Ukraine: Resisting nationalist polarization and Russian invasion

written by Jean Batou, Nina Potarskaya | September 29, 2014

Nina Potarskaya is one of the leading Ukrainian leftist feminists, founder of the feminist squadron at Maidan, and member of the Left Opposition, which helped organize three successive conferences of left forces in Kiev, in November 2013, March 2014, and September 2014. The most recent conference decided to build a new democratic Left party, which is the first electoral effort of its kind in Ukraine. She was interviewed in Geneva by Jean Batou, with the help of Kirill Buketov, for solidaritéS.

Potarskaya outlines certain basic democratic principles of the new party: the need for a popular membership, transparent funding, and participatory internal democracy—all of which says a lot about their wish to break with Ukraine's traditional party politics. When I asked what the founders of the new party meant when they declared themselves a party of the left, Potarskaya replied that the party will challenge social, economic, and gender inequalities, and the members are now in the process of drawing up a program with specific demands along those lines. For reasons outlined in the interview, the party has not taken a position on the national question and the war.—*Jean Batou.*

Q. Could you explain the social and political dynamics of the Maidan process, which led to the overthrow of the Yanukovych regime in February 2014, and could you try to contrast it with the course of events in Eastern Ukraine?

Nina Potarskaya: First, I'd like to recall the nature of the social protests in Ukraine before and after Maidan. Opinion polls show that during the last four years, the principal reasons for people's discontent, whether in Western or in Eastern Ukraine, had to do with economical frustrations. Therefore, in the last period, the social and economic deterioration triggered growing popular protests. This anger exploded after the non-ratification of the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement, which led to the first Maidan demonstrations, towards the end of November 2013. And every two or three weeks that followed, the evolution of the political situation provoked an escalation, as a growing number of people were taking over the streets, especially after special police forces began to beat and even kill demonstrators.

The situation was different in the East, because Russian-speaking people, who are predominantly listening to Russian media, populate the Eastern part of Ukraine, and their information about Maidan had nothing to say about the actual reasons for these protests. They heard about an uprising led by neo-Nazis, which had to be stopped by all means. Of course, the far right played an important role at Maidan, but it was wrong to say that it was a right-wingers' movement. So the Russian media explained to the people of the East that there was a serious danger for them, and they were provoked to the streets, because they thought they had to act to stop fascists.

I was one of the founders and organizers of the women's squadron at Maidan—because the demonstrators were divided into different squadrons. This group consisted of twenty or so very active women with a much broader influence. One of the actions of this women's squadron was to send a delegation to Kharkov, because there was an anti-Maidan movement growing there, in order to meet with women at a square occupied by anti-Maidan demonstrators. The first reactions of those women were very negative, and we were even physically assaulted. But when we managed to start a dialogue, after 15 or 20 minutes, we found a common language because we realized that the social

concerns of our movements were absolutely similar. It was the media that was misinterpreting the nature of our movement, manipulating the population, and creating a serious split between the Eastern and the Western parts of the country.

Q. How can you measure the respective role of Russian troops and Eastern Ukrainian activists in the growth of the separatist movement, which led to the formation of two self-proclaimed "People's Republics" in Donestk and Lugansk, in April-May 2014?

NP: As people in Donbas were starting to act against what they saw as a potential fascist threat, many Eastern Ukrainians came to believe that—just as the Russians had been able to take over Crimea without bloodshed—the same scenario would be repeated in the East. At the beginning, because many Eastern Ukrainians hated both Viktor Yanukovych and his rival Petro Poroshenko, the prospect of a separate state was certainly popular, even if it is very difficult to say to what extent. But, since the situation is changing very rapidly, the public opinion is very volatile. When the Ukrainian army retook control of Kramatorsk in the Northern part of Donestsk in May, we had the opportunity to talk to the people of this town, and they told us that they hated all military uniforms, whatever they may be.

Anyway, as they realized that their situation was not that of Crimea, Eastern Ukrainians were hearing a lot of rumors that the official use or teaching of the Russian language was going to be outlawed, and that they had to act themselves to defend their rights. At the end of April 2014, elements of the Russian military began to infiltrate Eastern Ukraine, disguised as members of civilian self-defense units, and took over government buildings, immediately supplanting local anti-Maidan activists, who were already occupying these buildings. Russians are easy to recognize because they speak with a distinct accent and use some distinct words and sentences. When they entered Slavyansk, urging people to leave the streets, they employed a typical Russian term, never used in Ukraine, in naming the signs that separate roads from pedestrian areas. But when anti-Maidan activists realized that they were not going to be allowed to occupy the buildings again, they took to the streets, using pro-Russian rhetoric and pro-Russian flags, probably influenced by Russian agitators.

Even if such demonstrations have been limited in size, it doesn't mean that they were not supported by a large fraction of the population. People from Lugansk recently told us that taking to the streets was a very uncommon way to protest in Eastern Ukraine. Therefore, you cannot infer from their limited size, that these demonstrations were not supported by a large part of the population. In any case, there is no accurate way to measure the share of the people that supported the two self-proclaimed "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Lugansk (April-May 2014). Concerning violence against civilians, it's also difficult to determine the responsibilities of both camps, since each side, depending on its nationalist inclination, accuses the other one. There is no independent source of information, and according to local people, both sides have behaved badly.

Q. How does Ukrainian national feeling interact with the social demands of the people? Do workers stop mobilizing themselves in defense of their interests?

NP: The question is how to push the social issue ahead of the others. But of course, in a situation of war, people stop thinking too much about social issues. In August, everywhere, we observed growing patriotic mobilizations driven by increasing nationalist feelings. There are growing anti-Russian and anti-separatist actions in the West, but the social and political reasons for which people took to the streets last year—for example, to fight against corruption—are less and less at the forefront.

