The War on Ukraine

written by A Sotsialnyi Rukh activist, Andrei | August 10, 2022

Illustration for Sotsialniy Rukh, Katya Gritseva, 2021, digital art, Kharkiv

New Politics put the following questions to Andrei, a member of the Ukrainian socialist organization *Sotsialnyi Rukh* (Social Movement).

***NP**: What is your assessment of the current military situation?*

A: Russia has conceded defeat in its attempted blitzkrieg, or "general battle," and has moved on to a war of attrition. Putin believes that, over time, support for Ukraine will weaken, pressure from sanctions will become less and less, and Ukraine will not be able to stand alone against Russia. As we can see, he does have reasons to think so. Putin considers the complete obedience of the Russian population to be his strategic advantage over the West, which, unlike the populations of Western countries, will not criticize him because of high inflation or economic problems.

For its part, the Ukrainian side is trying to buy the time necessary to obtain heavier weaponry and to form reserve military units from among the mobilized. Tactically, this is turning into a slow exchange of territory for time—the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) is retreating without taking more casualties than the Russian side, periodically launching local counterattacks to improve its position. The main problem now is that the stocks of Soviet-type weapons and ammunition in Western countries are limited, and the introduction of heavy weapons of NATO standards requires time. For example, the immediate task of the AFU is a full transition to NATO standard artillery (as stocks of shells for Soviet artillery are running out). Under normal circumstances, this could take six to twelve months, but now it needs to be done in two to three months. Roughly the same will have to be done with tanks, air defense systems, and, most importantly, aviation.

Russia has not changed its goals of destroying Ukrainian statehood, but it has changed its methods. The future of the war cannot be clearly predicted now—war in general is an unpredictable thing. However, it is already clear that it will be a long and bloody confrontation for a year or more.

***NP**: Do you believe that the Ukrainian government is making the decisions regarding whether to fight on, or do you think this is being determined from outside? (A report in the Ukrainian press,[1] seemed to suggest that Boris Johnson was decisive in scuttling negotiations.)*

A: Two questions arise. First, what could Boris Johnson use to exert such pressure? It is clear that Ukraine could be forced to make concessions by refusing to provide further aid. But what could be used to coerce the Ukrainian authorities to escalate the fighting is not clear. Second, how could such an escalation be sold to local elites and the population if they did not want it? We are actually seeing the opposite, namely that Zelensky's position is quite moderate and is a compromise between polar positions in Ukrainian society.

Zelensky has officially stated[2] that some Western countries have pressed Ukraine to make concessions to avoid a continuation of the war. In this situation, clearly, the pro-Ukrainian position of such an influential country as the UK could have influenced the Ukrainian leadership, but rather in the sense that it gave hope that Ukraine would receive support and not be left on its own. Because, of course, everyone in Ukraine understands that without serious external support, Ukraine cannot win the long war of attrition with Russia.

***NP**: Are the Ukrainian people in a position to assess whether to fight on and what concessions, if any, to make, given that the Ukrainian government doesn't release casualty figures, making it very difficult to accurately judge the situation?*

A: There is much confusion about what is meant by Ukrainian concessions. If we are talking about the territory occupied by Russia after February 24, then military losses will have little effect on the population's perception of whether to concede these territories. This is simply because Ukrainians have seen what the Russians did in Bucha and Mariupol and understand that any option other than the return of these territories will result in far greater casualties than continuing the war. Already Ukraine has lost far more civilian than military personnel, according to officials—and it is not clear how this can change, given that the Russians are not changing their attitude toward civilians.

The situation with the territories seized before February 24—Crimea and ORDLO (the occupied districts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions)—is completely different. There are different opinions about these territories. Some believe they should be recovered by military force, some believe there should not be an effort to recover them militarily, but neither should they be recognized as Russian territory, and perhaps there is a small minority ready to recognize them as Russian territory. The compromise point of view, promoted by the authorities at the moment, is that Ukraine continues to consider these territories its own, but with a commitment not to try to recover them militarily. Zelensky keeps insisting that the return of ORDLO and Crimea by military means is not possible and not worth the possible military losses—a position that has not changed since the war began. However, talk of this in any case can only come after the expulsion of Russian troops to the borders that existed before February 24, which is still a long, long time away. And Putin has never suggested anything of the sort.

