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Ukraine

Maidan 2013: A Multi-Dimensional Dialectic of Resistance (A View from the Left)

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As this text is being written, the outcome of the resistance remains undecided, but the author is certain that one way or another, the present Ukrainian authorities will draw closer to the European Union. Meanwhile, one thing is clear: the profound problems of Ukraine, and of Russia's relations with it, will not be solved as a result.

A tragedy turning into farce? Or farce as tragedy?

Ukraine is shot through with contradictions. For the second time in ten years Kiev has become the scene of mass protest actions and of clashes with the authorities. But the events of late autumn 2013 are only superficially similar to those of 2004. The situation has grown far more complex.

In 2004 the main force on Maidan (Independence Square) consisted of people who had grown tired of the arbitrary and contemptuous behaviour of the ruling politico-economic elite. The nationalist groups and so forth were perhaps no less strong in 2004 than they are in 2013, but the main thing then was the mass outrage of the population. Further, the choice posed in 2004 was not only geopolitical (whether to join with Europe or to be aligned with Russia), but socio-political as well – between us, the citizens, and them, the parasites.

The situation on Maidan now is different in many ways. The general discontent with the parasitism of the authorities remains, but what is now taking centre stage is the result of carefully thought-out organisation on the part of the pro-Western political and economic elites. While in 2004 the behind-the-scenes operators were still reluctant to show themselves openly, they have now moved unashamedly to the forefront. And there is another, very important aspect: in 2013 nationalist and pro-fascist organisations have taken to Maidan in a capacity approaching that of the main, effectively organised force of the “protest” (just so, in inverted commas).

In essence, the situation has now become multi-dimensional, and analysing it is thus all the more important. The contradictions tearing Ukraine apart have to be understood not just from the now-fashionable geopolitical point of view, but also in terms of their socio-economic, politico-ideological and cultural-historical dimensions.

Hence the main thesis of this text: just as in the past, modern-day Ukraine represents the intersection of profound contradictions, and not just the contradictions of Ukraine itself.

Ukraine consists of steelworkers and “office plankton”, of teachers and peasants, of service company proprietors and oligarchs, with the latter divided into various “clans”. The country has pro-Western, pro-Russian and “independent” trade unions and public organisations. The latter consist mostly of cynically pragmatic parliamentary parties which view the question of integration with the European Union above all through the prism of the electoral challenges they face. Ukraine is also a primarily Ukrainian-speaking population and a mainly Russian-speaking one. Finally, Ukraine represents centuries of wars with and incorporation into Poland and Lithuania. It is 450 years of unification with Russia and centuries of oppression by the Russian Empire. It is the heroism of antifascist partisans and the crimes of Banderist supporters of fascism.

Hence the profound, fundamental contradictions of Ukrainian society, historically determined and conditioned by social and class factors. The contradictions are multi-dimensional: historico-cultural, politico-ideological,

pragmatic-economic, geopolitical, and social and class dimensions are now once again intersecting on Maidan.

There is one more thing that should not be forgotten: Ukraine is also the unity, at once concrete and universal, of its peoples, history and culture. This is the “Ukraine” that is a certain integrity, a wholeness, with a general national interest of peace.

It is through the prism of these issues that we can and should analyse the question of the integration of Ukraine with Europe.

But first, a few words on the international context, on Russia and the European Union.

Russia: traditions of friendship between peoples and increasing chauvinism, goals of social liberation and the rapaciousness of oligarchic capital...

Let me say at the outset: for me, Kharkov, Kiev and Lvov, the Dnepr, the Carpathians and Crimea, are inseparable parts of my homeland, the Soviet Union. I grew up and lived in this space, in which I had friends everywhere. But I also grew up with an understanding that my homeland, the USSR, was permeated with deep contradictions, which were capable of destroying it and which in the end did so. I can also say the same of contemporary Russia: this is my country, the most important part of my homeland. I love it sincerely, but precisely for this reason I am unwilling to close my eyes to the fact that in modern-day Russia reactionary political and economic forces for the most part prevail.

