

Interview with a Leftwing Ukrainian activist in Kyiv

March 1, 2022

Соціальний |



Logo of Social Movement of Ukraine

Interview by Nao Hong (she/them) from the Revolutionary Communist International Tendency, 4 March 2022, www.thecommunists.net

Currently Russian forces are conducting military operation near Kyiv and have made a number of attempts to surround the city. We interviewed a left-wing activist from Social Movement (<https://rev.org.ua/>) and the Territorial Defense Forces (VTO) in Kyiv.

Question: Greetings! We thank you for finding time in such a difficult situation to give us an interview! Please introduce yourself.

Answer: My name is Fedor Ustinov. I am a member of Social Movement. I was working for the last year as a welder in a small Polish town. I supported the organization [Social Movement] from a distance. I received news of the beginning of the war on the way to Warsaw, where my comrade and I went to speak to the Polish Sejm [parliament] about the need to end Ukraine's external debt. So, since that time I've been in the Ukraine. I went to Kyiv and joined the ranks of one of Territorial Defense Forces.

Q: How do you see the current situation in Kyiv? How do you estimate the mood of the local population? And how does the population of Kyiv look at ongoing events?

A: It is quite obvious that the original plan of the Russian military staff for fast capture of the capital has failed. Currently the occupying forces are trying to surround the capital. There are clashes with the Armed Forces of Ukraine near the North and West parts of Kyiv. Another unit of troops from Nizhyn was stopped in the east. Heavy artillery, bombers and rockets have fired at civilian targets including infrastructure as well as military installations. Sometimes some detachments of the Russian Army have broken through and gotten deep into the capital, about five kilometers in. However, they have been all eliminated. There are some "sleeper cells" of saboteurs in the city who had been brought here a few months before and were then activated. A significant part of the population of Kyiv has been evacuated. However, there are those who remain and actively support the city's defense. The general mood is anxious but remains determined.

Q: We heard there was a distribution of arms in Kyiv. There were also local residents who joined VTO militia. How widely does VTO consist of people who are political activists? Are socialists and leftists active in the militia? Are there independent militia units outside VTO?

A: I do not have full information. However, I can say that the VTO is already staffed above the planned limits. Fifteen percent of all members of my platoon are people with a political background. About four of them are leftists. Most of the platoon is made up of local inhabitants. As far as I understand from the information from the activist chat rooms, there are now several hundred left-wing activists inside the VTO units of the capital city. Among those about a hundred are combatants. There are activists of our organization and friendly associated groups involved in the defense of other cities and towns, including some which are surrounded and are experiencing devastating shelling.

Q: What is the mood of the militia members in VTO? How do you estimate the willingness of the militia to fight against the invaders? Are progressive views against Moscow's imperialism widespread among the members of the militia?

A: The mood is clearly for an uncompromising struggle. There are many military veterans in VTO. Everyone expects that the finale of this military confrontation would be the ending of the occupation of Crimea and Donbass. According to my observations, our battalion is dominated by people with democratic political views. It is a quite common notion here that we are fighting not just against the army of a neighboring country but against an authoritarian, imperialist regime in Russia. People believe that the goal of this war is democracy and the right of free determination of own future. Actions of local population in the occupied cities confirm this and are in sharp contrast with the mass repressions against protests in Russia itself.

Q: Kremlin propaganda emphasizes the role of "fascist" elements and their influence inside the Armed Forces of Ukraine and in the government as a whole. How this assessment is true? How much are right wing forces represented in different branches of the military?

A: As you know, right-wing political forces have very little electoral support. However, they are represented disproportionately in many combat units. Nevertheless, they make up the majority only in AZOV, DUK PS [Praviy Sector units] and in few other lesser-known combat units. For instance, they [right-wing forces] constitute the core representation of Warta Municipal in Kyiv.

Q: How would you rate the popular support for Zelensky? How do you think the population is divided into supporters of the government and its opponents and supporters of invaders?

A: It seems to me that support for Zelensky has grown significantly since the beginning of the escalation. Perhaps such support even exceeds today's pre-election level. In my opinion, the main point is that he always focuses on public sentiment and performs actions that would bring him short-term political dividends. It is in many cases difficult to reconcile these moves with any single political line. However, now he acts very responsibly and understands current situation quite well. To some extent it is possible to consider that at this moment he has become the public personal representative of the Ukrainian's people political views. Today, his political support is higher than during 2019 presidential election. Also, if we talk about public sentiment according to yesterday's opinion poll about 80 percent of the population Ukraine is ready to defend the state with arms in hand. Basically, I have nothing more to add to this number.