***NP**: What is your view of the remarks[3] of former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger: "Negotiations need to begin in the next two months before it creates upheavals and tensions that will not be easily overcome. Ideally, the dividing line should be a return to the status quo ante. Pursuing the war beyond that point would not be about the freedom of Ukraine, but a new war against Russia itself."*

A: This is the answer to all Western leftists trying to pit US imperialism against Russian imperialism. Kissinger sees Putin as "his man." The architect of "Operation Condor"[4] is certainly close to Putin's goals of "denazification"—the elimination of activists dissatisfied with the actions of the imperialist state. Like Putin, he is used to a world divided into spheres of influence among the big states. These "great powers" can do whatever they want within their sphere of influence: carry out genocide, violate human rights, and so on. Sometimes these spheres are redistributed as a result of negotiations or wars. But for Kissinger and Putin, the wars should never directly pit one major power against the other.

Putin is uncomfortable with the very fact that the West is trying to promote values that claim to be universal—for him, it is a violation of his sovereignty. By "sovereignty," he means the ability to kill undesirable people in his sphere of influence.

We must say openly that there are universal values for all people on the planet. If they are violated

anywhere in the world, the world is obliged to intervene, regardless of other powers' "zones of interest" or "spheres of influence."

The content of these values can and should be discussed and revised on equal footing, any country can offer its vision, but no one can isolate itself from this discussion under the guise of its sovereignty. Tyrants who kill their own citizens will sooner or later start to kill their neighbors. Sovereignty does not and cannot have clear permanent borders. We all live in one whole world, on the same planet. Isolationism is a failed idea used by tyrants so no one will stop them from committing crimes. Trump, Putin, Kissinger, the monarchs of the Arab world, the Chinese Communist Party, radical Islamists: they all oppose the idea of universal values in one way or another.

This was not always the case. In the 2000s, for example, Putin tried to create his value system combining Western consumption and Soviet paternalism. However, the pro-Western protests in Moscow in 2011 and the victory of the pro-Western revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine showed the complete failure of this system of values in open competition with Western values (this does not mean that Western values in the form of liberal democracy are ideal). It was only after this that Putin turned to pure violence.

The United Nations has a key role to play in the development of universal world values. The UN should get rid of the system of permanent members of the Council and start playing the role of a platform for an ongoing discussion about the future of the world—what it should be and how to get there.

Isolationist revanchism is a very serious threat to the world. We need to resist it both by repelling the external threat in the case of our country and by fighting politicians who offer us compromise with dictators based on the idea that "what they do at home is none of our business."

***NP**: What has the impact of the war been on various left forces: socialists, the labor movement, anarchists, the women's movement? Is the right being strengthened or weakened? What do you see as the trends the longer the war continues?*

A: The position of all political forces changed in a highly contradictory way. On the one hand, the war, having become an existential threat, united all political forces, all population groups, and all social classes. The first month was a kind of rebirth of the nation, when all the old disputes and disagreements (linguistic, regional, class, cultural, political) could easily be resolved for a more important and understandable purpose. (Maybe that's what communism would look like!) The few political actors who tried to start scoring political points from the war were condemned even by their supporters.

However, the withdrawal of Russian tanks from Kyiv made a big difference. The actual existential threat has been replaced by a potential threat, making it easy to ignore. Civic unity began to crack. Businesses began to look for ways to shift the costs of the war onto workers and consumers, the security forces looked for ways to increase their power, the population asked questions about why the authorities were not preparing for war, political parties began to blame each other for Ukraine's problems, and language and culture wars returned. All the stereotypes and prejudices have also returned. Feminist acquaintances, for example, report that they cannot rent an office simply because they say they represent a feminist organization. You could say that we are going back to the way we used to live. However, this is compounded by: a) martial law, which drastically reduces the scope for criticism of the authorities; b) mass impoverishment of people; and c) the loss through emigration of a huge amount of the population.

