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Ukraine

Popular movement and imperialisms

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV473 - June 2014 -

Publication date: Monday 16 June 2014

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This resolution was adopted at the meeting of the FI Bureau on 7 June 2014.

The very deep political crisis experienced by the Ukraine since November 2013 is far from being over. In this country, following a very long national oppression (basically Polish and Russian), the process of national formation is incomplete, the nation-state is still fragile. This is all the more the case that the country is taken in hostage between Russian imperialist pressure and that of the Euro-Atlantic powers, and subject to the socially fragmenting impact of neo-liberalism.

1. From Maidan to the provisional government: a powerful popular mobilization

For three months (November 21, 2013 – February 22, 2014) tens of thousands (and on some days hundreds of thousands) of people gathered in the centre of Kiev, on the Place (“Maidan”) of Independence. It was the suppression of the first protesters (“pro-European” and defending national independence) which gave the movement its massive size by late 2013, combined with a hope - ideally associated with “Europe” - of well-being, rejection of corruption, democracy and national sovereignty.

We stressed in February ([IC resolution](#)) the characteristics of this movement which has “*presented a combination of revolutionary (democratic, anti-elitist, self-organized) and reactionary elements - the overall outcome was and remains a question of political and social struggle. Those features are also deeply rooted in the current character of the present post-soviet Ukrainian society (atomized, without any class identity, with degradation of education and hegemony of reactionary nationalist ideas in society, combined with a legitimate commitment to national independence and the dramatic legacy of Stalinism).*”

We can specify the weaknesses and limitations of Maidan:

- Despite its length, the main forms of self-organization which emerged remained limited: above all the construction, the maintenance, the defence of this rebel city of tents and barricades in the middle of winter, the organization of supplies and of health services ... teams occupied administrative buildings, a student assembly imposed notably transparency of the budget for education. “Sotnia” (companies) for self-defence were formed, of which a minority were controlled by political organizations present in the Maidan.
- The movement never had any “representation” or elected spokespersons. This has facilitated its exploitation by the political parties of the opposition, including the far right party Svoboda, ranked among the “pro-Europeans” - speaking in the name of “Euromaidan”, particularly abroad.
- The small groups of the extreme nationalist right (Pravyi Sektor and so on) vying with Svoboda played a role in the self-defence of the movement. Their evident “visibility” and their attacks against left-wing activists have been used to discredit the whole of Maidan, notably by the Russian government and media, or later by anti-Maidan components identifying with the left.
- Finally, although very diverse and sensitive to social issues (against the confiscation of public goods, corruption,

inequality), the movement has not expressed social demands; it has done very little to mobilize the industrial working class, and therefore also the regions in the east and the south-east (despite a few exceptions). If strike calls (launched by the independent trade unions) have not been supported, the same is true of attempts at workers' mobilizations against Maidan.

– Taking into account the initial themes (“pro-EU”), of the predominant organized forces of the right and fascist aggression, the very weak Ukrainian left has been very divided faced with Maidan and in Maidan: in addition to the various anarchist groups, the Socialist Movement - Left Opposition has chosen to intervene there opposing right and extreme right ideas as a result of the social and mass democratic aspirations of the movement. By way of contrast, the organization “Borotba” (Struggle) remained outside the movement, denouncing it globally as reactionary. Located on the “left” by its label, and its social discourse, the Ukrainian CP, very much involved in the oligarchic privatizations, has sought to distinguish itself from the Party of Regions by proposing a referendum regarding the agreement with the EU; but it was discredited by its vote for the February laws criminalizing all protesters. It has propagated, like Borotba, the thesis of the “Nazi putsch”.

– In total, while taking more distance from the parties than was the case in the “Orange Revolution” of 2004, Maidan especially mobilized in the regions of the west and the centre of the country, more oriented to the EU; if it was expressing social and democratic aspirations shared across the entire country, its only “program” was the fall of Yanukovych.

2. The fall of Yanukovych: a popular victory confiscated and a right wing government, not a “fascist putsch”.

The fall of Yanukovych has dismembered the Party of the Regions, which had become under his presidency the main instrument of the power of the oligarchy, and whose base was located in eastern Ukraine - where the Ukrainian oligarchy emerged and developed in the great industrial corporations privatized fraudulently during the capitalist restoration in the early 1990s. This party had a strong electoral support because of social relations of domination. The implosion of the Party of the Regions, which became in the course of the presidency of Yanukovych the structural instrument of his regime, as well as the dissolution of the special forces of repression, “Berkout”, weakened the Ukrainian state, depriving it of an important part of its structures of domination.

