“Tensions are building in Ukrainian society as a result of neoliberal policies imposed by the government”

written by Oksana Dutchak | February 7, 2024



After two years of war, how do you see the situation in Ukraine?

After two years of war, the situation is both the same and different. The war goes on, but there are changes in the context—both internal and external. All of these changes were predictable from the very beginning in the highly likely scenario of prolonged war—which doesn’t mean that many, including myself, didn’t have hopes for less likely positive scenarios.

We have been witnessing different tensions accumulating in Ukrainian society—most of those are caused by the predictable neoliberal policies, imposed by the government with the pretext of wartime necessity. Using the justification of economic hardship and the ideology of “free market” capitalism, instead of supporting the universal social rights, already damaged by the economic crisis, the government defends the interest of business at the expense of workers’ rights and social support for the pre-existing and newly emerging underprivileged groups. These steps go totally against the logic of all those relatively effective centralized and, to an extent, socially-oriented policies implemented elsewhere during the war.

Due to these policies, which are the ideological continuation from previous years, the general mobilization of the population’s efforts and the relative unity of Ukrainian society is under the process of steady erosion. After the first months of mobilization to defend their communities, many people are now hesitant—and some object—to the idea of risking one’s life. There are many reasons for this. For example, the relative localization of the threat from Russia, the unrealistic expectation of a quick “victory,” promoted by a part of the political establishment and some mainstream opinion-makers, and the consequential disappointment, and numerous contradictions of interests, individuals’ situations and choices in the structured chaos of the prolonged war. However, the feeling of injustice plays a prominent role. On the one hand, there is the feeling of injustice in relation to the process of mobilization, where wealth or corruption lead to predominantly, but not exclusively, working-class people being mobilized, which goes against the ideal image of “people’s war” in which all the society participate. And some cases of injustice within the army add to this. On the other hand, the lack of a relatively attractive and socially just reality and prospects for the future play an important role in individual choices of various kinds.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that all of society decided to abstain from the struggle against Russian aggression, quite the contrary: most understand the gloomy prospects of occupation or frozen conflict, which may escalate with the renewed efforts. While the majority oppose many actions of the government and may even hate it (a traditional attitude in the political reality of Ukraine for decades), there are stronger public sentiments that are highly unlikely to change in the future:

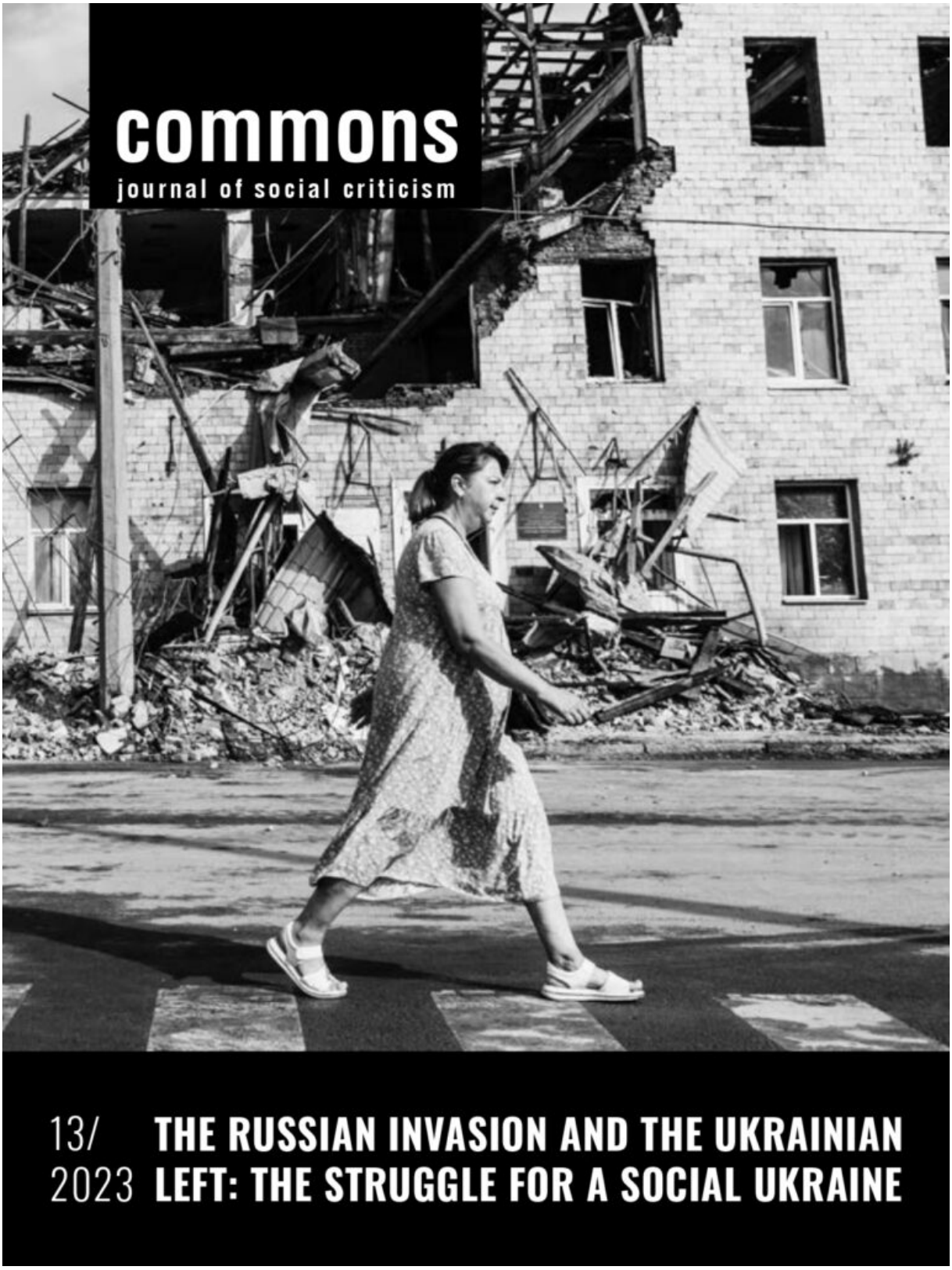
namely, opposition to the Russian invasion and distrust in any potential “peace” settlement with the Russian government (which violated and continues to violate everything, starting from bilateral agreements, and ending with international law and international humanitarian law). However, a socially-just vision of policies during the war and of post-war reconstruction are prerequisites to channel individual struggles for survival into a conscious effort of community and social struggle—against invasion and for socio-economic justice.

