

Ukrainian Socialist: ‘The Future of Demilitarization Lies in Stopping Russia’s War machine now’

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BBC map, March 7, 2022.

Vitaliy Dudin, head of the Ukrainian democratic socialist organization Sotsyalnyi Rukh (Social Movement), spoke from Cherkasy, Ukraine, on April 6, to *Green Left's* **Federico Fuentes** about the current state of Russia’s invasion, the scale of peoples’ resistance to it and key issues such as Ukraine’s far right, NATO and sending weapons to Ukraine.

It is very difficult to get a real picture of what is happening in Ukraine. Could we start with your assessment of the current state of play six weeks into Putin’s invasion? Do you see any likely prospect for an end to the war in the coming weeks?

Russia’s invasion has created a major threat to the existence of Ukraine as an independent state. Without doubt, we can say that the current war is the most devastating war we have seen since World War II.

Several regions — Chernigiv, Donetsk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Luhansk, Mykolaiv, Sumy and Zaporizhia — have been converted into theatres of military actions, with tanks and artillery shelling cities. The Russian army has even attacked cities in western Ukraine, in the Lviv, Rivne and Volyn regions, firing deadly missiles from the air and sea.

About 6000 civilians have been killed. Military actions have taken the lives of tens of thousands of soldiers from both sides. About 5 million people have lost their jobs, mainly because so many workplaces have been bombed. Nearly 10 million people have been forced to flee for safety and hundreds of thousands have lost their homes.

Many towns in the north, east and south are currently, or were until recently, under brutal Russian occupation. But the invaders have not managed to achieve their strategic aims.

They have only occupied one big city — Kherson — and are trying to assault Mariupol, which is undergoing an inhumane blockade and bombing campaign. Almost every building in the city has been damaged, including medical infrastructure.

Russian troops have been halted in the majority of directions, and have suffered significant losses in terms of personnel and vehicles. Ukrainians have shown that they are willing to bravely fight back, even without modern weapons such as anti-aircraft systems, fighter jets and missiles.

That is why I believe that the Russian army lacks the strength to crush the Ukrainian army, and why military actions might be halted, at least in some regions. Putin's government has a lot of resources, but Ukrainian people are willing and ready to resist.

At the moment, the Ukrainian army is pushing back the invaders in several directions, mostly in the Kyiv and Chernigiv regions. Towns such as Ivankiv, Bucha and Hostomel, which were occupied and plundered in the first weeks of war, have been liberated.

But we shouldn't underestimate the danger: the Russian invasion has caused vast destruction, their missile attacks continue to cause large-scale destruction and they have reinvigorated the offensive in Donbas.

I think that the war will continue as long as [Russian President Vladimir] Putin is in power. Until his demise, for now we can only envisage a partial cease-fire. The destiny of Ukraine depends on the battle for Mariupol.

Could you give us an idea of the kinds of resistance — armed and unarmed — that Ukrainians are engaging in. What role is the left, such as Social Movement, and trade unions playing within the resistance?

Firstly, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians have joined the Armed Forces (AF) of Ukraine and the Territorial Defence (TD), which is integrated into the AF. The AF is currently fighting on the frontline with all the weapons available to it, whereas the TD mostly protects cities with guns.

Some Social Movement activists, as well as many trade union members, have joined the TD as volunteers. It is worth mentioning that dozens of anarchists and socialists have formed their own unit within the TD, called the Resistance Committee.

Secondly, a lot of leftists are helping as volunteers to supply the army or satisfy people's humanitarian needs. One of the most effective initiatives in this regard is Operation Solidarity, which has managed to provide supplies to the militant left. We are also working to meet the needs of trade union members serving in the army.

We have also worked with the nurses' NGO Be Like Nina and helped them obtain medicines for hospitals that are taking care of wounded soldiers.

Third, we see that a lot of people are protesting the invaders in occupied cities. We aren't involved in

such activity, but we support it. Of course, it is very dangerous because peaceful protests can be shot down by armed Russian soldiers. Such resistance proves that people are against the “liberation” that seeks to turn their cities into grey-zones.

Fourth, we as Social Movement continue to act as a political organisation. We seek to counter Russian propaganda and call on our people to fight for a free and fair Ukraine.

A lot of attention has been given to the Azov battalion and other neo-Nazi forces. Could you tell us about their real level of influence and the role they play? Are you concerned that the far right — in Ukraine and abroad — will come out stronger from this war, particularly the longer it drags on?

I think that the role of the far-right has been overestimated. This has been shown up in the phantasmagorical way that Russia tried to justify its invasion and war crimes.

Before February 24, Azov united about 1000 people who were located in Mariupol and did nothing, because they were integrated into the National Guard of Ukraine. After the Russian invasion, they have been heroised due to their role in the defence of Mariupol, alongside AF units. This is a strange way to dismantle a far-right nationalist agenda, isn't it?

Far-right militants have committed acts of violence on the streets, but can these actions be in any way compared to the mass killings that have resulted from the bombing and terror campaign carried out during the occupation?

Of course, they could become stronger, but if this occurs it would be the fault of Russia.