Although all the ministers of the new government had been accepted by the crowd of Maidan, the movement was largely demobilized after the establishment of the provisional government.

The fall of Yanukovych was the victory of a quasi-insurrectionary movement, and not the deed of a “fascist anti-Russian putsch supported by the west”. Even if Yanukovych came to power in 2010 through elections recognized as legitimate, he was himself responsible for his own downfall: he is deeply discredited, including in his region of origin, the Donbas, by years of oligarchic personal and familial enrichment while the country is impoverished; and even his unexpected refusal in November to sign the agreement with the EU has been the illustration of the presidentialist drift of a regime less and less controlled even by his own party and parliament. His fall was catalyzed by the repression and the dead of Maidan. In view of the disputes on the responsibility for these deaths, the government in Kiev has appealed to the International Criminal Court (ICC), on April 25; it is investigating events ranging from November 21, 2013 to February 22, 2014.

It was the parliament itself which voted for the dismissal of the president after his escape, with a very strong majority, and which designated the provisional government. The latter largely reflects the compromise, supported by Western

diplomats, which had been negotiated with Yanukovych, before he fled. After having explicitly supported all “pro-European” parties, including Svoboda, the European governments have been embarrassed by the extreme right. The latter has sought to make itself more “respectable” (Svoboda has toned down its anti-Semitic matrix and its celebration of the SS Galizien Division). In parallel, the minister of the interior (who has been asked by the European Parliament to disarm the private militias) is in a tense relationship with Pravyi Sektor.

If the government is not “neo-Nazi” it is true - and non-trivial - that the party of the extreme right “Svoboda” has multiple positions of power within it: 4 ministries (3 since, March 25, its Minister of Defence, Admiral Ihor Tenyukh, regarded as “inactive” in the face of the events in the Crimea, was “dismissed”) as well as the post of attorney general. Andriy Parubiy, secretary of the National Security Council and of defence, is sometimes also catalogued as a member of Svoboda. It is true that he was one of the founders, in 1991, of the “Social Nationalist Party of Ukraine” which took the name of Svoboda in 2004. But he left this organization 10 years ago and has since 2012 been a member of “Batkivshchyna” (“Homeland”) led by Yulia Tymoshenko.

It is this formation that dominates this neo-liberal government which has appointed oligarchs to posts as governors of regions and has put in place the measures required by the IMF: including an increase in the price of gas (50%), a freeze on wages and hiring in the public sector, reduction of pensions, reduction of social expenditure, VAT increases and so on. The first measure taken by the new parliamentary majority, repealing the act of 2012 on languages, has not been ratified by the acting president. But in the context of a denunciation of the new regime as “anti –Russian” including by Moscow, the effect has been disastrous in the Russian-speaking regions. The Russian aggression in the Crimea is presented as a response to such a policy.

The 25 May election carried the oligarch Petro Poroshenkoto the presidency of the Republic – by 54.7 % of the voters, with a participation of 60.3 % (this latter figure is undoubtedly over-estimated). [1] This election, taking place against a background of tensions that diverted the social questions, nevertheless expresses a popular desire to give Ukraine a sovereign representation. It buries at the same time the fundamental political demands expressed by Maidan – a radical cleansing of the police and State apparatus, the fight against corruption, the separation of big capital from direct political power. Never in the modern history of Ukraine has big business been so directly involved in the management of the country: almost all those who figure in the Forbes list of the richest Ukrainians are today in high-ranking posts in the executive.

3. Annexation of the Crimea

The Crimea (12% of whose population includes Tatars formerly deported by Stalin and having returned since 1991), the gift of Khrushchev to Ukraine in 1954, had acquired a special status as an autonomous republic within the independent Ukraine, since 1993. Its main city, Sevastopol, had a separate status, as a naval base which houses the former Russian Black Sea fleet, according to a treaty of “peace and friendship” in 1997.

Moscow had obtained from Viktor Yanukovych an extension of the lease, under which it leased the basis to the Ukraine, in return for the agreement on energy tariffs and the debt specified in December 2014. Putin exploited the fall of Yanukovych to unilaterally challenge all these agreements, by annexing the Crimea. But it was the argument of the “Russian minorities” threatened by a “fascist putsch” which was put forward in the vote by the Duma in favour of the employment of Russian armed forces in Ukraine. That is why this thesis plays an essential role in the propaganda. In the posters for the plebiscite that was held under military deployment and without access to Ukrainian media, Ukraine was marked with a swastika.