The external context has steadily changed too. There have been new military conflicts in different parts of the globe, which are, like the Russian invasion, further symptoms of the “burning” periphery caused by declining Western hegemony and the consequent new struggle for “spheres of influence,” as well as regional and global hegemony. These escalations, as well as some major failures of Ukrainian diplomacy ,for example, the use of “Western civilization” rhetoric, which alienates people beyond the Western world, and right populist trends in many countries, have their negative impact on international support of Ukrainian society.

In the light of these dynamics, it is extremely important to develop internally and support externally the workers’ movement and other progressive forces in Ukraine. It is also important for the Ukrainian progressive movement to build connections and mutual solidarities with national liberation, labor, and other progressive struggles in other parts of the globe. I don’t believe there is a chance to reverse the tide of the global imperialist and neocolonial revival or right-wing populism in the near future. But we have to develop the left infrastructure for the coming struggles. We came to this gloomy stage somehow unprepared and we have to do our best to preclude such a scenario in the future.

What is the situation of *Commons[1]* and your projects?

We continue working despite all the circumstances, including the most painful—the loss of a prominent economist, our editor and friend Oleksandr Kravchuk, the loss of a prominent gonzo-anthropologist, our author and friend Evheny Osievsky, and some other friends, colleagues, comrades, some of whom were killed in action. Additionally, some of our editors and authors volunteered for the army, others are overloaded with fundraising, providing supplies for humanitarian needs, and supporting left and antiauthoritarian volunteers. Yet others are scattered across the country and across the borders as internally displaced people and refugees, managing individual survival and sometimes being or becoming single mothers due to displacement and war.



During the first year of the full-scale invasion, we considered three tasks to be important for us as a left media—to engage in leftist debates on the Russian imperialist invasion, to describe the realities of war and its impact on people in Ukraine as well as on Ukrainian refugees abroad, and to intervene with a critical perspective on ongoing and planned policies and reforms by the Ukrainian government. With time passing, by the end of 2022, we considered that most of the people had made up their minds and few can be convinced to change their position—though we are grateful to those who continue interventions in the leftist discussion from the position of solidarity with Ukrainian people. On our side, we summarized our position in an issue, available online and in a printed version (revenue from selling goes to Solidarity Collectives): a collection of the text from our web-

site, which we consider the most important.

We rethought the flow of these debates and decided where to apply our efforts. We felt that too few direct bridges were built directly between the Ukrainian experience and the experiences of other peripheral countries going through wars, debt dependencies, austerities, and struggles against those. So, the project "Dialogues of the Peripheries" emerged and some of our editors consider it to be the main focus for us in the near future. Though, of course, other topics remain and we continue to write about problems and struggles in Ukraine, about history, culture, the ecology, and different important spheres. We continue to describe the self-organization of people in Ukraine—either as volunteer initiatives or trade unions. In 2023 we managed to do it in a series of video-reportages "Look at this!" and even made a short documentary about the movement of nurses in Ukraine.

I must emphasize that all this would be impossible without our editors and authors, as well as without support from many left organizations, initiatives, and people from abroad.

What do you hope for the year 2024?

There are different levels of hope. I have my personal hopes; I also have a dream that I share with most of the people in Ukraine—that the war will end in a way that will be favorable for a democratic and socially just future in Ukraine or at least in a way that will not preclude productive struggles for such a future. My personal hopes and society's shared dream are connected, of course. In summer 2023 I returned from Germany to Kyiv which I considered to be my city for some years, and I don't want to go anywhere else anymore. I'm not naïve and understand that most probably our dream for a favorable end of the war in 2024 is just a dream. But one needs a dream to build one's hopes on it.

As for *Commons* (*Spilne* in Ukrainian), we hope to continue our work, to write and to discuss what is important for us, and to be useful to progressive struggles in Ukraine. We hope to continue with the Dialogues of the Peripheries, to inform Ukrainian readers about contexts, problems, and struggles in other countries; to build connections and understanding with people in other peripheral realities, hoping to contribute to mutual solidarity in progressive struggles.

Interview by Patrick Le Tréhondat, February 3, 2024

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[1] See "Commons: A Ukrainian left-wing collective intellectual"