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Ukraine:

**Volodymyr Ishchenko: “For
Ukrainians, as for any other
people in the world, the main
threat is capitalism.”**

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We publish the transcript of Volodymyr Ishchenko's interview on This is Hell! radio station with Chuck Mertz from the 19th of April 2014, organized in cooperation between the Chicago-based radio station, AntidoteZine.Com, and LeftEast. This is the complete transcript of the interview, including the last two questions which Volodymyr answered in writing after the show.

Chuck Mertz: On the line with us right now is Volodymyr Ishchenko. He is a sociologist studying social protests in Ukraine. Good evening, Volodymyr.

Volodymyr Ishchenko: Good evening.

CM: Volodymyr's most recent writing includes Tuesday's Guardian post Mайдан or Anti-Mайдан: the Ukraine situation requires more nuance.

This week, Volodymyr, here's the story from the BBC: Russia and Ukraine agree on steps to end crisis. "Russia and Ukraine struck a deal on Thursday to end unrest in Eastern Ukraine stoked by pro-Russian militants." Has that agreement solved all of Ukraine's problems? Do you think that this will provide safety and security for Ukrainian citizens?

One of the stories that's been going around in the U.S. media is the idea in Crimea, and also in the East of Ukraine, that Kiev has become lawless, it has become run by gangs, that there has been criminal activity, that it is not safe, and they fear that the same kind of chaos is coming to Crimea or the Eastern Ukraine.

VI: That's a very exaggerated picture. Life in Kiev is totally safe. It's definitely much safer now than in the Eastern Ukraine; in Donbas there are armed gangs which have attacked state buildings. Some of them seem to be local protesters, but some of them seem to be too well-equipped and too well-trained to be just some militia. If they aren't Russians or Russianists, they could also be former riot police officers who left Kiev to escape punishment by the new government.

Kiev is definitely much safer than in February, when there really was chaos and street clashes in the center; the major problem is in the Eastern Ukraine.

CM: Let me ask you a couple of really general questions about this protest. Whenever there is any coverage of any protest—it could be Ukraine, it could be Egypt, it could be Venezuela, it doesn't matter where it is—the media often points out that this is about the economy, and if it weren't for a downturn in the economy, these protests would never happen. It's almost as if the media is saying, protests do not happen when people are upset about an infringement on their rights or freedoms; the only thing that drives people out into the streets is the economy.

To what degree did the economy play a role in this Ukrainian uprising? Is this at all about freedoms and rights, or is this just about the bottom line and Ukrainians' wallets?

VI: There were actually two uprisings. You have the Mайдан uprising—that started in December and became more

violent in January"and now you have the Eastern Ukrainian uprising. They have many similar traits, but the socio-economic component is somewhat deeper in the Eastern Ukraine now, where the economic situation is really deteriorating.

The national currency lost something like 40% of its value during the last two or three months, prices are rising, and people in Eastern Ukraine are mainly workers, pensioners. They are speaking about wages, they are speaking about prices, about the collapse of industry. Some of them demand nationalization, some of them demand decent pay for their work. That protest has more to do with the economy; it's not just about their identity.

But they also speak, of course, about their dignity, about their language, about their history, about their heroes, and about this federalization question"which also animates the question of recognition of their self-determination, the question of concrete freedoms and rights.

The Maidan protest started more as an ideological protest that was, to some extent, an attempt to break through to the European Dream, seeing it as a kind of utopia which would solve many Ukrainian problems. And for other people, it was a protest against Russia. It was generally believed that if Yanukovich would not sign the European Association Agreement, he will join the Customs Union with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. These countries were described in quite negative tones as authoritarian, poor countries that Ukraine doesn't need to orient itself to.

But later during the Maidan uprising, there came the questions of police repression and violence, of the authoritarian laws which were passed in January"they were pulled to the forefront. They became more important than the European Association.

CM: This is the other general question I wanted to ask you: how much are these protests caused by outside forces? Since the Wikileaks revelation from last week"about USAID and the work that they have done in trying to destabilize or help overthrow governments that are not friendly to the United States"there has been some talk in critical sectors of the media, here in the States, about the role that USAID and NED play.