Therefore, the situation is very contradictory. On the one hand, there is a very strong public mobilization and solidarity which dramatically increases people's civic participation. This also helps leftist organizations (even in our organization many inactive members became active at the beginning of the war). The mass participation of a variety of people in the army—including vulnerable groups (LGBT, ethnic minorities, Roma, left-wing activists)—will make it difficult for right-wing groups in the future to frame the image of the defender of Ukraine as necessarily a right-wing white man. In general, the main enemy of the left—political apathy and the desire to be out of politics for the majority of the population—looks largely defeated. It's hard to be out of politics when that politics means rockets fired into your flat and tanks rumbling down your street. Also, the complete break with the ideology of the former Soviet Union means that Ukraine faces the need for rapid integration into the European Union, which also plays into the hands of the left as the EU is on average far more progressive than Ukraine and we can campaign for progressive policies by arguing that we need to be like Europe. Moreover, the far-right in Ukraine has always been mostly anti-European, seeing Europe as a haven for LGBT, socialists, and feminists.

However, all this does not paint an unequivocally good prospect for the left. The Ukrainian government is neoliberal, and the war has only made this worse. Amazingly, while all European countries respond to even modest economic crises with leftist measures—expansionary fiscal policies, class redistribution to level out disparities, a drive for full employment at the expense of inflation, etc.—Ukraine's crisis has been met with even greater neo-liberalism and fiscal conservatism. This has led to mass impoverishment, which has led to an increase in crime, and the Interior Ministry has responded by legalizing firearms. Both are hitting leftists hard: impoverishment knocks people out of activism, and mass possession of guns leads to the risk of both increasing right-wing violence and police brutality (which are often the same because of the affiliation of right-wing street activists with security forces). Martial law—the prohibition of protests and strikes, the consolidation of the media—makes it extremely difficult to fight this. In many ways, we are forced to actively use our Western connections to at least influence the actions of our government.

When it comes to the long-term prospects of the left, the fate of the left in Ukraine is closely linked to the fate of this war. If Ukraine ends up losing—loses more territory or sovereignty, suffers huge irreparable economic losses without adequate compensation, loses the prospect of European integration—there is a high risk of a rise in right-wing sentiment. Without a clear perspective, various extremist ideologies can easily spread in society, which will of course be based on hatred of both Russia, which stole our country, and the Western world that abandoned Ukraine to its fate. The situation in Chechnya (Republic of Ichkeria) can be given as an example. Before the first Chechen war, it was a fairly secular country, but it became a center of attraction for radical Islamism after the Khasavyurt agreements deprived it of the chance to become an independent state. Such radical, extremist ideas are often the consequence of an inability to defend oneself by other more reasonable and realistic means.

On the other hand, if Ukraine does not lose (although we can hardly call this a victory), and maintains those things necessary for decent social progress, the left will have very good prospects. European integration will require society to move in a more progressive direction. It will be difficult for the right to frame itself as those who "won the war" because participation in the army was very massive and relatively inclusive. We will see large numbers of people gaining experience in self-organization by volunteering and helping the army. These social skills are not going anywhere. The demand for progressive social change in society and less influence of money on politics in Ukrainian society is very strong—in fact in his discourse Zelensky has constantly flirted with these themes, although of course, his politics have little to do with his words. The country will also face the question of reindustrialization and the development of science and education—issues that have long

been dear to the left and promoted by the left in Ukraine—which in the future will also be essential for the building of a strong defense sector.

