

DSA Discusses Ukraine—Without an International Socialist Perspective

August 31, 2022



The Democratic Socialists of America organized a panel discussion on Ukraine on August 28, but it made no reference to the central issue of Ukraine's right to self-determination. A few of the of the speakers condemned the Russian invasion rather perfunctorily, and a couple described the atrocities taking place in Ukraine, but there was little or no discussion of Russian imperialism, and no analysis of the current political situation surrounding the war, one that entails analyzing the complex, contentious and dangerous interaction not only Ukraine and Russia, but also NATO, the EU, and the United States. None of the speakers attempted to provide a socialist analysis of the war based on internationalist principles. And they should have.

What Are We Discussing?

After all, let's remember what this is all about. At the orders of the tyrant Vladimir Putin, Russia invaded Ukraine, a former colony of Tsarist Russia, of Soviet Russia, and now a target of contemporary Russian imperialism. Putin justified his attack declaring that Ukraine was not a nation and that the Ukrainians are not a people. One can hear the genocidal implications in such remarks. A racist and nationalist, he calls for the Russians to lead the Slavs to unite Asia and Europe, and wants to begin by uniting the Russians, Belorussians, and the Ukrainians by force. In response to the attack on Ukraine, the government of Volodymyr Zelensky mobilized the army and the home defense forces to resist the Russians, which they have successfully done now for six months, with arms acquired from the United States and Europe. But the Ukrainians have done so at a tremendous cost.

The Russian war on Ukraine has led to the deaths of an estimated 45,000 Russian soldiers, tens of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians, thirteen million Ukrainians have been displaced and 6.7 million fled their country, including 500,000 school age children. Russia has taken over 20 percent of Ukrainian land, destroyed much of Ukrainian industry and agriculture. As economist Michael Roberts writes, "If Putin's forces succeed in annexing Ukrainian land seized during Russia's invasion, Kyiv would permanently lose almost two-thirds of its deposits. Moscow now controls 63% of Ukraine's coal deposits, 11% of its oil, 20% of its natural gas, 42% of its metals, and 33% of its rare earths." Everyone recognizes that achieving peace is imperative and that diplomacy will play a

role, though the call for peace and diplomacy now is tantamount to demanding that Ukraine surrender. Only the Ukrainians can decide when they want to negotiate and what the terms will be. So, the real question at issue, the question that was largely ignored in this discussion, is where does one stand: with Russia or with Ukraine?

A Diverse Panel

DSA's discussion of Ukraine presented a highly diverse panel, men and women from six countries, but didn't invite Ukrainian democratic socialist associated with *Sotsial'nyy Rukh* (Social Movement or SR) or from the leftwing Ukrainian journal *Commons* to participate. Those groups represent the organized democratic socialists and other leftists in Ukraine who are both fighting the Russian invasion and simultaneously organizing to resist Zelensky's neoliberal policies. Some of SR activists, like Taras Bilous, are well known and have appeared on Democracy Now, but the organizers chose to exclude these Ukrainian socialists who have criticized DSA's position.

The panel presented a variety of opinions and views on Ukraine, really a hodgepodge, but the thrust of their remarks taken together tended to downplay or ignore Russia and to focus on the policies of the United States and NATO. While there is certainly much to criticize regarding the United States and NATO, one cannot ignore the Russian aggressor. No one on the panel, even if they condemned Russia's invasion, criticized Russian imperialism, and when China was taken up, its violations of human rights of the Uighurs and Hong Kong were ignored. At the same time, three of the speakers tended to look back fondly to the era of Soviet and Eastern European Communism.

The Panelists' Comments

Let me say a word about each of the speakers and their contributions.