More precisely, modern-day Russia still retains a vast historical potential in terms of culture, science and education. In this country, numerous sociological surveys indicate, the majority of citizens still embrace the values of social justice and popular power. Until now, and despite profound internal contradictions and growing nationalism, out people in their majority have kept their orientation toward friendship and equal relations with the peoples of other countries. This applies in particular to the peoples of such countries as Ukraine, since our parents and children fought together against fascism, and our peoples joined for centuries in building a unified socio-cultural space in which no-one thought particularly to ask whether someone like, for example, the writer Nikolay Gogol should be considered Ukrainian or Russian.

From this has stemmed the powerful trend toward the integration of the peoples of Ukraine and Russia. I stress – not simply of Ukrainians and Russians; our countries are multinational, and understanding this is of fundamental importance. From this stems the undoubtedly progressive and productive character of our increasingly deep collaboration, our extremely close cultural integration, that has allowed each of our countries to develop and spread its culture more fully and broadly not only on its own territory but also on that of its neighbour. It is important to note that Russia would live badly and with difficulty without the cultural heritage of Ukraine, including the refined European heritage of western Ukraine. The Ukrainian language, the poems and plays of Lesya Ukrainka, Gogol’s Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka, the steep bluffs overlooking the Dnepr, old Lvov and the avenues of Kharkov are all part of our common cultural world.

But modern-day Russia is also the great-power chauvinism nurtured by the country’s barbaric capitalism, and also Russia’s still-dominant elite. In this respect everything is far more complex and difficult, and indeed, worse. For Russia’s oligarchs Ukraine represents above all a new territory on which they can implement the same policies of parasitising natural riches and cheap labour power as in Russia. To the peoples of Ukraine, Russia’s “senseless and pitiless” business will bring the same it has brought to our country: a mixture of harsh capitalist exploitation and semi-feudal dictatorship.

The same needs to be said of our dominant “political class”. Russia today is ruled by a corrupt bureaucracy that is intertwined with raw materials and financial oligarchs plus the bosses of the military-industrial complex. The real social and civil rights of Russians are remote from anything that corresponds to the norms of a democratic state, and the rights of independent trade unions and social movements are extremely restricted. An important factor in Russian political life is the great-power nationalist sentiments of various figures in the country’s ruling circles.

This makes Russia’s actual ruling elite an extremely problematic partner for integration, to put things mildly. Economic and political integration with this Russia would do no more than to provide a basis for strengthening pro-Russian oligarchs and pro-Russian political elites in Ukraine. The peoples of Ukraine would on the one hand acquire relatively cheap resources for the country’s citizens and for production, plus the retention (and perhaps eventual growth) of heavy industry and of the industrial proletariat, plus the large markets of the countries of the customs union. Meanwhile, they would also acquire the preservation and strengthening of primitive-capitalist forms of exploitation and of the semi-feudal exploitation of workers, along with paternalist-bureaucratic tendencies in the state apparatus and the danger of geopolitical domination by the Russian bureaucracy. When the balance-sheet of these two sides was drawn up, the ultimate result would be that little would change for most Ukrainian citizens.

What about the European Union?

The European Union: Achievements and Crimes. Or, What could Integration into the EU Give Ukraine?

The first point that needs making is an obvious one: the achievements of the European Union are real and are familiar to everyone. If, that is, we are talking about the “centre” of the EU. Here, despite all the present difficulties, a great many positive aspects remain. If we are considering Northern Europe, the so-called “Scandinavian” model implemented there has real advantages compared to the systems that prevail in Russia and Ukraine. Above all there is the high degree of socialisation of the economy. These countries feature a progressive income tax, generous social welfare provisions, mainly free access to education, health care and culture, and strong, active trade unions. They have low levels of social differentiation (with a gap of 6-7 times between the richest and poorest deciles of the population, that is, less than half the figure in our countries), and genuine rights for the institutions of civil society.

Mixed in with this barrel of social-democratic honey, however, is a spoonful of tar. More than one, in fact. The impressive social outcomes in these countries were first achieved many decades ago, after which the process...stopped. Meanwhile, a social democratic trend, like a bicycle, cannot stand still; it has to keep moving forward. If an attempt is made to stop at a particular point, if the transformations are frozen halfway, society will finish up in a condition of stagnation, of social and spiritual inertia.

Such are the achievements of the EU. The second point – the crimes of the EU – might seem to be a far-fetched ideological insinuation by the enemies of European integration and democracy.

However.