There are two types of trade unions in Ukraine. The Federation of Trade Unions is rooted in the old Soviet culture and simply supports what the government says; it has only played a very limited role,

to say the least, in reforming the labor legislation of the country. But there are also independent unions, which have been formed during the *perestroika*; they are much more active, especially at the local level, and some of them are extremely powerful. However, the leader of these independent unions is a very strong politician; he supports the Ukrainian government, even though he tries to avoid any kind of provocative speech. There are conflicting political positions among this confederation, but nothing like a neutral position against the war.

Q. What was the result of the recent Kiev conference? Is there a possibility to build a united democratic Left party in Ukraine today? What are the forces that could cooperate in this regard? What could the program be of such a party? What makes this a *left* party? Is not the national issue dividing its ranks?

NP: We now have the opportunity to bring together independent trades unions, NGOs, and progressive political forces, all together under the umbrella of a left democratic party. That was the purpose of our last meeting in Kiev. This conference decided to create an organizing committee, which started to work on a founding document. We wanted to do that in a transparent and democratic manner, but of course, a democratic process takes time. We discussed our common commitment to doing politics in a different way, which we can sum up in a few simple points. First, we want to exclude from our membership the people who earn more than a certain amount of money. Second, the party finances must be an "open book," where all transactions are publicly reported: everything that we receive or spend must be transparent to everybody. Third, the decisions should be taken by open forums, involving as many rank-and-file members as possible; it is not up to the leadership to take decisions, but we should develop internet processes allowing all the members of the party to be involved. In a way, we opted for a mixture of the organizational principles of the European pirate parties [supporting civil rights, freedom of information, and direct democracy] and the social-democratic parties.

We didn't separate the pro- from the anti-Maidan forces. There were very different positions represented, but we decided to focus only on fighting social, economic and gender inequalities. Our common reference to the left means that we put social and economic rights at the forefront. We didn't raise the national question. This was the first opportunity for us to speak to each other in recent years. So people were of course interested to deal with a lot of different things, but we didn't deal with the national question this time. We mainly addressed the organizational principles through which some kind of unity could be built. What we, as organizer of the conference, tried to do was to create an atmosphere in which a common declaration could be made on the topic of the war. But in order to keep the unity of the group, the language of such declaration had to be very diplomatic and soft, and finally there was no declaration, but only a draft.…

Q. What are the procedural problems to be solved in building a new political party in Ukraine today?

NP: Building a new political party is a very difficult technical process, with a lot of practical obstacles: most of Ukraine's existing parties were created at least ten years ago, when the legislation was much more favorable, and now it is almost impossible to form a new one. A well-known lawyer from Kharkov, who had been a member of the socialist party, but was expelled from it, succeeded (along with some other Kharkov socialists) in building his own political organization. He is a well-off politician, but has no backing from any of the oligarchs. He succeeded in having this new organization registered, and in being elected to the Parliament, with some members of his party obtaining seats in municipal councils. But step-by-step, his organization declined and disappeared, leaving him with nothing more than a registration without members. So he is offering us his registered organization as a vehicle to build a new left party that could adopt a new name.

Q. You are a member of the Left Opposition. Can you tell us something more about your organization and the role it played in the preparation of the Kiev conferences?

NP: The Left opposition initiated these conferences. Our influence is, however, low, since our membership is in the range of a few dozens, with a more limited number of active people, not only in Kiev, but also in Cherkassy (in the center of the country). Of course, we mobilize a broader bunch of sympathizers, who take part in our actions, in our debates, and spread our publications. The left opposition is made up of two sets of people: the first, which created the organization, came from the Trotskyist tradition. The other part is not interested in choosing between the different Trotskyist affiliations; it considers itself as anti-capitalist, socialist, anti-Stalinist, and anti-authoritarian, that's all. For me and for many other people, it is enough; and for many young people or new activists who join us, what we are fighting for or against is much more important than our historical background. In some sense, we are twin brothers of the Russian socialist movement (RSM).

Q. Does everybody agree on the electoral perspective of this democratic Left party under construction?

NP: No, we are still debating this. Our possible involvement in the forthcoming elections was a kind of spontaneous decision, which was just taken because of the opportunity to do so. But some people wonder whether we should be part of a parliamentary group. So, we decided to participate in the electoral process without aiming at getting elected. Instead, we'd like to use this campaign as an instrument for mobilizing and organizing people around us. Of course, some friendly political websites criticize our decision to enter the electoral process.

Q. What social force can resist today's nationalist polarization? At the beginning, you mentioned women. Could the attempt of Maidan women to bridge the gap with anti-Maidan demonstrators in Kharkov have a possible follow-up?

NP: It is difficult for the left to build an anti-war initiative, because very different opinions coexist in our ranks. And each time you discuss the possibility of an independent campaign, you have to oppose two dominant options: following the Russian or the Ukrainian propaganda. The nationalist responses dominate public discussions. The building of an independent feminist voice is made difficult by the very limited resources of feminist organizations. Social and political demands cannot be heard without adopting a more general stance on human rights. It was already the same during the Maidan events, when the left-wing groups couldn't easily participate as such in the political discussions, and it was possible only for women to get into Maidan and start debating the issues of nationalism, sexism, and discrimination. Even if the far right is traditionalist, and think that women should stay in the kitchen and have no voice in a political process, it could not exclude us from the debate. During two weeks of truce, the so-called "two weeks of silence" in the Maidan process, when the fighting stopped, we were able to launch very important debates around social issues, and to attract the attention of the media. We became very well known—one hundred people participated in our meetings, our comments on *Facebook* were spread everywhere, and the far right had to take account of us.