Certainly, there is no guarantee that in post-war construction the left will necessarily be able to win public support. The same European integration can be implemented by borrowing all the worst from the EU, but not by accepting the good there. All this will be subject to political struggle—but the trend as a whole will contribute to the growth of left-wing sentiment and the success of left-wing organizations.

***NP**: Do you worry that if the West provides more and more powerful weapons to Ukraine, this will cause a cycle of escalating violence that will end up destroying Ukraine?*

A: "Escalation" has become the most important word in the current international debate on this war. Again, as with the word "concessions," there is a very dangerous ambiguity that needs to be discussed.

The first issue is "escalation in Ukraine." Except for weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), the Russian Federation has used all kinds of weapons, including within populated areas: heavy bombs, heavy flamethrowers, missiles (including hypersonic ones), cluster incendiary munitions, and so on. Russia has no heavier weapons to use in Ukraine. Also, Russia has already committed every possible war crime—in effect carrying out genocide on invaded territories. There are no types of targets that Russia has not already attacked. At the moment it has two escalatory tools left: mobilization and WMDs.

The first is impossible because of the nature of the Russian regime, which is based on the passivity of the people and the basic contract "no one owes anyone anything—the state does not owe the population and the population does not owe the state." Breaking this contract would most likely lead to the death of the regime. Many had expected a mobilization on May 9, but this didn't happen.

The use of WMDs also does not look like a real threat at the moment. Neither Western intelligence nor most military analysts believe that such options are actually being considered. WMDs will not give Putin anything militarily, but it will very much change the world's attitude towards the war—a military intervention by NATO countries in such a situation is quite possible. Putin tries to look like a madman, but he is not. His actions are quite logical for a tyrant trying to retain power, but they are based on incorrect information about the world (Putin gets this only from reports of his subordinates who try to tell only the facts that are pleasing to him). Escalation in Ukraine is impossible because the Russian army is already fighting at its maximum capacity without any restrictions.

The other and much more real problem is escalation by Russia outside of Ukraine. No, of course Russia will never attack NATO, but there are many forms of hybrid aggression that it certainly uses: trade war (cutting off gas in winter, for example), creating a food crisis or stopping humanitarian aid in Syria, large-scale cyber attacks on critical infrastructure, political assassinations and terrorist attacks (as with the Czech arms depots), selling heavy weapons to various terrorist groups. Of course, it seems insignificant compared to what is happening now in Ukraine, but it is a big problem for Western politicians. Such actions will trigger a backlash—and in the current very heated situation it could trigger an escalation spiral with unpredictable results. Western politicians are afraid to take the first step in this confrontation, so their policies remain reactive.

There is nothing wrong with this attempt to protect their countries from any possible costs of this war. However, there is no need to cover up concern for themselves with the guise of concern for Ukraine. Western society needs to take a sober view of the dangers posed by Russia, and first and foremost develop defense mechanisms. And a second important point to remember is that inaction

can also affect Russia's ability to use hybrid attacks against Western countries. It was inaction and the lack of a clear strategy, with the hope of "what if it doesn't work," that led us to this war.

***NP**: What are your objectives for the short term and for the longer term?*

A: The first important thing to understand is that this war could be a very long one, much longer than many people currently think. It will not be uniform in intensity, but it will not be over completely for a long time.

The short-term goals in these circumstances are what is needed right now in the process of war. The long-term goal is some kind of transition to a post-war world, the configuration of which is almost impossible to predict right now.

The main short-term goal is of course to help Ukraine win the war. Primarily for this purpose, we work with our foreign friends from various progressive organizations around the world. We try to make sure that the topic of Ukraine does not disappear from the public discourse and try to promote the interests of Ukraine. We do this first of all by countering the myths created around Ukraine and the war by Russian propaganda and various stereotypes. We support what our state is promoting in terms of arms supplies, sanctions, and confiscation of Russian assets.

We also try to talk about the types of support that our government is not talking about. The most important is the cancellation of the Ukrainian international debt. It is important not only to ease the financial situation in Ukraine but also politically. The debt has long been a way of stifling Ukraine's development, a way of keeping it on the periphery of Europe. This has benefited international financial institutions and Ukrainian elites alike, but not the people of Ukraine. The time has come to end it.