As in the case of Russia’s ruling elite, in our analysis of the EU we have to distinguish between the achievements of the citizens of the European countries on the one hand, and the policies implemented by European transnational corporations and by member governments of NATO on the other. By the achievements of citizens, we have in mind above all the achievements of workers, of their trade unions, of left and left-centrist parties, and of social movements and non-government organisations, whose active struggle over more than a century for social and civil rights has

yielded undeniable results. When the question is posed in this way it becomes clear immediately that the NATO governments, as “actors” of the European Union, are responsible for the deaths of thousands of peaceful citizens of the former Yugoslavia. Nor is this all; they are responsible too for the financial crisis that since 2008 has struck virtually all the peoples of the world, for the mass unemployment in the countries of Southern Europe, etc., etc.

Most important is the fact that integration of Ukraine into the European Union does not mean that Ukrainian citizens in the foreseeable future will live in the same way as the citizens of Germany or Austria. Like the world as a whole, the European Union is divided into rich and poor regions. On one side of this division are the “homelands” of the European transnationals, the countries that concentrate in their hands the major masses of capital and most of the innovative technologies, along with extremely valuable simulacra ranging from product brands to all sorts of mass-cultural and media garbage. On the other side are the countries where cheap labour power (by European standards) is concentrated, along with resource industries, polluting processes, assembly plants, and populations ready to work for 12 to 14 hours at a stretch without days off in order to partake of the “European way of life”. The social differentiation within the EU, if we compare the richest decile with the poorest across all the countries of the community, turns out to be approximately the same as in Russia and Ukraine...

In this context, it is important to recognise that if Ukraine follows the route of integration into the European Union, it will fall into the category of the poor periphery. No-one, strictly speaking, disputes this. It is simply that the pro-European circles in Ukraine “forget” about it. Or more precisely, refuse to discuss it.

What, in these circumstances, would lie ahead for our Ukrainian brothers and sisters? An extremely contradictory outcome, just as if they moved in the direction of Russia.

They might be able to expect a certain formal shift in the direction of parliamentarism and rights for various minorities (though hardly of rights for trade unions and the left). The Ukrainian elite could also expect an easier dialogue with the West and inclusion in the EU establishment, along with new opportunities to expand the activity of the small and middling bourgeoisie in the areas of commerce, tourism etc. Plus – and this is of fundamental importance – victory for Ukraine’s pro-Western oligarchic factions in the competitive scramble for state resources and markets. Meanwhile, this would also strengthen the already significant migration of Ukrainians to the EU, mainly as a form of “outsourcing” of low-paid workers. Also in the picture would be an intensification of the process of deindustrialisation and a growth of Ukrainian nationalism, along with substantial socio-cultural problems for the Russian-speaking population.

So what should Ukraine do?

What, then, is best for Ukraine? To become another peripheral area of the EU, to integrate itself with Russia, or to be an independent country of the Third World?

Personally, I would formulate my answer along three lines.

In the first place, this question must be decided by Ukrainian citizens themselves. For emissaries of the European Union or of the US to exercise pressure here is just as unacceptable as for Russians.

Secondly, different strata of Ukrainian society have an interest in different solutions. Naturally, I do not claim to be able to pronounce any ultimate truth, but as a scholar and a citizen I am reluctant to take the position of a neutral observer. In my view, the situation can thus be presented (in extremely compressed form) as follows:

For most of the peasants and industrial proletariat of eastern Ukraine, collaboration with Russia (I stress: as a matter of principal, we are not talking about incorporating Ukraine into Russia) would bring greater stability, and would not create new cultural and language problems. This is the case despite the obvious vices of Russian business and Russian bureaucracy. The same would apply to members of the mass intellectual professions such as teachers, health staff and other highly trained workers in state institutions. All these people would receive a relative stability in exchange for paternalist tutelage from the Ukrainian bureaucracy and further restrictions on their civil and social rights. Also gaining from a rapprochement with Russia would be the corresponding circles of big business, along with the political and bureaucratic groups intertwined with them. All these “pluses” are extremely ambivalent. But there is one undoubted plus to be had from our countries drawing closer together: a revival and intensification of our socio-cultural dialogue. This parameter is of fundamental importance, and is uniformly positive.

For most members of the “free professions”; for the small and middle bourgeoisie of the commercial sector; for those oligarchs whose activities have become interwoven with Western trans-nationals; and also for pro-Western political forces, an orientation to the European Union would be advantageous in the short term.

