NO to NATO, or the identity crisis of the Spanish left

written by Elisa Moros | April 25, 2022

The terrible images reaching us after the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Kyiv region reveal the scope of the Russian offensive. These images force political leaders to unanimously condemn Putin's attack on Ukraine, including Putin's natural allies (the far-right). In this context, some of the most radical among us feel the need to express -if only through an aesthetic gesture- their aversion to national unanimity. For example, Members of Parliament (MPs) from the CUP (Catalan pro-independence radical left) and the BNG (Galician nationalist left) as well as the Secretary General of the PCE (Communist Party) refused to applaud Ukrainian President Zelensky when he addressed the Spanish Parliament.

This aesthetic gesture is hardly surprising. Rather, it is the logical consequence of the analysis and positions of the Spanish left on the Ukrainian situation. Albert Botrán (CUP MP) explains the meaning of his gesture in his article "Applauding Zelensky," in which he begins by stating that "Only Putin is responsible for the Russian occupation of Ukraine," only to contradict himself in the following paragraph by denouncing the "responsibilities" of the other powers and the Ukrainian state. While only four MPs pushed their logic to its conclusion by refusing to applaud Zelensky, the logic of "Well yes, but actually no" is practically unanimous within the Spanish radical left, which (1) designates the NATO as (at least) co-responsible for the conflict, and therefore (2) opposes any concrete material support to the Ukrainian armed resistance in order to "prevent escalation" and (3) systematically points out (and often exaggerates) all the flaws of the Ukrainian government/state. This then serves in practice as a pretext for these leftists keeping their distance from all sections of the Ukrainian population, and leaving them alone in the face of the Russian imperialist attack.

The inconsistency of this position is striking. The obsession with the responsibility of NATO is not justified by concrete analysis of the concrete situation, as our Syrian and Ukrainian comrades have repeatedly pointed out.

Although this position is neither unique nor exclusive to the Spanish left — it exists widely throughout Western Europe — the peculiarity of Spain and of other countries in southern Europe is that this position is hegemonic and leaves little or no room for contradiction.

The analysis that the Spanish left makes of the situation in Ukraine is far from reality. The left does not seek to understand the situation, but rather responds to its own internal interests: the need for a "radical" identity affirmation of an increasingly institutionalised left, combined with a lack of interest in our neighbours on the periphery of Europe that makes them the ideal means of this self-affirmation.

NO TO NATO: An identity statement

Opposition to NATO is an identity mark of the "true" left in the Spanish state. Spain's membership in NATO, which was ratified in a referendum held in 1986, is a major symbol of the institutionalization of the PSOE and its betrayal of the left and the working classes in the country. Indeed, the PSOE came to power in 1982 with the slogan "NATO, no entry yet," only to lead, in 1986, the "Yes" campaign, which narrowly won in the referendum, despite the massive opposition of the left, which grouped in the Civic Platform for Spain's Exit from NATO. This left rejection was consolidated shortly after into the electoral coalition Izquierda Unida (United Left).

Over the past decade, important sectors of the Spanish radical left have moved from a disruptive strategy to a strategy of "governability," facing numerous contradictions and internal tensions in this process. The trajectories of the CUP since 2011 and of Podemos since 2014 are illustrative of this process of institutionalization of the left, with all its contradictions. Needless to say, CUP and Podemos are very different in terms of their functioning, organization and positioning on the political spectrum. The Catalan and Spanish state contexts are very different, and Podemos is a much more vertical and institutionalized formation than the CUP.

Despite these notable differences, both formations have gone through a process of institutionalization. As a result, both have suffered moments of internal rupture in the last two years. Both formations constantly strive to distinguish themselves from their institutional allies (from their PSOE partners inside the Spanish government in the case of Podemos). The reality faced by CUP and Podemos is that institutionalization is incompatible with rupture and that, while both might be necessary in any process of social transformation, they can hardly be embodied by the same political agent. The crisis between Yolanda Díaz, Minister of Labour and Social Economy from Unidas Podemos, who supported Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) in supplying arms to Ukraine- and the rest of the Unidas Podemos team who accuse the PSOE of being "the party of war" perfectly illustrates this tension.

Where do the Ukrainians fit in all this?

In this context, the war in Ukraine presents itself as an ideal opportunity for demarcation and identity reaffirmation by the radical anti-Atlanticist left, contrasting itself to the institutional, monarchist, Atlanticist "left," sold to the system and to the US interests, and ultimately embodied by the PSOE. But what allows this in Spain — as in the rest of Western Europe — is that, basically, whatever happens in Ukraine only matters to us to the extent that it can affect us directly: Ukrainians themselves matter little to us. As Oriental "others," they can be instrumentalized at will to fit the logic of our own narratives.

