

# Ukraine: Democratic Aspirations and Imperialist Rivalry

June 27, 2014

Ukraine constitutes a test not only for democratic movements, or the unevenly matched imperialisms of the U.S./EU and Russia, but also for the global left. As with other “difficult” moments like the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, Iran 2009, or the Libyan uprising, our support for democracy and human rights has in some quarters come into conflict with the long held stance that neoliberal capitalism, led by the United States, is the main danger confronting humanity. The Maidan uprising that toppled the oligarchical kleptocracy of Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine was not socialist or even social democratic. Moreover, Maidan was cheered on by the United States and the EU, which clearly sought advantage from it against Russia. This has led some on the left to lean toward Putin’s Russia and to shy away from supporting the Maidan uprising and Ukraine, even in the face of Russia’s takeover of Ukrainian territory and threats to dismember the country. This article takes a different stance. In the tradition of the anti-Stalinist left and particularly the Marxist-Humanist stream of which I have long been a part, I maintain that we can and should support progressive democratic and popular movements, even when they undermine regimes that the U.S. government opposes, and at the same time, work to oppose U.S. war and hegemony.

## **The Maidan Movement: A Democratic Uprising on Putin’s Doorstep**

The 2013-14 Ukrainian uprising showed the creativity of masses in motion and the ultimate fragility of state power, even when surrounded by a repressive police apparatus and enjoying the support of a foreign imperialist ally. The overthrow of the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich involved large-scale street protests of over 500,000 people and the occupation of Kiev’s central square, the Maidan, for weeks on end in the dead of winter. Despite support efforts by Russia and police repression that resulted in more than 100 deaths, in the end the regime collapsed. The police melted away, the army refused to attack the people, and Yanukovich fled for his life.

The Maidan uprising rattled Putin’s regime in Russia, which has experienced persistent democratic protests over the past two years, despite ever-increasing state repression. As the British journalist James Meek wrote: “Putin’s great fear is that the people of a future better Ukraine might inspire an entirely different unification with their East Slav brethren on his side of the border—a common cause of popular revolt against him and other leaders like him. The revolution on Maidan Nezalezhnosti—Independence Square in Ukrainian—is the closest yet to a script for his own downfall” (*London Review of Books*, 3-20-14).

In a similar vein, the Ukrainian sociologist Volodymyr Ishchenko held that in annexing Crimea, Putin was motivated not only by territorial and imperial motives, but also by the situation at home: “Crimea was necessary to increase patriotism among the Russian population, and to decrease any chance that the Russian opposition—which was very much inspired by Maidan—might attempt anything like that in Russia” (“For Ukrainians, as for any other people in the world, the main threat is capitalism,” *LeftEast*, April 30, 2014).

The Maidan uprising exhibited several contradictions, however. One revolved around the emergence of far right groups. Though only a small minority within the movement, these groups were well organized and prepared for street fighting. A recent report from an anarchist correspondent speaks to the relative strength of such groups: “The Maidan self-defense was organized in ‘groups of one hundred,’ with organizations or currents setting up their own group. All together there were about

fifty such groups of one hundred. However, despite the name many groups were made up of not more than thirty or forty people. About ten groups were dominated by rightists or fascists, others expressed nationalist tendencies but with more liberal or democratic elements." This account also mentions that the left was a very small, often marginalized part of the protests, sometimes due to attacks by right-wing groups. Nonetheless, some "anarchists, communists, and socialists" took part in an occupation by 300 students of the Ministry of Education in Kiev ("Ukraine: Report from a visit in Kiev in April 2014," *libcom.org*, April 29, 2014). Thus, while notions of the uprising as fascist or reactionary were a fantasy put forth by Russian state propaganda, the emergence of the far right as a tendency is certainly a serious danger for the Ukrainian democratic movement.

A second contradiction within the Maidan movement concerned a major part of its agenda, that of affiliating with the European Union rather than Putin's Eurasian Economic Union. This was the issue that sparked the initial protests in November 2013, as most Ukrainians were outraged by Yanukovich's rejection of a pact with the EU, which they evidently saw as a way out of Putin's increasingly authoritarian political and economic network. The EU offered a multibillion-dollar loan package in exchange for unspecified economic "reform." Little account has been taken by the Ukrainian democratic movement, then or since, of the terrible human costs of the austerity measures the EU and other international lending agencies would demand in return for loans, above all cuts in salaries and pensions and hikes in prices of basic commodities. And this in a country already teetering on the edge of economic collapse.

