“We Must Rebuild a Left-wing Student Union in Ukraine”: Interview with Ukrainian Student Activists

written by Patrick Le Tréhondat | August 5, 2022

Ukrainian students: Maxim and Katya

*Patrick L**e** Tréhondat of the Syllepse Publishing House collective conducted an interview with two Ukrainian university students, Katya and Maxim. Katya studies at the Academy of the Arts and Maxim is a computer science student. This was originally published in French by* Soutien à l’Ukraine résistante

PL: In your call for solidarity with Ukrainian students that you launched, you mention the problem of student housing. Can you tell us about that?

Katya: In Ukraine, students can live in state dormitories near their universities. The accommodation fee is relatively small (150-300 euros for six months), but even in peacetime, it was unbearable for students who received scholarships of no more than 50 euros per month. Most dormitory residents usually came from eastern Ukraine or their families lived in the occupied territories. For some of my friends, studying at a university was the only way to leave the Donetsk People’s Republic or Luhansk People’s Republic because the state could provide them with housing and minimal means of subsistence. Students faced housing problems with the beginning of the full-scale invasion in different regions of Ukraine. Like me, students from Kharkiv were forced to flee their student housing. People from Mariupol and many other bombed cities will never be able to return home again, and their parents obviously cannot help them because they have also lost everything.

Both the Russian and Ukrainian armies often use dormitories and schools as military bases. Sometimes, like at the Kyiv National University, students have to live in the same building as the Ukrainian military. It is a necessary measure but endangers the lives of students. In Kherson, Putin’s troops did not act so kindly: the army occupied the dormitories and evicted the students, not allowing them to take their things. Such cases occur everywhere in the occupied territories, not taking into account the fact that there are frequent cases of Russian bombs hitting educational buildings and dormitories.

Maxim: Even though plenty of students are now on the verge of poverty, as well as physically and mentally affected by the war, the state still obliges us to pay for education, which does not always take place, and always lags far behind the pre-war level. And most unfair – we must pay for the rooms in which we cannot live. Yet the dormitories in Ukraine’s relatively peaceful regions continue to function as usual. They even accommodate refugees and students who find themselves without housing. But it is dangerous to live in hot spots, and even when the danger decreases, the administration does not want to be responsible for students’ lives and evicts them. Thus, many students stay in a dangerous city, but now conditions force them to rent housing on top of everything else.

It is difficult to demand the observance of one’s rights in a country at war, which is also in a deep economic crisis. Whether to pay for a hostel becomes a tough moral choice for students. For non-payment, we face eviction, not being allowed to take exams, neglect of our personal belongings,

constant psychological pressure, and, eventually, exclusion. But besides this, unpaid debts may affect the ability of the Ministry of Education to pay salaries and scholarships. Some universities may reduce housing due to unprofitability. The distribution of funds is entirely opaque, so everyone feels guilty that their university is dying from a lack of funds. However, the real reason for this may not be the student but the corrupt administration. This problem is very complex and can hardly be solved with a general strike, and so on. We are in a terrible and unique situation, the solution of which can only be a real revolution in the student movement.

PL What other daily life problems do students encounter?

Katya: Since direct physical danger threatens the lives of students and their families who remain in the territory of Ukraine, the opportunity to concentrate on studies is currently a privilege. Psychological exhaustion or debts force them to leave their studies, leading to the risk of a shortage of specialists who could be involved in activities and help develop Ukraine now and after the war.

Many have gone abroad. Students in such a situation have two options: to continue their studies and live at the expense of the universities that enrolled them, or to try to survive on their own. The second way often leads to the necessity of precarious work for young people without legal protection and complicates the integration process and getting used to a new environment. Some students complain of chauvinistic or contemptuous attitudes from the community and from new teachers and colleagues in the country that shelters them. Such problems have sometimes forced people to return to their homeland. I know many examples of college students who chose a life in danger in Ukraine instead of being bullied in a foreign country. That is why it is worthwhile to promote the creation of comfortable non-violent conditions for refugees in European universities and to distribute materials that will help students adapt to a new environment.

Maxim: It is also necessary to consider the decrease in teachers' motivation due to the same psychological exhaustion, the frequency of non-payment of wages, and the disdainful attitude of the state toward the protection of workers. There are many examples when teachers heroically continued their work during active hostilities. It was they who organized the evacuation of students, participated in humanitarian aid, and gave their last strength for the sake of science. However, there are negative examples where students lost contact with the structure of their universities, which could have been their only refuge. Or where teachers became collaborators and imposed on students the opinions dictated by the occupation authorities.

PL: In the appeal, you mention that students have engaged in territorial defense. Can you tell us more about this?

Maxim: Young people comprise a considerable part of Ukraine's armed forces, particularly the territorial defense. Although the state exempts university students from conscription, many students voluntarily participate in armed resistance. Some of our friends signed up for the territorial defense as soon as the war started. Military authorities rejected some, since the number of inexperienced volunteers was sufficient.

Students work in the army under precisely the same conditions as other people. Usually, to continue studies after the end of their service or after a rotation, many take a gap year. However, cases have become more frequent when, due to problems with the bureaucracy at many universities, students at the front receive letters from educational institutions telling them that they will no longer be able to continue their studies. Fighting students need a lot of help, the closer to the front line, the more difficult it is to get things necessary for the war. Moreover, the territorial defense regiments are now fighting on the front lines on the same basis as the armed forces of Ukraine. Of course, it's not easy being young in a war.

