

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > Ukraine > **Ukrainian society in the third year of resistance to the Russian invasion: (...)**

Ukrainian society in the third year of resistance to the Russian invasion: points of unity and division

Tuesday 18 February 2025, by [DUDIN Vitaliy](#) (Date first published: 12 February 2025).

It's February 2025 and many Ukrainians have forgotten what life was like before the Russian invasion. Feelings of insecurity, painful loss and separation from family members are inherent attributes of the lives of our citizens, whether they live in Ukraine or even abroad. The length of the front line in Ukraine now exceeds 3,000 kilometres. The population of Ukraine has shrunk to around 30,000,000. Are the authorities doing enough to reduce the military threat and preserve a living space? These are some of the key questions that preoccupy Ukrainians and define their attitude towards the state in the midst of war. Political life is gradually coming to life, even if the situation around us does not seem to be conducive to this, with the continuing Russian offensive in the Donbass and the risk of bombings in every town.

Faced with the most aggressive imperialism of our time - Russian imperialism - the Ukrainian people have chosen the path of struggle. Our society has shown an unprecedented drive for self-organisation, has forgiven the State for its imperfections and international solidarity has become tangible. Ukraine is holding firm, Putinism has not achieved its objectives, but the end seems far off.

The Ukrainian state has changed little since then, but the context in which it operates has changed. There is no easy way out of the state of war. What should we do - end the war against Russian imperialism or continue it, while becoming dependent on US President Donald Trump?

Of course, changes in the international situation will have an impact on how transformations within Ukraine take place. I'd like to take stock of what the three years of war have brought and whether the current dynamic opens up prospects for a more progressive policy.

Ukrainian capitalism, a factory full of problems

Few political analysts who study the Ukrainian political system fail to raise the question of President Zelensky's legitimacy. But the question needs to be asked more deeply: is the whole dominant discourse based on liberal values and confidence in the West losing its legitimacy? It is failing. At the start of the war, everything seemed simpler: we wanted American-style capitalism and integration into NATO. Since Donald Trump came to power, things have become more complicated and previous objectives have been called into question. The right-wing consensus is gradually breaking down. Attitudes towards the far right have changed. Recent events have shown how close their ideas are to the conservative ideas of the European far right, which is a fan of Vladimir Putin.

Most political forces still do not go beyond the right-liberal consensus. Of course, the primitive ideas of ethno-nationalism and authoritarianism are widely represented in Ukraine, but fortunately not to

the extent that Putin's propaganda would have us believe. On the other hand, the masses are increasingly demanding social justice: Ukrainian miners, nurses and railway workers are suffering so much from the abuses of the ruling classes that the fight against these abuses has not ceased, even in the midst of the war. In the chaos of war, social inequality is even more painful than before: if you're rich, you have a much better chance of saving your life! At the same time, the inability of the state apparatus to serve the people has been demonstrated by tragic examples. If we don't resolve the social issue, in other words the redistribution of goods and power in favour of the majority of the population, Ukraine is doomed to find itself in an extremely precarious situation.

However, implementing a left-wing line is not that simple. We are in fact the only European country where the Left is absent from the political "big stage" as a phenomenon, and almost all the political forces find it necessary to utter hatred of the Left, skilfully manipulating the traumas of the Soviet past.

We have to accept that the political Olympus will continue to exist for a long time without the left. However, at local level, a field of left-wing political practice is opening up. I associate my optimism with the activism of representatives from the relatively industrialised regions of eastern and southern Ukraine, close to the current front line. Why is this so? Because during the war, these regions underwent a significant transformation. Firstly, they received a great moral boost, as their skills proved extremely useful during the war - both in production and, above all, on the front line. Secondly, these towns finally asserted their national identity in the face of Russia's ruthless terror. Thirdly, many people (particularly women) moved to the European Union, and experienced the effectiveness of welfare state policies. It is therefore in this environment that the supporters of left-wing ideas will have to seek their social base (although, of course, the oligarchs will also want to play on the discontent of the masses).

In my opinion, the main feature of society is not so much people's war-weariness as their disappointment at the unsuitability of Ukrainian capitalism for the conditions of war. The elite's dependence on liberal instruments has prevented it from taking decisions that could have saved lives:

- 1) The development of the military-industrial complex has failed because of dependence on imports of military equipment.
- 2) We failed to introduce progressive taxation because of the lure of [Western] loans.
- 3) The end of labour protection control has led to the death of many valuable specialists.
- 4) Austerity in the public sector has led to a deterioration in the quality of human potential, making it increasingly difficult for Ukrainians to study and educate their children, to undergo medical treatment and to rehabilitate themselves.
- 5) Restrictions on labour rights have benefited the oligarchs and discouraged people from working.