This lacuna was rooted in the fact that the working class did not appear under its own banner, and in the weakness of the left, which meant that the democratic uprising lacked a socio-economic, let alone an anti-capitalist, dimension. There have been some small protests with an economic dimension, however, as recounted by the abovementioned anarchist correspondent: "On April 9 we went to a protest rally of social workers in front of a government building near Maidan. [They] are the first to be sacked after the agreement with the IMF. About 200 people (from different parts of the Ukraine) came to this ... rally outside the government building. Many workers showed up with self-drawn banners and slogans like proposing to the government: 'Let's exchange salaries,' 'Start the cuts with yourself,' and 'The reforms suppose improvements and not unemployment and poverty!' Most workers are women."

A third contradiction involved the narrow form of Ukrainian nationalism that dominated much of the uprising, as well as the new Kiev government. Thus, as Yanukovich was falling from power, parliament, which by now had gone over to the opposition, conducted a fateful vote to repeal the 2012 language law that had placed Russian on an equal footing with Ukrainian as a national language. Even though the repeal never took effect due to a veto by the acting president, huge political damage was done, giving a powerful propaganda tool to Putin and his allies in eastern Ukraine, where Russian speakers are the vast majority. Moreover, many eastern Ukrainians rightly feared that the kind of neoliberal policies favored by those coming to power in Kiev would open the industrialized Donbass region to competition from cheaper foreign imports of manufactured goods, resulting in mass layoffs.

Despite these contradictions, the Ukrainian uprising was on the whole a positive event, one that showed both the power and the creativity of a mass democratic movement in a region marked by increasing authoritarianism. Moreover, it actually succeeded in toppling a government, a rare event anywhere. This shook up not only Ukraine, but Russia as well, and also worried regimes as far away as Iran, where a dispute broke out between reformist and conservative newspapers ("La révolution ukrainienne dérange les conservateurs en Iran," *Le Monde*, 2-28-14).

## **Inter-imperialist Rivalries and International Solidarity**

Within days of Yanukovich's fall, Putin moved to annex Crimea, a territory that Russia has long claimed and which has one of its most important naval bases. Crimea has a clear majority of Russian speakers, plus lots of Russian military personnel residing there, although there is also a significant minority of predominantly Muslim Crimean Tatars (12 percent of the population), as well as of Ukrainian speakers (24 percent). These minorities were almost completely silenced during a snap sham election in which an improbable turnout of 80 percent was claimed, and an old, USSR-style majority of 97 percent supposedly voted to break off from Ukraine and join Russia.

Putin's annexation of Crimea resulted in sanctions and threats from the U.S./EU to isolate Russia, all of which carried the flavor of a new Cold War. The United States has shed its usual crocodile tears over Crimea, even as it occupies Guantanamo, an enclave carved out of Cuban soil. In fact, Putin's whole comportment since the Maidan uprising, with 40,000 troops massed on the border and belligerent statements about protecting Russian minorities everywhere, is nearly a mirror image of the way Washington has traditionally behaved toward Latin America.

A different type of international response was that of cross-border democratic and anti-imperialist solidarity. Inside Russia, the democratic opposition mounted a remarkably large, 50,000-strong demonstration on the eve of the Crimea referendum, March 15. Slogans included "Hands off Ukraine" and "No to war." A much smaller counter-demonstration took place under the slogan, "There will be no Maidan in Moscow" (*Le Monde*, 3-16-14). That is probably true for now, but the specter of Maidan surely haunts Putin, even as his jingoism has temporarily jacked up his popularity ratings. The annexation of Crimea was also condemned by a lopsided vote in the UN General Assembly.

It is often mentioned by those parts of the left that have been reluctant to support the Maidan uprising—and by international experts of the "realist" school—that NATO has extended itself into most of Eastern Europe and the Baltics since 1991, in violation of assurances given to Russia's leaders as the Soviet Union was collapsing. To be sure, NATO has acted in true imperialist fashion, taking advantage of its former rival's weakness, in a form of veiled aggression that sowed huge distrust from the Russian state and people. Despite U.S./EU claims today that they are only interested in an economic partnership with Ukraine, not NATO membership, it should be remembered that Vice President Joe Biden declared during a visit to Kiev in 2009 that the United States would "strongly support" such a move (Ellen Barry, "Biden Says U.S. Still Backs Ukraine in NATO," *New York Times*, July 23, 2009, A8). Chastened by the disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a public dead-set against more foreign adventures, and the sapping of its resources during the Great Recession, the U.S. government now speaks more softly. However, the overall goal of world domination has by no means been shelved.

What of Russian imperialism, vastly weakened since 1991? In this regard, it must equally be said that critics of U.S. and Western imperialism seldom mention that Putin has, like the United States with regard to NATO and Russia, violated the guarantees that Russia gave in 1994, when, along with Washington and London, it signed onto the Budapest Memorandum. In that agreement, the three powers pledged to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity in return for its agreement to give up its nuclear arsenal, then the third largest in the world. Ukraine did so by 1996, making it one of the only countries in the world, along with South Africa, to have given up its nuclear weapons.