PL: I believe that, Katya, you are a member of the student council of your university and a representative of your dormitory. Can you explain to us what this council is, are the student representatives elected, what do they do, and what is your role as a dormitory delegate?

Katya: All higher education institutions in Ukraine have student self-government bodies. Their members engage in different activities and can interact with students and the administration differently, but primarily they perform purely bureaucratic tasks or cover student life in the media and social networks. There are a number of decisions that the administration of the university cannot make without the consent of the representatives of the student government. Hence, if you are assertive enough, you can achieve some constructive changes, although a corrupt administration will most likely considerably hinder your efforts. To get into student self-government bodies, you need to be elected by students in elections that are held with a certain periodicity (in different universities at different times) or show yourself well and please the administration.

Frankly speaking, I got into the student parliament by accident. I was invited to the artists' trade union meeting (a "yellow union," of course). I went there, and it turned out that I was enrolled in the student council of our academy because my teachers recommended me as a responsible person. It was unexpected and unwanted for me, but now I consider it an excellent and essential experience in my life, which will help me in revolutionary practice. From the first day of working in the student council. I tried to explain the horrible conditions that we students were living in as clearly as possible and tried to protect our rights.

The most acute issues in our college at that time were material and economic issues. Therefore, I began to work specifically on dormitories and financial problems to solve them. It is difficult to concentrate on creativity when your roof is leaking, the floor is rotting, and cockroaches are eating your last meal. The work of the head of the dormitory is very similar to trade union organizing. All students who lived at the academy had the same problems and were determined to act radically. Before the war, we were going to go to a rally against the increase in student housing prices. We didn't manage to, because the war had started. However, thanks to my participation in the dormitory management, they managed to completely replace the corrupt personnel of the dormitory and started renovations (for the first time in the last 30 years!), which greatly simplified our lives in the first days of the invasion. They provided an adequate manager, a boiler, a basement with painted walls, and new water pipes. If it weren't for such simple changes, I'm sure these days would have become a living hell for us. I built communication with students on horizontal leftist principles, which made it possible to quickly mobilize them and prevent unnecessary anxiety due to disorganization. For two weeks during the bombing of Kharkiv, we lived in a friendly commune and survived thanks to mutual aid and solidarity (there was no support from the administration or the goverment).

PL: And you Maxim, what is the situation in your university ?

Maxim: The situation with my university is a bit different from the one described by Katya. I study at the Ukrainian Catholic University. It is a reasonably new, private higher education institution that does not depend on state management. All the funds spent on the maintenance of the hostels, the staff, and the payment of the scholarships– issued on a grant basis — come from wealthy people, private companies, and international patrons. Because of this, the services they provide, such as the dormitory, are of a very high-quality for Ukraine. At the same time, this entails, although it is not blatant, the deeply ideologically-conservative line of the administration. In addition, paying for education is beyond the reach of the vast majority of young people in Ukraine. The total cost of education is $3,000 per year, with an average national salary of $400 per month, leading to a year-to-year decrease in the level of entrants as the economic situation worsens. Another important

aspect is the neoliberal nature of the university since a large part of the funding comes from companies interested in receiving specialists. Since the main goal of the university is making a profit, the level of knowledge offered is becoming increasingly superficial, so that the graduate can immediately get a job in a company and perform monotonous tasks. It is necessary to understand once and for all that profit-oriented private universities cannot effectively perform the role of academic institutions. Therefore, the reform and restoration of public universities–and not their liberal "optimization" which always means only mass layoffs–should be the primary task for a country that wants to have a high level of education.

During my studies, I often participated in student volunteer initiatives. At the same time, I learned how to organize administrative work and plan projects. This experience expressed itself fully when I ran for and was elected to the student parliament. For the students of my university, the issues of ecology and individual freedom were acute. So we tried to implement various innovations to promote these ideas and reduce the influence of conservative propaganda of the university clergy on students of other religions or atheists.

With the beginning of the war, university students, in cooperation with the administration, organized a horizontal security system. Student volunteers alternately patrolled the campus perimeter, wove camouflage nets for the front, and managed the collection and logistics of humanitarian aid. Like me, those in the computer science program have been involved in hacking the sites of the Russian propaganda machine and have started designing and 3D printing tourniquets for the military.

PL: Finally, a few words about the Ukrainian student movement. Are there student union organizations or youth organizations active? What are the activities of Sotsialniy Rukh among the youth?

Katya: Some organizations in Ukraine articulate themselves precisely as student movements, but unfortunately, they are all anti-left. The libertarian organization, Ukrainian Students for Freedom, which seems to be the largest student organization now, developed a reasonably active network. For them, freedom is a free market and privatization of universities, which we fundamentally disagree with. The independent trade union Direct Action once united left-wing students of Kyiv and other major cities of Ukraine. Nowadays, most active Ukrainian leftists came out of this trade union, but since 2018 its activity has been frozen. There are no alternatives for students except for openly right-wing, bourgeois, and scout organizations. The youth of left-wing views usually join the activities of broader organizations, as happens in the social movements but does not have a better-known independent network. In our organization, there are quite a lot of young people who work on an equal footing with everyone else and actively engage in revolutionary activity. The youngest member of the Council of the Social Movement is 19 years old and very active. And there are also younger members active. Our activists are determined to renew networks of solidarity between the students of Ukraine, and the help of international students can contribute to this. During the war, the rights of young people who cannot provide even their basic needs are grossly violated. It is now that leftists can show how important social support of students is for them and thus encourage young people to think about the need for radical changes in the social system.

August 1, 2022

First published by Soutien à l'Ukraine résistante

Interview by Patrick Le Tréhondat