Olena Lyubchenko, a Ukrainian studying at York University in Canada, is a prolific writer for *LeftEast* who calls herself a Marxist humanist. She condemned the Russian invasion, and called for the Russian to go home and deal with their own fascist regime. She then went on to analyze the Ukrainian government's neoliberal policies—shock therapy, structural adjustments, privatizations—and discussed the ways in which policies had placed an inordinate burden on women and on migrant workers. All that she said was excellent; the problem is what she didn't say. She did not express solidarity with the struggles of her Ukrainian compatriots who are fighting Russia and need weapons in order to do so.

The second speaker, Yuri Sheliashenko, is a Ukrainian pacifist, a member of the board of World Without War and also of the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection. A sincere pacifist who opposes militarism, conscription, and war, he condemned the war and the atrocities committed by all of the forces involved: the Russia and Ukraine, the United States and NATO. He also ignored, however, the important question of whether or not Ukraine has the right to fight for its independence and to resist the destruction of its people and its culture. One felt he was included because his pacifism coincided with DSA's opposition to providing arms to the Ukrainians. Like DSA, his position calling for immediate diplomacy and an end to the war now is implicitly a call for Ukraine to surrender and submit to Russian domination, a position, horrendous in itself but also one that would encourage the next Russian invasion of one of its neighbors.

He was followed by Sopra Japaridze, a Georgian who is chair of Georgia Solidarity Network and also a writer for *LeftEast*. She discussed Russia's war on Georgia in 2008, condemning both the Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili and Putin. She described how the Georgian government's reforms that followed in 2010 had created something like a "libertarian paradise" that destroyed the social safety net and left people in tremendous poverty. She lamented the competition that pitted neighbors

against each other. One had to sympathize with the economic and social catastrophe she described. But then, suddenly and surprisingly, she defended the old Communist regime. "They're trying to criminalize Communism and erase memory of a better life that a lot of people had. Most of the population had their basic needs met. People miss Communism. They miss peace. They miss the time when [under Soviet Communism] different nationalities got together, a time of peace and love." As it would turn out, she was not the only one who reminisced warmly about Soviet Communism.

The next speaker, Pawel Wargan, a Polish member of the Coordinating Collective of the Democracy in Europe Movement (DiEM25), apparently looks to Stalin for political guidance, having recently tweeted, criticizing Finland and Sweden asking to join NATO, "Social democracy, as Stalin warned nearly a century ago, is the moderate wing of fascism," (He also made other tweets that show his admiration for Stalin.) He discussed Poland, though he did not begin with Solidarność, the Solidarity workers movement of 1980 that contributed to bringing down Soviet Communism.

He talked instead about the transition from Soviet Communism to capitalism and how President Biden had gone there in the 1990s to tell them to privatize more. He argued that while Poland had done better than other Eastern European countries, it had depended upon Germany, which had made it a kind of economic colony. He too looked back fondly to the Soviet Communist era. "After World War II we were destroyed but we rebuilt in 25 years, and then we went to other countries and they helped them build schools and hospitals." He was referring to the Soviet Union's soft-power imperialism during the Cold War, similar to the U.S. Peace Corps. But he didn't mention helping Ukraine's left and labor movement today in resisting Zelensky's neoliberal policies and fighting Russia, as the Polish Party Razem (Left Together) has been doing.

Richard Wolff, Professor Emeritus of Economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and currently a Visiting Professor in the Graduate Program in International Affairs of the New School in New York, argued in essence that the war in Ukraine is really about China. The United States, he observed, is a failing empire, China a rising economic power, and there is a contest between the two. To win that battle, the United States must reestablish its leading role in Europe. I think he's right, but he tends to view China as a benign power and to downplay its human rights violations against the Uighurs or Hong Kong. His argument, seeing the United States as the chief military aggressor around the world, might also be seen as exculpating Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. While he talked about the underlying U.S.-China conflict, Wolff did not condemn the Russian invasion and did not indicate any support for Ukraine in its fight for self-determination.