This narrative of the Spanish radical left deliberately obscures the participation of socialist, anarchist and feminist comrades in the Ukrainian resistance, while magnifying the weight of Ukraine's far-right and the authoritarianism of the Ukrainian government. For example, suspicion towards Zelensky and certain sectors of the Ukrainian resistance is repeatedly used by the radical left to justify distancing from the Ukrainian resistance as a whole, and refusing any concrete solidarity. This trend is well illustrated by a recent tweet by Álvaro Aguilera, coordinator of Izquierda Unida (IU) in Madrid, accusing Zelensky of being a "danger to peace" as well as "heir to a coup that outlawed the Communist Party and 11 others." CUP MP Albert Botrán has also denounced the outlawing of the Ukrainian Communist Party (which actually took place in 2015, before Zelensky came to power in 2019) as well as the recent banning of several parties accused of being pro-Russian. Álvaro Aguilera, Albert Botrán and their respective organizations, of course, do not have - nor have they ever had- any connection with the conservative, racist and anti-feminist Ukrainian Communist Party, which defended the death penalty, the traditional family, opposed the reproductive rights of women and persecuted lgtbqi+ people, despite keeping the "communist party" name for historical reasons.

There is, however, a feminist, anti-racist and anti-capitalist left in Ukraine that is resisting the Russian invasion with and without arms, while continuing to oppose Zelensky's policies. Izquierda Unida and the CUP do not have direct relations with this left, because they do not want to. If they wanted, it would be easy, since their partner organizations from countries such as France, Switzerland, Belgium and Germany work closely with this Ukrainian left and other organizations from Eastern Europe in the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine (ENSU). The representatives of the CUP and IU prefer to pretend that this Ukrainian left and this internationalist space do not exist, and set themselves up as defenders of a fantasized and non-existent left which would not be part of the Ukrainian resistance, but would be squashed by it.

This logic is not exclusive to IU or the CUP. Podemos participated in the European Forum against the war, held in Rome at the initiative of the Italian coalition Potere al Popolo, with the stated objective to articulate a European anti-war movement but with its first two principles being opposition to supplying arms to Ukraine and opposition to sanctions against Russia. The movement, needless to say, does not have any Ukrainian representatives, and ignores their demands.

Spanish feminists also launched a transnational feminist manifesto with 150 signatures from prominent feminists from Europe and the Americas. Among them, not a single feminist from post-Soviet Europe. Their absence is obvious in the content, which contradicts the demands of Ukrainian feminists. Indeed, some western feminists who are in close contact with Ukrainian and Polish feminists have refused to sign this manifesto.

If what was really at stake for the Spanish left was the internal balance of forces of the Ukrainian resistance, wouldn't it be more logical to establish close ties with the anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal and anti-racist left in Ukraine to strengthen it as much as possible? The problem for the Spanish left is that this particular Ukrainian left, the real one, is of no use to them, because it does not fit into their demarcation strategy. In order for them to be able to keep telling the same story, it is necessary to silence and make invisible the progressive sectors of the Ukrainian resistance, denying them any concrete solidarity, which has the consequence of weakening the left in Ukraine. Meanwhile, of course, Ukrainian left activists, however, do not stop challenging us: they participate in the internationalist networks, they write to us from under the bombs and in English, they translate their work into Spanish and they would welcome you with open arms in the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine (ENSU).

The confusionist drift and the political responsibility of the left

The problem with clinging to an identity position is that it locks us into a biased interpretation of reality that runs the risk of entering dangerous waters. By the time the Spanish left finally understands that this one time the problem is not NATO, that Putin poses a real danger to Ukrainians, to Russians, and potentially to the rest of Europe, the conspiracist and denialist narrative will have already taken hold. Actually, it is already in place. The editor of *El Diario*, Ignacio Escolar recently explained that many readers are unsubscribing, accusing *El Diario* of being funded by NATO.

The Spanish and the Western European left's obsession with NATO has turned many activists into the useful idiots of Russian imperialism, and the main relays of Kremlin propaganda. The made-in-Kremlin rhetoric of "NATO expansion" and "the denazification of Ukraine" is only too reminiscent of the neo-Francoist revisionism which delegitimizes the Second Spanish Republic to justify the fascist coup. Ukraine is far from being a perfect or contradiction-free country, but it is (or at least was before the invasion) preferable to Russia in all areas: democratic participation, civil and political rights, freedom of expression, etc.

By insisting on this biased reading, the Spanish left contributes to sowing confusion in a historical context marked by political disaffection and distrust of institutions, all of which is conducive to the propagation of conspiracy theories. After Zelensky's speech before the Spanish Parliament — in which he made a parallelism between the massacres of Bucha and Gernika (Guernica) — the Spanish far-right took refuge in Francoist revisionism to deny Gernika, while denialism about the massacres in Ukraine was deployed in the left-wing sectors of Spanish social media. The communist intellectual and activist Manuel Delgado posted on his social networks "I believe nothing of what they tell us about what is happening in Ukraine. Nothing at all."

The only antidote to this denialism, specific to identity withdrawal that turns its back on reality, is concrete internationalist practice. Any political orientation that does not develop in a permanent dialogue with praxis is deficient. The Spanish left will not be able to take relevant internationalist positions until it actively practices internationalism. The Spanish left will not understand anything of what is happening in Ukraine until it becomes willing to discuss with the Ukrainian left.

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