And then if you take the Russian factor"according to the U.S. media, the protesters in Eastern Ukraine are being manipulated by Russia.

So is this really a Ukrainian uprising? Or are these just superpowers playing with a pawn?

VI: Yeah, that's a big problem now in the discourse. Those who don't like the Anti-Maidan uprising in the Eastern Ukraine see it mainly as Russian manipulation: just irrational, stupid people who want a more authoritarian regime, who want a Russian dictatorship, who do not understand their real interests.

And the symmetrical picture"by the Russian media or by those who didn't like Maidan protesters"is of manipulation by Western governments or by Ukrainian oligarchs; the claim, again, is that the people do not understand what they are fighting for.

Obviously you cannot deny that both the U.S. and Russia"and the EU"try to influence Ukrainian politics. They would be stupid if they didn't. They are great powers, they have their imperialist interests, and that's what we can expect from them.

But then you deny the grassroots nature of this protest. People are talking about real problems. People are self-organizing, both in Maidan in the Western Ukraine and in the Eastern Ukraine now. And you cannot just reduce

it to this great power play.

It also matters when it comes to actual outcomes. What will be the outcome of these protests? In the case of Maidan: we see IMF-required austerity, increasing prices, a new neoliberal government, an increase in the strength of the far Right. And in the case of the Eastern Ukrainian protests—if they do not stop, it will become a real danger to Ukrainian political stability...which in turn would be used by Russia to promote their own interests.

But we need to see this complex combination of various factors. The Ukrainian people hope to solve their problems; they hope to fight for a more just and free society. But they also are influenced by actors from abroad, and unfortunately Ukraine is now seen as the playground of the great powers.

CM: One of the stupid things that the U.S. media is reporting right now is that the entire reason that Vladimir Putin sent the Russian military forces into Crimea—the entire reason that he's able to flex his muscles on Ukraine—is because he believes that Barack Obama is weak. Do you think that has any basis in reality?

VI: No! That sounds really funny, if it's true that this is a major narrative. I think the main factor behind the Crimea annexation was internal politics. Putin needed to show the Russian people that any attempt to repeat Ukraine in Russia would not work. Crimea was necessary to increase patriotism among the Russian population, and to decrease any chance that the Russian opposition—which was very much inspired by Maidan—might attempt anything like that in Russia.

A short and victorious operation was very much necessary, and now you see from the polls: something like over 80% of Russians support the Crimea annexation; over 80% support Putin's policies, and there's a great extent of national unity around the president.

CM: Is there a military solution to this problem? Here's what we hear: the West isn't doing enough to stop Russia, but if the United States and Russia don't do anything, it's very possible that Ukraine is going to fall into civil war. Is there a military solution—either intervention by the West, or a civil war—that could solve this problem?

VI: No. A civil war is definitely not a solution. That's a problem, and a very real one. People are already dying in clashes in the Eastern Ukraine—and according to recent polls, over 40% of the Eastern Ukrainian region's population believes that civil war is very probable in the near future. That shows that it is getting quite dangerous.

And if NATO forces would be involved into pacifying Eastern Ukraine, they would be seen as foreign occupiers. And a military solution is not possible for the Kiev government either. There's a question as to whether Ukraine has an army right now—an army which can actually fight, not just the people and equipment on paper. There have been cases of soldiers sent to Eastern Ukraine just leaving their military machines to the local protesters and going back. They were not ready to fight them. They were not ready to shoot at them. So it's not only a question of whether a military solution is desirable, but if it's even feasible.

A popular uprising doesn't mean that revolutionary changes—structural and fundamental changes in social or political institutions—will follow.

CM: Who is the greatest threat to the Ukrainian people? Is it the West? Is it Russia? Is it the crime bosses within Ukraine? Or is it the Right Sector, the neo-fascist right wing that you're concerned about?