Moreover, I would also argue that claims about Russia's sphere of influence being undermined by the United States and NATO follow an imperialist logic, one that the left needs to question in all of its forms, whether that sphere is dominated by Washington or by another global or regional power.

Kerry and Obama tout their democratic credentials in supporting the Maidan uprising or in opposing Russian thuggery in Ukraine, but they remain silent about issues closer to home like the conviction

of Occupy Wall Street activist Cecily McMillan, whose “offense” consisted of elbowing a cop who had grabbed her breasts during a crackdown on a 2012 demonstration. In a remarkable expression of internationalism from below, two Putin opponents from the Pussy Riot group, Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, made a solidarity visit to McMillan at the Rikers Island jail. “It was a very bad decision to put her in jail,” said Tolokonnikova. The two Russian activists knew of whence they spoke, having finished their own jail terms earlier this year. (James McKinley, “Like-Minded Russians Visit Occupy Wall Street Inmate at Rikers Island,” *New York Times*, May 9, 2014, A19).

## **Eastern Ukraine and the Danger of Civil War**

In a number of cities in eastern Ukraine where Russian speakers predominate, the largest of them Donetsk (population 1 million), heavily armed pro-Putin militants have taken over government buildings. The extent of the involvement of Russian intelligence operatives is unclear. The level of popular support for these irredentists who advocate breaking off and joining Russia is even less clear. First, it should be noted that they have not been able to take over Kharkiv (population 1.5 million), eastern Ukraine’s largest city. Second, while some have seen an equivalency between these protests and the Maidan uprising, the level of mass participation is much lower. Third, a Pew Research Center poll released on May 8 found high levels of support for a united Ukraine in all regions: “Among Ukrainians, 77% say Ukraine should remain united, compared with 14% who think regions should be permitted to secede if they so desire.... A smaller majority (70%) in the country’s east—which includes areas along the Black Sea and the border with Russia—also prefer unity.” Finally, it should be noted that the public face of these occupations includes many very doubtful figures, for example, Denis Pushilin in Donetsk, whose earlier claim to fame was as a swindler in a large Ponzi scheme.

But as the Pew poll also shows, support for a unified Ukraine is not the same thing as support for the current government in Kiev, composed of politicians from previous regimes, most of them with ties to corrupt oligarchs: only 41 percent of the population hold a favorable view of it, with some regional differences.

On May 11, secessionist militants held a much-disputed referendum on “self-rule” for the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In the days before, Putin gave mixed signals about this step, even asking at one point for it to be postponed. The results of the poll were predictably one-sided, but the actual level of participation was unclear. It was also unclear whether Putin would actually move to incorporate these two eastern regions, as he had with Crimea. What was clear was that this exercise was designed to disrupt the nationwide Ukrainian elections scheduled for May 25, where almost all observers were predicting a landslide victory at a national level (although not in parts of the East) for candidates claiming to support the legacy of the Maidan uprising.

A week before the referendum, the first serious clashes between pro-Russian militants and those supporting a united Ukraine took place in the large southern port city of Odessa, with more than 40 pro-Russians killed. While the exact details are in dispute, the following account conveyed to me by a sociologist with good contacts in Odessa and longstanding ties to the anti-Stalinist left rings true:

There was a “pro-Russian” encampment in the city. Its members are armed.... On Friday, the “pro-Ukrainian” forces marched for national unity. The “pro-Russians” attacked them. It is my belief ... that the police stayed idly by when the “pro-Russians” attacked them. In the ensuing battle, the heavily outnumbered “pro-Russians” were defeated and split into two groups. One went into a building, and fighting continued. The armed “pro-Russians” were shooting from inside the building at their opponents—some of whom improvised Molotov cocktails and threw them. The building burned with horrible results.... What does all that amount to? The “pro-Russians” have been trying,

without success, to seize Odessa; they tried to attack a demonstration that opposed them; and they were defeated. This is not a coldly calculated massacre—it is the kind of tragedy that happens when a near civil war situation is developing.

Even though it wasn't a coldly calculated massacre, which needs to be said, it of course also needs to be said that some grotesque emotions were expressed by some of the "pro-Ukrainians" as they saw the building burning and people dying. Odessa shows the danger, not only of Russian irredentism, but also of a narrow Ukrainian nationalism. This form of nationalism, as in the vote against the Russian language, or the more recent ill-conceived attempts by the very weak Ukrainian military to intervene with force in the East, are only serving to increase support for separatism there.