The desire to keep capitalism intact has cost us dearly. I remain convinced that Ukraine is capable of resisting Putin, but at what price? Rumours persist that Ukraine will give up its natural wealth to continue receiving aid, which would be the natural price to pay for not dismantling the system of liberal capitalism that has held back our potential. Not to mention the problems of corruption and deplorable living conditions.

Mobilisation

The question of mobilisation has become one of the most divisive issues in society. However, Ukraine

had little other way of resisting the Russian army for three years without being a member of NATO. Within the Sotsialnyi Rukh, there are both people who voluntarily went to the front and others who were mobilised. All of them deserve unbounded respect because they enable our organisation to fulfil its true mission.

It's hard to admit, but to stop mobilisation in these conditions is to add to the burden of those who are already serving and who feel the worst. Of course, the procedure could be improved: to prevent particularly shameful events, "alert groups" should be made up of representatives of human rights structures who would record violations of basic rights. This might have discouraged the use of violent methods.

The biggest problem, however, is that the mobilisation of the people is not complemented by commensurate mobilisation measures against capital (including the confiscation of the assets of oligarchic groups). The fact that Ukrainian society has shown strong unity against the idea of an economic reserve [exemption] ("only the poor are fighting") is a clear victory, as otherwise it could have led to total despair. There is no doubt that Ukraine must seek a balance between the needs of mobilisation and the functioning of the economy. It is undeniable that a significant number of men escape mobilisation and swell the ranks of the economically inactive population. However, it is possible to achieve this using socially acceptable tools: temporary reserves for men who start work after a long break, reserves for key personnel in critical infrastructures and adapting the social and employment spheres to the needs of women.

Why do people go to the front? It's not just out of an abstract love of Ukraine (although, believe me, that's reason enough for many). The fact is that most Ukrainians believe in Ukraine's ability to change. This is what differentiates us from neighbouring countries such as Russia and Belarus, where all decisions have for a long time depended on the will of someone in power. Many Ukrainians dream of the time when the state will fight against the excessive concentration of wealth, when the economy will start to provide Ukrainians with everything they need for a prosperous life, and when working conditions will be influenced by trade unions to make people happy. Then we will truly rule our country, we will no longer be afraid of external enemies and we will stop looking for them from within.

Social struggle - who defends workers?

During the war, the Ukrainian Left and Sotsialnyi Rukh were forced to reinvent themselves under new conditions. Our activists fight the occupiers with weapons in hand, respond voluntarily to humanitarian and military needs, provide legal assistance to critical infrastructure workers affected by the Russian aggressors and offer psychological support to groups affected by the war. We are fully-fledged members of civil society, albeit with particular values: we believe in socialist democracy, international solidarity and the primacy of human dignity. And our clear stance against neoliberal policies has never been more relevant.

As the crisis deepens, the government is looking for an easy way to stabilise the economy at the expense of its citizens: by introducing a funded pension system, adopting a new Labour Code to replace the 1971 one, and privatising state-owned banks and railways. None of these reforms are new - every Ukrainian government has wanted to implement them since the 2008 financial crisis. The survival of the organised trade union movement depends on Ukrainian trade unions finding the strength to unite and fight against these outrageous reforms. Of course, Ukrainian trade unions have long been an instrument of collective struggle, but during the invasion they became more aware of their responsibility to workers, as they remain the most massive voice of workers' interests.

Despite the official ban on rallies, street demonstrations against hospital closures and university

mergers are taking place in Ukraine. Because nothing will make us accept a feeling of discomfort. In most cases, optimisation of the public sector is carried out in a way that suits civil servants, not to improve the quality of service or to free up funds for victory. On the other hand, Ukrainians are increasingly challenging violations of their labour rights in the courts, and every success in these cases is a victory for the people that gives them the strength to go forward and win a great victory for Ukraine.

I want to believe that in the future the working class will play a much more important role in the life of the country. If it has played such an important role in maintaining the front line and economic stability, would it be democratic to deprive it of its voice in the political sphere? The absence of left-wing political forces is the biggest problem facing Ukrainian democracy. But despite all the losses and current disenfranchisement, the working class has a chance of becoming strong in the long term.

Elections that shake up democracy

Ukraine today faces a difficult choice: how to preserve our dignity and protect our democracy? We can all see that society is becoming politicised on a large scale and is looking for ideas to change the country. What will be the solution to the accumulated contradictions? Apart from a revolution (the prospect of which can never be ruled out in Ukraine), the only option is to organise elections. However, society as a whole is convinced that holding elections during the war could be one of the most difficult tests for our democracy.

Many anxious questions are being asked. How can the elections be held safely? Will the pro-Russian forces not win? If the elections go ahead, will they change the ideological landscape?

I don't think we should give in to panic fear. We need to think more about the damage that will be done if the elections are held tomorrow without our influence. We, the Ukrainian Left, must finally give the Ukrainian worker the right to choose. If we miss the next elections because we are not ready, there is no guarantee that history will give us another chance to prove ourselves. Unfortunately, the war has reminded us that time is limited and that we are not eternal. If we don't seize this chance, we'll be condemned to continue going round in circles in the fight against the consequences of dying capitalism - the reduction of labour rights, the closure of hospitals, and so on.