Further along the track, these groups would most likely find themselves subordinated to the corporations of the EU “centre”, just as happened with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Paradoxically, temporary gains from European integration might be possible for independent trade unions and various non-governmental organisations (especially those at a certain distance from present-day socio economic problems, such as campaigners for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual rights). These groups might be freed from some of the restrictions imposed by the present bureaucracy.

These democratic advances, however, would scarcely be important or enduring, even if they were to occur at all. In the countries of the EU periphery, the norms of civil and social rights are violated with striking ease. Meanwhile, the Brussels bureaucracy shows an astonishing blindness in “failing to notice” these breaches, unless they affect the interests of European transnationals or of their Brussels neighbours at NATO headquarters.

Now for the key element in this point. Unlike the case with the events of 2004 (where the author was present in person), nationalists and fascists came close to making up the largest and best-organised force, in practical and active terms, involved in the Maidan actions of 2013. It needs to be said straight out: the growing strength of right-wing nationalist and pro-fascist organisations in Ukraine, just as in the Baltic countries, is the direct fault not only of the authorities in these countries, but also – and I stress this in particular – of the ruling structures of the European Union. The liberal democrats of Europe have tried already on occasion, and with monstrous results, to achieve their aims by playing the fascist card (we may recall the Munich Agreement of 1938, to cite just one example). The present use of nationalists and fascists as one of the key forces in the Maidan protests is in essence just such a crime (though for the moment on an incomparably lesser scale), committed by the Ukrainian “oppositionists” and the European Union.

Thirdly, even a brief analysis of the situation in Ukraine, carried out from a Marxist perspective, tells us plainly: all of us, especially in Ukraine, need to escape from the closed circle of choosing the supposedly less evil of two equally futile alternatives. We can and must find a perpendicular response. It lies on the plane of first of all solving the socio-economic, political and cultural problems, not on the level of pragmatic geopolitics (of the type, as the saying now has it, of “Who should we sell ourselves to?”), but of genuinely radical economic and political reforms within (at a minimum) Ukraine itself. Here too we can and must make critical use of the experience of struggle of the European democratic left, and of our shared experience – highly contradictory, but of fundamental importance – of the transformations that occurred within the Soviet Union.

Nor should we forget the crucial element: an essentially class-based left politics cannot and must not ignore the presence as well of a general Ukrainian popular interest, as a concrete-universal (and hence contradictory) unity of

the country's ethnic groups, history, culture and geography. This interest is marked by contradictions that cut across numerous dimensions. Nevertheless, it exists. Only the peoples of Ukraine itself, not Russians or European "policy-makers", can and should determine a strategy, conditioned by this general interest, for the country's development.

Accordingly, I cannot and will not attempt to set out such a strategy for the citizens of Ukraine. But as a Marxist scholar and as someone who grew up amid a dialogue of our peoples and cultures (and not of them alone), I cannot and will not remain on the sidelines as an indifferent observer. I would thus like to remind all concerned that the highest criterion of progress for any people, a criterion that exists despite the post-modernist aim of "deconstructing grand narratives", has been and remains the free, rounded development of the individual. This means not just economic growth, but also the advancing of human qualities and capacities, and the solving of social, environmental and humanitarian problems.

As I have argued repeatedly in the past, such an alternative for the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and any other country does not lie along the road of transformation into a periphery of any "empire of faith", whether of the European Union or North America. Nor is it to be found in a union of oligarchs and bureaucrats of semi-peripheral countries. In the broad sense, finding such a solution requires rejecting a choice between "lesser evils", and searching instead for a "perpendicular" response. This response can only consist of advancing along the road of democracy and socialism. Only this road can yield both integration into a global collaboration (a collaboration of peoples and cultures), and also the progress of national culture, since an authentic culture is always both global and national.

This is not an abstract recommendation. Setting out on this course is already possible, even for countries that are not among the world's largest or most developed. Present-day examples of such countries include a whole series of Latin American states whose peoples have rejected the tutelage of the US and have started implementing a democratic, socially oriented model of development. These countries have made their first priority not pursuing geopolitical intrigues, but choosing a socio-economic and political-ideological strategy that presents an alternative to the global hegemony of capital.