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Ukraine

Ukraine: “Tensions are building... due to the neoliberal policies imposed by the government”

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After 2 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 continues, but there are changes due to the context – both internal and external. All of these changes were foreseeable from the outset in a very likely scenario of a protracted war (which is not to say that many, me included, were not hoping for more positive but less likely scenarios).

We have witnessed the various tensions that are building up in Ukrainian society – most of them caused by predictable neoliberal policies, imposed by the government under the pretext of wartime. Using the justification of economic hardship and the ideology of "free market" capitalism, instead of supporting universal social rights, damaged by the economic crisis, the government is defending the interests of corporations at the expense of workers' rights, the social support of the existing and the new and emerging disadvantaged groups. These measures are completely at odds with the logic of all centralised and (to some extent) relatively socially oriented policies implemented elsewhere during wars.

As a result of these policies, which are the ideological continuation of previous years, the general mobilization of the efforts of the population and the relative unity of Ukrainian society are constantly eroding. After the first few months of mobilizing to defend their communities, many people are now hesitant (and some opposed) to risking their lives. There are many reasons for this, for example the relative localization of the Russian threat, the unrealistic expectation of a quick “victory” (promoted by part of the political establishment and some dominant influencers) and the resulting disappointment, and many contradictions of interests and the situations and choices of individuals in the structured chaos of a protracted war. However, the feeling of injustice plays a major role. On the one hand, there is the feeling of injustice in relation to the mobilization process, where questions of wealth and/or corruption lead to the mobilization of the majority (but not exclusively) of the popular classes, which goes against the ideal image of the “people's war” in which the whole of society participates. And in addition, there are a few cases of injustice within the army. On the other hand, the absence of a relatively attractive and socially just reality and prospects for the future plays an important role in individual choices of all kinds.

Of course, this does not mean that society as a whole has decided to refrain from fighting Russian aggression, quite the contrary: most understand the bleak prospects that would be imposed by an occupation or frozen conflict, which could intensify with [Russia's] renewed efforts. While the majority opposes and may even dislike many of the government's actions (a traditional attitude in Ukraine's political reality for decades), opposition to the Russian invasion and distrust of any possible “peace” agreement with the Russian government (which has violated and continues to violate everything from bilateral agreements to international law and international humanitarian law) are stronger and there is very little chance this will change in the future. However, a socially just view of wartime policies and post-war reconstruction is a prerequisite for channelling individual struggles for survival into a conscious effort of communal and social struggle – against invasion, for socio-economic justice.

The external context has also changed regularly. There have been further escalations in various parts of the globe, which are, like the Russian invasion, further symptoms of the “on fire” periphery caused by the decline of hegemony

and resulting from a new race to struggle for “spheres of influence,” as well as in regional and international conflicts for both regional and global hegemony. These escalations, along with some major failures in Ukrainian diplomacy (e.g., rhetoric about “civilization,” which actually alienates people beyond the Western world) and right-wing populist tendencies in many countries, are having a negative impact on international support for Ukrainian society.

In light of this dynamic, it is extremely important to develop internally and externally support the workers' movement and other progressive forces in Ukraine. It is also important for the Ukrainian progressive movement to establish links and mutual solidarities with liberation struggles, workers' movements and other progressive struggles in other parts of the world. I do not believe that it is possible to reverse the tide of global imperialist and neocolonial renaissance or right-wing populism in the near future. But we need to develop a left-wing infrastructure for the struggles to come. We have arrived at this grim stage unprepared, and we must do our best to prevent such a scenario from happening again in the future.

What is the situation of *Commons* and what are your plans?

We continue to work despite all these circumstances, including the most painful one: the loss of an eminent economist, our editor-in-chief and friend Oleksandr Kravchuk, the loss of an eminent gonzo-anthropologist, our author and friend Evheny Osievsky and a few other friends, colleagues, comrades, some of whom were killed in action. In addition, some of our editors and authors have volunteered in the military, others are very busy raising funds and supplies for humanitarian needs and support for left-wing and anti-authoritarian volunteers. Still others are scattered across the country and across borders as internally displaced persons or refugees, managing their individual survival and sometimes being or becoming single mothers due to displacement and war.

In the first year of the full-scale invasion, we considered three important tasks for ourselves as a left-wing media outlet: engaging in left-wing debates about the Russian imperialist invasion, telling the realities of the war and its impact on the Ukrainian population and Ukrainian refugees abroad, intervening with a critical perspective on the policies and reforms underway and planned by the Ukrainian government. Over time, by the end of 2022, we felt that most people had made their choice, and few could be persuaded to change their position – although we are grateful to those who continue to intervene in this left-wing debate in solidarity with the Ukrainian people. For our part, we have summarized our positions in an issue, available online and in print (the proceeds from the sale go to Solidarity Collectives): a collection of the texts from our website, which we consider to be the most important.

We have rethought the flow of these debates and found the direction in which we have decided to focus our efforts. We felt that too few direct bridges were being built between the Ukrainian experience and the experiences of other peripheral countries facing wars, debt dependency, austerity and struggles against them. This is how the “Dialogues of the Peripheries” project was born, and some of our editors see it as our main objective in the near future. Of course, other topics remain, and we continue to write about the problems and struggles in Ukraine, about history, culture, ecology and about different important issues. We continue to talk about the self-organisation of the people in Ukraine – either in the form of voluntary initiatives or in the form of trade unions. In 2023, we managed to do this in a series of “Watch this!” video reports and even made a short documentary about the nurses' movement in Ukraine.

I must emphasize that all this would be impossible without our editorial staff and authors, as well as without the support of many left-wing organizations, initiatives and individuals.

What are your hopes for 2024?

There are different levels of hope. I have my personal hopes. I also have a dream that I share with most Ukrainians: that the war ends in a way that is conducive to a democratic and socially just future in Ukraine, or at least in some

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way that does not prevent serious struggles for such a future. My personal hopes and overall dreams are of course linked. In the summer of 2023, I moved back from Germany to Kyiv, which I have considered my city for a few years now and I don't want to go anywhere anymore. I am not naïve, and I understand that our dream of a favourable end to the war in 2024 is probably just a dream. But it takes a dream to pin your hopes on it.

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

This interview was conducted by Patrick Le Tréhondat on 3 February 2024.

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