The final speaker was Vijay Prashad of India, executive-director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, the Chief Editor of LeftWord Books, and a senior non-resident fellow at Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies, Renmin University of China. Prashad, is one of the leading figures in what is called campist politics, the notion that the United States and its allies are and must be opposed by the Global South. Progressives too he believes should back the states of the Global South against the United States. He suggests that the left should stand with the governments of Modi's India, with Bolsonaro's or Lula's Brazil (they will have the same politics on international questions he suggested), and with AMLO's Mexico. For Prashad, whether these governments are authoritarian or democratic, regardless of their political and social system, one must stand with these governments, with their rulers against the United States.

Discussing the American failure to get more support for its sanctions, Prashad argued, "The United States couldn't find support for its sanctions of Russia because most developing countries don't want to be bullied by the United States anymore. They just don't see the Western narrative. They understand that this conflict in Ukraine, just like Taiwan, is to further U.S. interests against Russia and China. People want this conflict to come to a close."

There is no doubt much truth in the observation that many governments around the world are tired of being bullied by the United States, which has violently intervened in Latin America, the Middle East, Asia and Africa. But that in no way justifies supporting another bully, Russia, and doesn't excuse the failure to support a former colony battling imperialism: Ukraine. Like several of the others, Prashad had no criticism of Russia—he didn't even condemn its invasion or call for Russia to leave—and he certainly expressed no solidarity with Ukraine.

With two hours allotted for the panel and so many speakers, there wasn't much time for Q and A. But shockingly, in response to one of the few questions, Olena Lyubchenko, the Ukrainian "Marxist humanist" said, "I think we should embrace the nostalgia for the Soviet past." Sopra Japaridze, the Georgian solidarity activist quickly spoke up and said, "I agree."

A Tragic Longing for the Communist Past

What a tragedy that these young Eastern Europeans look back to the Stalinist Communist system, to the Soviet Union as something to be desired. Don't they know or have they forgotten the history? Stalin's Soviet government killed five or six million of peasants, many of them members of ethnic minorities—a few million of them Ukrainians—and murdered tens of thousands of socialist revolutionaries, the Old Bolsheviks who had overthrown capitalism and led the Russian working class to power. The Soviet state of Stalin and his successors established concentration camps, the *gulags*, that held 10 or 15 million prisoners.

After World War II, the Soviet Union simultaneously "liberated" Eastern Europe from the Nazis and conquered it for Communism. In most Eastern European nations (with the exception of Yugoslavia, Albania, and Czechoslovakia) the Red Army imposed new governments that had been hot-housed in the Soviet Union and which modeled themselves on the Soviet Union. The Communists in many countries absorbed the former Nazi administrators and police into the new Communist governments. The Soviet Union initially (in the late 1940s) pillaged the Eastern European countries, packing up entire factories and sending them to Russia. Then in 1949 the Soviet Union established COMECON, subordinating the new Communist states to Soviet Russia's ruling bureaucracy. There can only be one name for this: Soviet imperialism.

The Communist system did meet most of its peoples' most basic needs, but it was an inefficient system that left working people in the Soviet Union and throughout its Eastern European empire standing in line to wait for the necessities that gave them a very low standard of living. And this was a system without political democracy or civil liberties where the Communist model of the totalitarian police state was imposed with their secret police to prevent the people from speaking out or taking action. When in the 1950s and 1960s the Hungarians and Czechs fought for a better life, for better conditions and democracy, the Communists sent in the tanks to crush them. And when the Poles did so in 1980, the Soviet Union supported Marshall Wojciech Jaruzelski's imposition of martial law.

No, no one should "embrace the nostalgia for the Soviet past."

What a tragedy too that the Democratic Socialist of America, once committed to a global vision of democratic socialism, is today expressing campist positions and a nostalgia for Stalinism. DSA leaders and especially the International Committee now appear to take the side of authoritarian governments that crush labor movements, deny women their rights, and try to obliterate ethnic minorities. Not all DSA members share these campist and neo-Stalinist politics, but the members are not being given a chance to hear a real debate on the issues. DSA's leadership seems to be in danger of forgetting its first name—and its second too.