Moscow has stated that 97% of voters voted yes, with a participation of 86% - figures very far from those provided

by the Russian Presidential Council on Civil Society and Human Rights: "According to various sources, in Crimea 50-60% voted for joining Russia, with the total turnout of 30-50 per cent"). The exodus of Tatars out of Crimea has resumed - their fate is in no way assured. But on 20 March the treaty incorporating the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol in the Federal Republic of Russia was ratified by the Russian Duma.

Behaving like a great power, Putin has stifled his domestic critics by encouraging a nostalgic Great Russian chauvinism for all of "little Russia" - at the risk of a conflagration in the Ukraine. As was long the practice in Stalinist propaganda, to be Ukrainian (or Tatar) now means being (pro) Nazi and "anti-Russian". This finds its counterpart in the ultra-nationalist propaganda where to be "Russian" means being "anti-Ukrainian" or "Bolshevik". The real political, social and geo-strategic conflicts are thus hidden.

4. The "Anti-Maidan" faced with an unpopular government

In any event, the eastern and south-eastern regions of Ukraine are not the Crimea. Unlike the latter, they had voted massively for the independence of Ukraine in 1991; and the public opinion polls showed (until recently) that they remained predominantly attached to this, in spite of their political mistrust of Kiev. Favouring linguistic pluralism, and even a form of decentralization, or again wanting to keep the links with Russia (hoping notably for better energy prices), or being nostalgic for the USSR does not involve a secessionist logic: the Putinian political regime is not attractive (even if it is presented as a protector) and the policies applied in Russia near Donbas have removed much of the state aid which still remain massive in Ukrainian industry. But the policies conducted by Kiev cause concern, even if jobs are as much threatened by insertion into Russia than into the EU or submission to the IMF. The popular choices are therefore uncertain and concerns are quickly exploited.

The "popular republics" of Donetsk and Lugansk, self-proclaimed, exploit mistrust of Kiev. But they have broadly been reduced to para-military apparatuses or bring together former members of the Ukrainian state apparatus, criminals of all sorts, military personnel from Chechnya, members of the Russian security forces, or ordinary Ukrainians. Nothing that promotes a real popular mobilization, in a situation which is increasingly chaotic after clashes of which it is difficult to make an assessment.

The tragedy in Odessa on May 2 - the fire at the trade union centre which cost the lives of 40 so-called "pro-Russian" activists who were barricaded within, including a Borotba activist, as a result of the armed aggression against a demonstration in favour of "unity of Ukraine" leaving 4 dead - marked a radicalization of the "anti-Maidan" propaganda: according to the latter it would be a "new Orator" protected by a "Nazi state" in Kiev - which is accompanied by an indictment of "callous indifference" if one challenges these interpretations.

The anti-Maidan has not known any mass mobilisations beyond a few thousand protesters, in a highly populated area. It is difficult to clearly include there the thousands of voters in the plebiscites of May 11 in favour of the "popular republics" which have been without doubt at the same time in part a protest demonstration against Kiev and a vote forced by the militias - the same ones who on May 25 banned participation in the presidential election. Massive strikes have taken place, especially in Krasnodon, but they were on wage claims and the workers have rejected the political manipulation of the "pro" or "anti" Maidan candidates. Other more recent strikes among the miners, are against the "anti-terrorist" actions taken by Kiev (denouncing the risks of the bombing for the mines).

Even if we can denounce the hypocrisy of Putin calling for dialogs that he rarely practices at home, or denying any external intervention, the latter does not take the form of a military invasion. The violence of the armed "anti-Kiev" militias, blocking any dialog, certainly requires an adequate response. But the latter could rely on the democratic and

peaceful aspirations of the peoples. And the defence of the unity of the country implies answers other than military ones. Even if it is difficult to accept all the false propaganda, it is certainly true that the operations launched by Kiev were ineffective in ending the chaos and unable to earn the trust of the people. Which Putin intends to exploit.

5. Russia's imperial policy

Since 2008 and playing on imperialist contradictions, Russia has sought to reaffirm itself as a great power, after its marginalization since 1989.

The dismantling of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism in Russia was reflected in the Yeltsinian phase of 1990 by a plundering of wealth dominated by oligarchic quasi-feudal fiefdoms controlling the state. The Community of Independent States (CIS) had little of substance in this phase. Yeltsin's Russian state lost its internal (including the capacity to have taxes paid) and external power, in spite of its dirty war in Chechnya. The integration of Russia in the "G8" did not kid anyone with regard to its actual weight.