Our goals within Ukraine are primarily humanitarian. We are a small organization and can't help everyone, so we focus on helping affiliated organizations, often trade unions and various workers and activist organizations.

Although we believe that war is not the time to score political points, we also have to campaign politically. This is because some politicians have decided that war and martial law are a good way of pushing through unpopular bills. The latest egregious example is Bill 5371 that essentially destroys the rights of employees of small and medium-sized enterprises (which are seventy-three percent of employers). It is contrary to both EU and ILO (International Labor Organization) standards and was postponed until after the war due to public outcry. We are trying by all available means to prevent this bill from being enacted. We also help workers who have suffered from unscrupulous employers during the war, with advice, legal aid, and publicity about their issues. Unfortunately, the unity of Ukrainian society began to crumble precisely with the desire of business owners to pass their costs onto workers.

For the longer term, we see a place for a postwar Ukraine in Europe, with a strong self-sufficient economy, a strong army, a just social order, and massive civic participation. For this we need a political force that will unite progressive grassroots organizations—it could be a political party or another form of political organization. This force will have to work actively within Ukraine and abroad. Our fate is inextricably linked to Europe. We want European integration, but we want European integration with European trade unions, labor movements, and grassroots initiatives. We do not want European integration with European business lobbyists and reactionary movements. Europe is now at a crossroads; for years the wealth of the central countries has been ensured by shifting costs to the periphery. The war is one consequence of the transfer of security costs to eastern Europe. The complete failure of this approach can no longer be ignored. Fair and equitable

integration of Ukraine into the EU may set a precedent for a redistribution of power within the EU, and possibly closer integration and equalization of living standards between the different countries of Europe.

Another important topic will be framing the origins and causes of this war in public discourse. It is important because we need not only to end this war but also to learn from it and eliminate its causes. Even now there is a political struggle over that. For right-wingers, Russia is practically a revival of Communism and the Soviet Union. But we see that the Russian Federation is the leader in terms of inequality and the anti-leader in terms of civic engagement. It's a corporate dictatorship where people are governed by the libertarian principle of "do whatever you want, as long as you don't touch my private life." By suppressing public confrontation within the country, Putin has externalized the class conflict, sending the poorest to fight imaginary foreign enemies so that they will not confront their real enemies, the wealthy elite within the country.

We have to show that inequality and unresolved class conflicts are as dangerous to world security as tyranny. It is not something that is an internal affair of countries. Inequality and related violations of people's rights should become as much a cause for various kinds of international restrictions as tyranny.

Our era has been called "globalization without values." Capitalists have easily invested in the businesses of tyrants and slave masters without thinking about the ethics and sustainability of such investments. We should not discard globalization—creating borders is what the right-wingers want. But we must build our global cooperation on the requirements of sustainability and respect for all human rights—civil, social, cultural, and so on. The attempt to "take shortcuts" and go down the route of cutting costs at the expense of people must be seen as a threat to the stability and sustainability of development. People must come before profits. And this is exactly how Russia's attack on Ukraine poses the question: Europe and the world have to choose literally between the lives of Ukrainians and the economic costs of the confrontation with Russia. I hope the world can make the right choice.

Notes

1. Roman Romaniuk, "Possibility of talks between Zelenskyy and Putin came to a halt after Johnson's visit – UP sources," *Ukrainska Pravda*, May 5, 2022.

2. Mazurenko Alyona, "Zelenskyy Said That Ukraine Is Being Pushed Towards 'Peace', But With Benefits For Russia," *Ukrsainska Pravda*, June 6, 2022.

3. "Kissinger: These are the main geopolitical challenges facing the world right now," May 23, 2022.

4. National Security Archive, "Lifting of Pinochet's Immunity Renews Focus on Operation Condor," June 10, 2004.