only Ukrainian. They want us to know that the men fleeing the war are not Putin supporters. They are just men who are afraid of war and death, and that this is the most human thing there is. They want us to not erase the grey areas or give up thinking about what is difficult, even in the midst of war. And they want houses. This is what we will hear most often: we need houses. The people fleeing the front have nowhere to live. There will be no conversation without mentioning the difficulty of finding houses. The privatization of all Ukrainian public housing in the 1990s turned into a nightmare.

From humanitarian personnel to the Ukrainian Social Movement

We walk from the restaurant to the offices of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. The city is beautiful, everything is calm. The building that welcomes us is welcoming and we settle into a large room with large windows. No one thinks about the risk of air raids.

We met with the largest non-governmental organization on the front line. They are responsible for evacuating the populations. They work with UN funding and in collaboration with the Ukrainian government and armed forces. The evacuations are carried out exclusively by NGOs. They explain that there is a lot of resistance, especially from the elderly. They refuse to leave their homes until there is fighting outside. They only agree to be evacuated when things are getting very difficult. Russian drones do not spare humanitarian personnel. As the head of the UN mission, with whom we will meet the following day, will explain, Russia has said that it does not recognize the notifications regarding the movement of humanitarian personnel.

With over 5 million internally displaced people, this has become one of the biggest challenges for Ukrainian society. We met lawyers from another large NGO, which is dedicated to finding housing (the most difficult part), work and healthcare for those who have fled the front. They have many years of experience in the field; they used to support refugees from all over the world, and today they support these internally displaced people. There are more and more of them; Russia has been advancing on the front lines.

We leave at night, walking to the restaurant. We have to have dinner and return to the hotel before the curfew. When we arrive, they show us where the air raid shelter is. It is there that we will meet again shortly before 4 am. Air raid warnings are broadcast on the speakers in the hotel corridors and on the *apps* on our mobile phones. In the underground car park, which has been converted into a dormitory, we can go back to sleep. We return to our rooms, only to grab our bags and leave.

The second morning in Kiev will always be accompanied by air raid sirens. They will sound continuously until the early afternoon. But the city continues to work. In addition to the *app*, everyone follows Telegram channels to find out more precisely what is happening. As a mother explained to me the night before, even at night, they only go to the shelter if they hear drones nearby. They know the risk, but fatigue takes over.

The Portuguese ambassador in Kiev arrives early at the hotel for a coffee and to exchange ideas. It is unusual for elected officials to travel on an unofficial mission, but Portuguese diplomacy is always present and the air warnings do not change what was agreed. Throughout the day, we will hear

some explosions but we will stick to the schedule. We will act as if we were locals.

The headquarters of the Ukrainian Social Movement is full. Members have come from all over Ukraine, even from frontline regions. We have heard from trade unionists, students, student movements, LGBTQI+, feminists. They explain to us their two goals: to fight Putin and to fight neoliberalism and the corrupt oligarchy in Ukraine. There is no contradiction here. A Russian occupation means power for the fascists and oligarchs.

The new leader of the Ukrainian Social Movement presents herself as a trade unionist and a mother. Her son is fighting on the front line. Her husband, a miner, died in a work accident. She points the finger at a regime that sends workers to war but does not give them a voice in running the country. She talks about the labor and union rights suspended by Martial Law and denounces that the war has a broad back; attacking the rights of those who work is the political project of the regime and dates back to long before the war. She calls for more military support for Ukraine, the forgiveness of the country's public debt and more political support for the Ukrainian left and free trade unionism.

Difficult debates and the intersection of struggles

The debate on support for Ukraine is not an easy one for this delegation. We agree on the importance of diplomatic paths to peace and effective sanctions against the Russian regime, and we choose, at each meeting, to speak openly about the different positions of the parties we represent regarding military support. The Nordics even support the use of long-range weapons on Russian territory; I explain that the Bloc supports the defence of Ukraine but is against attacks on Russian territory due to the risks of nuclear escalation and because it rejects proxy war; the new leadership of Die Linke speaks of its anti-militarist principled position. Our interlocutors almost invariably feel comforted by the Nordic position. But in no case do they reject the debate or attack different positions. The Ukrainian Social Movement, which is now trying to establish itself as a party, has declared its willingness to join the new Alliance of the European Left.

We ended up having to leave in a hurry. One of the members of the Movement explained that the air strikes were getting closer. But before leaving, many photos and videos were taken. Some of the leaders had to stay out; the persecutions – organised and unorganised – were real. As a researcher explained to us during lunch, the far right had trained many young people. It had obtained public funding for supposedly educational work in schools and recruited them. Today, with the older people on the front line, there are violent attacks carried out by children who are not yet old enough to be held criminally responsible.

The far right is organised within the armed forces. Not so much in the famous Azov Battalion, but still concentrated in one of the army battalions. Their symbols are popular and often confused symbols of Ukrainian resistance. And, of course, they have international support. As we have already seen from the conversations we have had, even to guarantee adequate socks or boots for soldiers, informal solidarity networks are needed. Anti-fascist activist networks also gather national and international support for their soldiers on the front lines. One of the T-shirts they sell reads: "I am slowly stripping you of millennia of patriarchal oppression". Here, the intersection of struggles is a given.

The air raid warnings stop. The city continues to function as usual, and we hold a final round of meetings back at Rosa Luxemburg's office. We meet the students who are fighting to keep the draft age from being lowered and to prevent them from having to trade their studies for war; the nurses' union that organized an illegal strike and secured a pay rise in the middle of the war; the LGBTQI+

movement that refuses to allow the Pride march to be commercialized. We hear from the UN official about humanitarian aid and the enormous risks of the coming winter. We realize that there is no data on what is happening in the occupied territories.

Back

The trip was organised by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, a German left-wing foundation that has a delegation in Ukraine. The participants included the Finnish Left Alliance, the Danish Red and Green Alliance, the German Left, the Portuguese Left Bloc and the Swedish Left Party. An international delegation speaking seven languages, many of whom only met during the trip. It was on the return train that we outlined some common paths for the future.

Ten people sit in a compartment for four, with our dinner bags and beer cans. The differences between us are clear, but that is also what unites us. Solidarity with self-determination, commitment to international law, rejection of NATO as a solution. And the enormous desire to support a new left, far from the nostalgic misconceptions, capable of mobilizing and articulating struggles in the most difficult of circumstances. The commitment to support the Ukrainian Social Movement is immediate. Next up is joint work in the European Parliament on sanctions against the Russian government and a European conference on Peace and Reconstruction, which we will hold next spring.

The trip ended on Sunday, November 3rd. The following Tuesday, Trump won the US election. Putin increased attacks on Ukraine's essential infrastructure. Joe Biden decided to authorize Ukraine to use long-range missiles against Russia, which it had always refused. Escalation to de-escalate, they explain to anyone who wants to believe. I remember the words of one of the researchers we met: no one knows when Peace will be or what it will be. Much less whether it will last.

Catarina Martins was the national coordinator of the Left Bloc from 11 November 2012 until 28 May 2023, and a member of the Portuguese Parliament since 2009. Martins was elected a Member of the European Parliament in the 2024 European election.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

P.S.

Esquerda

<https://www.esquerda.net/artigo/resistencia-e-movimento-social-num-pais-em-guerra-diario-breve-de-uma-viagem-ucrania/93240>

Footnotes

[1] The verse by Wilfred Owen that gives its title to the book *Monstrous Anger of the Guns. How the Global Arms Trade is Ruining the World and What We Can Do About It*, published with the support of Jeremy Corbyn's Peace and Justice Project .