First of all, I would like to comment on the fears of pro-Russian revenge. How can Russia hope for any success when it has caused irreparable damage to Ukraine and set itself up against the inhabitants of the Russian-speaking regions close to it? Moreover, Ukraine has already neutralised the pro-Russian forces, notably by banning parties likely to have links with Russia.

The forthcoming elections will clearly not be an opportunity for pro-Russian revenge. That could come much later, if more and more people become disillusioned with Ukrainian democracy and its ability to deal with pressing issues. The greatest danger is to face one's own problems alone and drown in them. When Putin's aggression is no longer an excuse and the help of international partners disappears. In other words, I think we need to think together about how to make our democracy sustainable, so that no one breaks it up.

I would like to remind you that the elections in the Ukrainian People's Republic over a century ago could not prevent the collapse of the Ukrainian state, although they were not a victory for the Russian forces. I believe that Ukraine is much stronger today.

Despite the prospect of elections, we should be thinking about how to adapt the legal regime of martial law to the needs of Ukrainian democracy (and not the other way round). Especially as the

war is going to last a long time. We must lift restrictions on the right to strike and to assemble, and extend forms of public control! Because in the Ukrainian context, democracy does not prevent military victories. On the contrary, its disappearance provokes panic, fear and mistrust. At over the last three years, we have seen plenty of evidence of the first proposition and, unfortunately, of the second.

Global solidarity and reconstruction

In conclusion, it cannot be stressed enough that the Ukrainian issue is a global one. I sincerely believe that this war will show the world's capacity to unite against barbarity. Comrades from left-wing movements around the world still have a chance to prevent the greatest catastrophe of the 21st century - Ukraine's defeat in the war against the Russian imperialist oppressor. The success of the Ukrainians will serve as an example to the other nations of the world who dare to go against the plans of the invader.

I would like once again to express my contempt for those on the pseudo-left who have forgotten the essence of true solidarity and are looking for any excuse to deny Ukraine the right to defend itself. In their geopolitical analyses, they ignore the Ukrainian people, who are the key to resistance and to preventing harmful reforms.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about reconstruction. Unfortunately, the words "just reconstruction" are losing their meaning, as are the words "just peace". We need to give real meaning to this concept.

For me, it will be fair under the following conditions:

1) Guaranteeing independence. The cancellation of Ukraine's foreign debt is a prerequisite. The economy must be socialised: strategic companies must be owned by the state under the leadership of workers' collectives. The emphasis must be on developing green energy and industry so that we can produce technological goods at home and not depend on foreign masters. Transnational companies should adhere to social standards that are no worse than those in their home countries. Ukrainian natural resources and labour must fuel our economy, not ensure the prosperity of someone abroad. A strategic perspective would be to form defence alliances with countries that feel threatened by Russia (notably Poland, the Baltic States and Scandinavia). The entire population should undergo military training and the state should create appropriate social guarantees for this purpose (maintaining the average wage during training). Under these conditions, Ukraine will be able to overcome its peripheral position and put its independence at the service of the interests of the population.

2) Workers' power. The working population of Ukraine paid a heavy price for independence and therefore deserves power. Workers must have an influence on the state of affairs in Ukraine, particularly through left-wing workers' parties. Laws should not be passed without the agreement of the trade unions. Workers must be represented in the management of companies to ensure a fair distribution of the results of economic activity. All investment deals must be subject to trade union audits to ensure they are in the long-term interests of the working class and promote productive employment. A Ministry of Labour should be set up to ensure that workers' interests are taken into account in the best way, to determine the best workload and to coordinate labour inspectorates and employment services, with a leadership appointed by the unions. This is the only way to restore workers' confidence in the state and promote the inclusion of citizens in politics.

3) A social policy for all. Equalise wages for women and men by establishing fixed minimum wages for the most feminised sectors - education, health and care (these wages should not be lower than

the national average). Reconstruction tenders should include social clauses - the winner should be the bidder who offers the best working conditions and guarantees employee participation in management. Emphasis should be placed on supporting employment programmes through large-scale infrastructure construction projects (including social infrastructure). The union can force the owner to increase staff if the maximum workload is exceeded. Mothers, war veterans and disabled people should have a priority right to employment. It must become economically unviable to maintain social standards that are too low!

All these changes certainly do not cover everything Ukraine needs. But they can help pave the way for a more inclusive, pluralist and democratic politics.

I would also like to express my gratitude to all our international friends who have shared our difficulties and triumphs, who have raised funds and sent precious supplies to Ukraine, who have spread the truth despite the fear of being falsely accused in their own countries. Together, we have already achieved the impossible: Ukraine has resisted, and its future will undoubtedly be much more connected to the whole world.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

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