### **Putin's Amalgam of Neo-Stalinism and Pan-Slavism**

Putin's regime espouses a neo-Stalinist ideology that regards the collapse of the USSR as a tragedy. Reeking of Russian chauvinism, this worldview also contains elements of older versions of Czarist Pan-Slavism, especially the notion of "protecting" Russian minorities abroad. This odd combination is seen in how Putin reveres the conservative Slavophile Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (who denied the existence of a Ukrainian nation separate from Russia), even as he expresses nostalgia for the Stalinist regime that imprisoned him. Putin confirmed that view on March 12 of this year when he telephoned Mustafa Dzhomelev, a venerated leader of the Crimean Tatar minority. Putin was ostensibly trying to reassure the Tatars that they would not be persecuted under Russian rule, as they had in the Soviet Union, which deported them en masse to Central Asia in 1944. But as a stunned Dzhomelev reported, Putin also suggested that Ukraine's 1991 independence from the former Soviet Union had lacked validity: "Putin noted the issue that self-proclamation of independent Ukraine did not quite correspond to the Soviet norms that stipulated withdrawal procedure from the USSR structure" ("Ukraine withdrew from USSR not quite legitimately," QHA-Crimean News Agency, 3-13-14; see also Sylvie Kaufmann, "Après la Crimée, un autre monde," *Le Monde*, 3-17-14).

These issues have a deep resonance in Russian and Ukrainian history. Lenin castigated Russian chauvinism, going so far as to support Ukraine's right to independence:

If Finland, Poland, or Ukraine secede from Russia, there is nothing bad in that. What is wrong with it? Anyone who says that is a chauvinist. One must be mad to continue Czar Nicholas's policy.... This is a repudiation of the tactics of internationalism, this is chauvinism at its worst. What is wrong with Finland seceding? ... The proletariat cannot use force, because it must not prevent the peoples from obtaining their freedom" (Speech on the National Question, Seventh All-Russia Conference of the Russian Social Democratic Party-Bolshevik, April 29 [May 12], 1917).

Philosopher Slavoj Žižek has noted this revolutionary heritage in a recent article defending Ukraine's national rights against Russia:

The golden era of Ukrainian national identity was not tsarist Russia—where Ukrainian national self-assertion was thwarted—but the first decade of the Soviet Union, when Soviet policy in a Ukraine exhausted by war and famine was "indigenisation." Ukrainian culture and language were revived, and rights to healthcare, education and social security introduced. Indigenisation followed the principles formulated by Lenin in quite unambiguous terms ("Barbarism with a Human Face," *London Review of Books*, May 8, 2014).

The tragedy of Russia 1917, a revolution that transformed into its opposite, continues to haunt both Russia and Ukraine today, even after the collapse of the USSR.

Some very telling indications of what the pro-Putin forces have in mind for eastern Ukraine are foreshadowed by the first weeks of Russian rule in Crimea. If one holds that the position of subordinated minorities, ethnic and sexual, is a key measure of a political order's progressive or reactionary character, two disturbing trends can already be noted. (1) Persecution of the Tatars: Dzhemilev has been barred from returning to Crimea after a trip to Kiev, prompting a demonstration by 2,000 Tatars at the border as he tried to return ("Crimée: heurts entre Tatars et forces de l'ordre," *Le Monde*, May 4, 2013). (2) Persecution of the LGBT community: the Pride parade scheduled for April 22-23 has been cancelled in light of Russian law banning "gay propaganda," as the entire community feels a deep chill, with some planning to emigrate as soon as possible (Daniel Reynolds, "Russia's 'Gay Propaganda' Law Takes Effect in Crimea," *Advocate*, May 1, 2014).

The terrible legacies of Stalinist famine and deportation, and of Nazi occupation and the Holocaust, as well as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, all weigh down upon Ukraine and the region today, both as memory and as foreboding for the future. So does the danger of an ethno-regional civil war, as in the Balkans during the 1990s. Ukraine faces a deep crisis today, economically, politically, and culturally. It is caught between two rival imperialisms at a time of deep economic and social crisis. Its path forward is by no means a clear one, especially since its democratic movement has abstained from addressing the oppressions of capital and class, and is being hemmed in by U.S./EU austerity. Nonetheless, in staging not one but two mass democratic uprisings over the past decade, the Ukrainian people have shown a yearning for self-determination in the broadest sense, and for grassroots democracy. To be sure, Ukrainian nationalist excesses, as in Odessa, illustrate the deep contradictions within this democratic agenda. Overall though, the Maidan uprising and its aftermath have challenged the regional imperialist power, Russia, whose increasingly authoritarian regime is working night and day in an effort to make sure Ukraine's democratic experiment ends in miserable failure.