The Putin era initially resulted, in 2000, in the restoration of a strong internal state, incorporating the control of oligarchs and exports - after the payments crisis of 1998 - especially in the oil and gas sector. This was accompanied by a "managed democracy", framing the elections and the major media and suppressing protests at the same time the old social protections were dismantled. The resumption of strong growth has been accompanied by the internationalization of the economic and financial presence of the Russian oligarchs, and several attempts by Moscow to create around Russia a more integrated economic "space" than the CIS.

The Russian regime has tried, especially since 2011, to transform the Customs Union already put in place with Belarus and Kazakhstan (which Armenia has joined), in a project of "Eurasia" for 2015 directed also at Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and even Georgia and Moldova: it concerns, by playing notably on the weapon of the gas tariffs, offering them an alternative to the "Eastern Partnership" with the EU: the challenge is for Russia to compete with China and Western capital but also to counter attempts at incorporation of its "close neighbours" in the Euro-Atlantic institutions (EU and NATO).

Russia also exploits the dependencies and "partnerships" that the big imperialist powers have established with it, such as in the "fight against terrorism" or the management of the Syrian crisis. It takes advantage of the crisis of these powers, but it suffers also because of its own dependencies, which it is endeavouring to mitigate by the deployment of its relations with China.

Its coup in Crimea rests on the apparatus of Yanukovich and on the extreme "Eurasian" right to mark a new relationship of forces in international negotiations. But it is not certain that Putin controls the separatist forces of Ukraine and the dynamic carries dangers, beyond the short-term gains: Azerbaijan has joined the criticism against the annexation of the Crimea which is not reassuring for the neighbours with which Moscow would like to associate.

6. Western imperialisms

The fall of the Berlin Wall, was accepted by Gorbachev in the context of "Soviet disengagement": lowering the cost of the arms race and winning Western credits were his priority. In the negotiations undertaken in Germany, he had advocated the dissolution of the two military blocs; and then he had to accept the entry of the reunited Germany into NATO, in return for the commitment by the United States that no foreign troops or weapons would be stationed in the

East and that NATO would not extend further.

But U.S. imperialism made the choice to expand NATO to Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic in 1999, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia in 2004, as well as Albania and Croatia in 2009.

And the “pro-Western” forces of “coloured revolutions” in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), heavily supported by the United States, had called for their integration into NATO and the EU. The latter was however divided with regard to relations with Russia. As can be seen by the direct links that Germany (or Italy) had preferred to build with Moscow for oil supply.

In 2009, the Polish leaders, supported by Sweden, advocated an “Eastern Partnership” of the EU - in the absence of new enlargements, this amounted to a “thorough and comprehensive free-trade” agreement with all the former countries of the ex-USSR bordering the EU - including Ukraine. Russia reacted by the Eurasia project offered to the same countries with the objective of a redefinition of continental relations, where Russia would be a dominant pole, but also a counter-weight to the demands of the EU.

Yanukovych, facing the risk of cessation of payments, negotiated the agreements with the EU until 2013, under pressure from Russia and the IMF. He asked for tripartite meetings (Ukraine, Russia and the EU) then refused by the latter. Today, the Western imperialist states seek an agreement with Russia - in spite of all the big speeches. None of them, no more than the government in Kiev, can control the clashes on the ground which can degenerate into a real civil war.

7. Sovereignty of Ukraine

The unity of Ukraine requires military neutrality, the withdrawal of Russian troops, and the rejection of anti-social policies.

Only an anti-war and anti-fascist front (Ukrainian and international) against the reactionary forces of every kind, rooted in the peoples, can impose it, against the Russian and Western imperialist diktats, in defence of social and national rights, against violence.

These are the objectives that the progressive forces of Russia and the EU will defend against the IMF and the “free trade” agreements - by recognizing the right of the Ukrainian people to decide on its international links.

The national question is at the centre of political activity in Ukraine. As the Left Opposition put it: *“the national and cultural renaissance of the Ukrainian nation and other nations of our country is not possible without the social problems being resolved”*. In Ukraine, a left that left the national dimension to the nationalists would condemn itself in advance to failure. In the nationalist camp there are already emerging currents that, taking advantage of the marginality of the socialist left, wish to appear in the eyes of workers as an alternative to capitalism.

[1] Tadeusz A. Olszanski and Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga, [Osrodek Studiow Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia, Warsaw](#) note that in the regions of Donetsk and Lugansk, where the pro-Russian “militia” did everything to prevent the vote, it takes into account only the registered voters in polling stations that opened, that is to say respectively 668 000 out of 3.3 million and 216 000 out of 1.8 million, the participation is 15.4 % in the region of

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Donetsk and 38.9 % in that of Lugansk, whereas if all registered voters are taken into account participation undoubtedly did not exceed 3 % and 10 % in these two Eastern regions.