VI: I would say that for Ukrainians, as for any other people in the world, the main threat is capitalism, and all the problems and wars it leads to. The political crisis in Ukraine started much earlier than 2013â€”Ukraine suffered a lot already in the economic crisis of 2008. The main enemies of Ukrainians are both Russian and Western imperialism as well as Ukrainian oligarchs and the ruling class.

The best solutionâ€”though the most difficult and not the most probable solutionâ€”would be for Western Ukrainians and Eastern Ukrainians to unite on some common ground, some common platform of shared demands for social justice, and to fight against the ruling class, against Russian intervention, against possible Western intervention, and against both pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian far-Right nationalists.

CM: You write a great deal about the Right Sector, about the neo-fascists. Back in early February, a couple weeks before the Yanukovich government fell, you had a piece in The Guardian headlined the Ukrainian protesters must make a decisive break with the far Right, with the sub-headline Neo-fascists have become involved in the Euromaidan protest movement and we can't turn a blind eye to the danger that presents.

Is it the neo-fascist ideology of the Right Sector that's popular, or is their popularity more driven by their violent tactics at the Euromaidan, by being the people who confronted the police?

VI: More the latter than the former. They were seen as people's heroes and the vanguard of the uprising. They got a lot of respect and symbolic capital for that.

But you have to understand that the political mainstream in the Ukraine is much further to the right than, for example, in Western Europe. Things which would receive very strong criticism in the West are more or less tolerable in the Ukraine. It's more or less okay to talk about things like “the defense of white European people;” this kind of thing can even be said by mainstream politicians. It's okay to be homophobic, not to recognize any need to defend LGBT people. In this more right-dominant ideology, the far Right from the Right Sector or from the Svoboda party are not actually seen as something extreme.

Right now, the Right Sector and Svoboda are being criticized because their violent and provocative actions are seen as something that can be used by Russiaâ€”the Russian media can capitalize on them and use them to show that there is a very serious fascist threat in Ukraine. So people, even when they criticize the Right Sector, they do not criticize them for their antidemocratic ideology. They don't criticize them for being extreme Right. They criticize them because they are not “consistent nationalists;” because they appear not to be thinking about the national interests of Ukraine.

The biggest problem in the Ukraine is probably this rightwing consensus, and there's not any serious Left force which could be a challenge to this.

CM: So there is no real alternative, then? Are you saying it's inevitable that whoever is running the next Ukrainian government will definitely be farther to the right?

VI: Noâ€”if you're speaking about this government, this is a neoliberal government. You cannot say that it's any kind of fascist junta, which is a popular term used by the Russian media. It's a neoliberal government; it includes some nationalists from Svoboda, but they are not dominant. And they would not be able to promote any far Right policies before the situation in the Eastern Ukraine stabilizes. That would just be extremely stupid.

And we know that the winner of the next election will probably be Petro Poroshenko, who is an oligarch. He is one of

the hundred richest men in Ukraine, and he would continue the same neoliberal policy.

CM: To what degree are Ukrainians even going to have a choice, though?

VI: That’s another question, because as far as I can see from the polls, many people from the Eastern Ukraine are actually not going to vote in the coming presidential elections. Or if they turn out at all, they are going to vote against all candidates. So whoever wins the coming presidential elections will have serious problems with legitimacy, at least in the Eastern Ukraine.

CM: You know our media really likes to try to find a celebrity within any story. And the celebrity that they have found here is Yulia Tymoshenko. Some people have referred to Yulia Tymoshenko as Ukraine’s Sarah Palin. How would you describe the potential for Yulia Tymoshenko to be the next leader of the Ukraine, and does it even matter if all she really represents is another neoliberal government running Ukraine?

VI: I would compare her not as much with Sarah Palin, probably, as with Eva Perón, the wife of the 20th century Argentinian leader. She is actually a dangerous person. I am quite sure, if she were faced with something like the Maidan uprising against her, she would be much more ready to suppress it—even more than Yanukovich, for example, or any other major politician in Ukraine.