Radical nationalists exist in Ukraine, in their specific niche, as in many other countries. Their activities pose a problem for Ukrainian society, but not for Russia or international peace.

The far right in Ukraine was mainly tolerated because of the defence needs of the Ukrainian state. The government turned a blind eye to attacks by radical nationalists while they helped them meet their defence needs.

These radical nationalists have played a role in protecting and serving the oligarchic elite and its regime. But their political influence is very small and they mostly have a very limited role.

For now, the radical nationalists are playing a less important role than in the 2014 Maidan protests, because thousands of ordinary people are taking up arms. The more Ukrainians that have the necessary weapons to defend themselves — and the more the international left supports Ukraine — the less influence the far right will have in Ukraine.

The best way to neutralise the problem of radical nationalism in Ukraine is by weakening Russia's imperialist intentions. Those who refuse to express solidarity with Ukraine because of the existence of radical nationalists have nothing in common with anti-war principles and ideas.

Much has been made about the conflict in eastern Ukraine prior to the invasion. How has the invasion impacted on this conflict and, more generally, on relations between Ukrainian and Russian speakers in Ukraine?

Putin's invasion has seriously damaged relations between Russian and Ukrainian people but, at the same time, it has brought about some kind of consolidation in Ukrainian society. After February 24, even people who had some political illusions regarding Russia's progressive role became convinced enemies of Moscow.

We can say that this common tragedy has united people. People from the western part of Ukraine are willing to help refugees from the east and are showing their support.

At the same time, some people have pursued an exclusionary and extremist agenda, claiming that Russian speaking people are “agents of Putin”. We know that Russian culture will be associated with the culture of the oppressors for a long time (until Putin’s regime is overthrown by Russian citizens). But we are ready to oppose any sort of linguistic or cultural discrimination and hope that solidarity will prevail.

We have also seen that ordinary people in the self-proclaimed republics in Donbas are tired of being used by Moscow in the war against Ukrainians. Of course, most of them consider Russian as their native language, but they do not wish to give up their lives either. Even amid this horrible story, the potential for re-integration remains.

Given where things are at, some believe that the best possible outcome is for Ukraine to negotiate and give up its ambitions to join NATO. How would you respond to those who argue this? More broadly, how do Social Movement view the issue of NATO and its role in this war?

First of all, we think that any intention of joining NATO cannot justify Russian invasion. This is an issue that lies in the field of domestic debate and national sovereignty.

Second, we view NATO as a club of the richest countries and their close allies. For Ukraine, it would be better to develop relations with all countries and ensure real independence.

Third, it is important to realise how the issue of NATO has impacted Ukrainian political life. The perspective of membership was very vague — NATO has never guaranteed membership for Ukraine. So, an “Atlantic orientation” was always more a case of wishful thinking on the part of the government, while for the people it was a reaction to the collective trauma and fear of war in 2014.

NATO could have offered Ukraine membership a long time ago, but instead it promised some kind of cooperation, which only made Ukraine vulnerable. We believe NATO has played the role of a passive spectator in this war. Starting from the end of 2021, they have done nothing to support Ukraine with arms. It seems as if they are more interested in assessing the strength of the Russian army.

Debates have occurred over the issue of sending weapons to Ukraine, with some opposing this saying it would only contribute to the re-militarisation of Europe and empowerment of NATO. Others say it will lead to a scenario like Afghanistan in the 1980s, with Ukrainians being used to obtain the US’ goal of undermining Russia. What is Social Movement’s position on this question?

I see no reason for such a debate. Talk of the risks of re-militarisation in Europe is totally ill-grounded, because there is a complete asymmetry between Ukraine and Russia. The future of demilitarisation lies in stopping Russia’s war machine now.

Issues of security should be of strong concern. Any demilitarisation that ignores the security of the people, their right to defend themselves, and justifies blocking resistance against imperialist aggression is morally wrong.

Ukraine needs weapons to defend itself and the rest of Europe. We need anti-aircraft weapons and jets to protect civilians, because people are dying from missiles and airstrikes.

I want to stress that such weapons will not change the nature of war: they won’t enable Ukraine’s

army to eliminate enemies far away but rather enhance their fire-power in close combat.

The more Russian military units that are destroyed, the more stable a peace we will get. It is simple, like during the war against the Third Reich. Russia also justifies its aggression with an ideology of ethno-nationalism. It's a strong and real threat that needs to be addressed.

It is also important to know that a lot of Ukrainian workers are joining the army. We should arm them, so that they can return to their homes alive and be empowered to continue the class war against greedy oligarchs.

Beyond the question of arms, what kind of solidarity do you believe is required to ensure genuine peace for Ukraine?

We ask that everyone put pressure on their governments to ensure debt cancellation and provide unconditional financial aid for rebuilding Ukraine, as part of a so-called "New Marshall Plan".

You can also help us by sending any type of aid (including medikits, bulletproof vests, helmets).

But the most specific thing leftists can do is to fundamentally shift their organization's analysis of the war. They should not tolerate Putin's imperialism and should fully support the right of Ukrainian people to self-determination.

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