And at this moment she doesn’t have good chances to win the elections. She is far behind Petro Poroshenko. One of the reasons why all these protests in the Eastern Ukraine started now, and why they are so violent, is actually to halt the national elections in May—to postpone them and give Tymoshenko some time to gain more popularity among Ukrainians.

CM: You write that “two popular labels are being ascribed to events in Ukraine. It was either a democratic or even social revolution, or it was a rightwing or even neo-Nazi coup. In fact, both characterizations are wrong.” So if it’s not a rightwing coup or a democratic revolution, how would you describe it?

VI: I describe it as a popular uprising which led to a change of elites. A popular uprising doesn’t mean that revolutionary changes—structural and fundamental changes in social or political institutions—will follow.

At this moment I do not see anything really changing the fundamentals of Ukrainian oligarchic capitalism. The oligarchs actually have even more power now; many were appointed as governors in some regions, and the likeliest next president is again another oligarch.

It’s not in their interests to fight corruption or to construct transparent institutions in Ukraine. Because their corruption, their close connection to the state, was one of the competitive advantages that allowed them to build their wealth in the first place.

So I do not see the potential for revolutionary change now. At this point it was a popular uprising leading to a change of elites, but not to revolutionary change.

(The following questions were submitted to Ishchenko via email after the telephone connection between Chicago and Kiev was interrupted; Chuck Mertz read them on the following week’s episode of This is Hell! to round out the conversation. —ed.)

CM: ‘Coup’ has very negative connotations. However, a coup is “a sudden, violent, and illegal seizure of power from a government.” In that the changeover of power in Ukraine did not follow the electoral and parliamentary processes that were in the Ukrainian constitution, and the interim transition agreement was immediately abandoned when Yanukovich left Kiev, how was what happened in Kiev not illegal, sudden or violent? I am concerned that the political connotations of ‘coup’ is what seems to be driving the debate.

VI: It was not a coup for a simple reason: those who seized power, the opposition parties, were not the vanguard of the Maidan but its very moderate wing.

After the first violent clashes started, the former opposition leaders distanced themselves, condemned them as government provocation and tried to intervene and stop them. Many times, the opposition leaders tried to convince the Maidan to accept compromises with Yanukovich.

As footage from Yanukovich residence security cameras showed, the opposition (together with European ministers of foreign affairs) pleaded with the people on the square to accept a final compromise with Yanukovich allowing him to stay in power until December—when he had already started to pack his things, preparing his escape from Kiev!

The ‘coup’ concept does not fully grasp the distinction between the movement—which was the (very much autonomous) driving force of events—and the political opposition, the people who actually took power. This is why I am calling Maidan a people’s revolt, not a ‘coup.’

CM: The final question we ask each guest is what we call the Question From Hell: the question we hate to ask, you’ll hate to answer, and our audience will hate the response. Asking the Question From Hell usually makes me cringe—and none more than the one I have for you:

Who will be responsible for more Ukrainian protester deaths: the deposed Yanukovich government or the post-Yanukovich government? We may need to distinguish between the Yanukovich government, the current interim government, and whatever government is elected post-interim administration.

It’s a horrible question to ask, but it gets at the greater point of potential for more violence. My concerns in any event like this are always for the most vulnerable.

VI: As is very often the case, the new government will blame its predecessors for all or most of the deaths and atrocities, even if they happened after their actual rule. And, as is also very often the case, this might be justified to some extent. If Yanukovich did not try to suppress the protest and did not cling to power to the bitter end, the violence would not have escalated to the level we see now—and might see even more in the nearest future. We will also need to assess the responsibility of the violent revolt itself, which is tightly connected to issues that are sharply divisive for Ukrainian people.

But if we are starting to speculate about the future, why stop here? If the events will lead to full-scale civil war in Ukraine, and then to full-scale Russian intervention, and then to the Third World War, who will we need to blame for the end of the human civilization? The crazy, irrational capitalist system that inevitably produces competing imperialisms. This is the root of the problem—not only for Ukraine, but for the entire world.

Transcribed and edited by Edward Sutton from AntidoteZine.com

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