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Ukraine

The oligarchic rebellion in the Donbas

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Seventy-five people were killed on the Maidan in Kiev on February 20, 2014. The following day, Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski insisted: “If you do not sign the agreement, you will have a state of war and the army in the streets. You will all be dead.” The foreign ministers of France and Germany echoed his words. The trio of Ukrainian opposition leaders eventually folded under the pressure. Although they feared the worst – they were very afraid of the reaction of the Maidan – they accepted a deal with Yanukovich. He was to remain president until December - until the early presidential election. The Western political elites breathed a sigh of relief: the revolution was hijacked onto the institutional path, where it was sure to get bogged down. But immediately there was a first surprise. The troops of the Ministry of the Interior and the police reacted to this agreement as if it was a capitulation by Yanukovich. At full speed, even panicking, they deserted the battlefield, thereby depriving the regime of its security forces. More and more police went over to the side of Maidan.

At the same time, the Maidan considered that it was the leaders of the opposition who had capitulated. In the darkness, over the heads of a huge and very angry crowd, through this sea of flames from candles, floated the coffins of those who had been killed.

Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Vitali Klychko and Oleh Tiahnybok gave an account of the negotiations and defended the agreement. The Maidan responded with a hostile uproar. Tiahnybok spoke, trying to control the state of mind of the masses. The commander of one of the self-defence companies of the Maidan, Volodymyr Parasiuk, aged 27, pushed his way through the crowd, went up onto the stage, grabs the microphone and makes a short and very emotional speech that, from the first sentences, became part of history: “We are not members of any organization, we are just the people of Ukraine. (...) We, the simple people, say to our politicians who are there behind me: no Yanukovich - none! - will be president for the rest of the year. He must clear off before 10 a.m. tomorrow.” The Maidan thundered its applause, affirming its enthusiastic support. “Our leaders shook hands with this murderer. Shame!” “Shame,” answered the crowd. “If by tomorrow 10 a.m. you do not present a declaration saying that Yanukovich must resign, we will go on the attack, weapons in hand! I swear!” [1] The agreement signed a few hours before had just ceased to exist. Learning what had happened in his armed forces and on the Maidan, Yanukovich fled Kiev by helicopter before midnight. His regime had collapsed.

It is impossible to hold back genuine popular revolutions. They surprise themselves. That is both their very great strength and their astonishing weakness. Lawrence of Arabia - who knew a bit about what revolutions are - wrote that their participants “are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible” [2]. Revolutions do not take into account the balance of forces. The Maidan, by deciding to finally break the colonial relationship that had bound Ukraine to Russia for three centuries, and to this end turning towards the European Union, measured its forces according to its aspirations. However Russian imperialism, very much weakened after the collapse of the Soviet Union, has already been reborn [3]. The restoration of its dominance over Ukraine is of primary strategic importance for Russia. Hence the immediate counter-attack.

The empire counter-attacks

Russia was able to seize the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol – the Russian Guantanamo – by taking advantage of the very great military weakness of Ukraine. In 1994 the United States and Britain, jointly with Russia, convinced what was then the world's third nuclear power to abandon its nuclear weapons in exchange for a

paper - worthless as it turned out, twenty years later -the Budapest Memorandum [4]. Later, following the efforts of Senator Barack Obama, backed by Congress and by President George W. Bush, Ukraine allowed the United States to destroy a large part of its conventional weapons [5]. Thus Russia was able to proceed with the annexation almost without firing a shot. Fearing a military conflict with Russia, the Western political and media elites legitimized the annexation: almost nobody questioned the announcement that 83 per cent of the electorate participated in the annexation referendum. The suggestion was clear: even if there were falsifications, we know that the Russian-speaking population is a majority in Crimea and we know what it chose. The world media were silent about the radically different data provided by the leaders of the Crimean Tatars. They did not make known the report of Yevgeny Bobrov, published by the Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights of the Russian Federation. Bobrov revealed that “in Crimea, according to various sources, 50 to 60 per cent of voters voted in favour of union with Russia, while the turnout was between 30 and 50 per cent; the inhabitants of Crimea voted not so much in favour of union with Russia, but to put an end - using their words – ‘to corrupt illegality and the rule of protected Donetsk thieves’”, protégés of the regime which had just been overthrown, in other words, of the oligarchy of Donbas [6]. The oligarchy is the popular term in Ukraine for local monopoly capital.

The Russian Colonel Igor Girkin, who would later be “Minister of Defence of the Donetsk People's Republic”, known as Strelkov, took part in the annexation of Crimea. He said: “It was clear that there was no question of limiting ourselves to Crimea. Crimea as part of Novorossiia (New Russia) is a colossal conquest, a brilliant jewel in the crown of the Russian Empire. But Crimea alone, separated by isthmuses of a hostile state - is not the same thing. When the Ukrainian government was collapsing before our eyes, delegates from the oblasts of Novorossiia were constantly coming to Crimea, wanting to repeat at home what had taken place in Crimea.” [7] Novorossiia is the old colonial name of South-East Ukraine. With the rebirth of Russian imperialism we observe the return of imperial titles - New Russia and Little Russia.

Bastion of monopoly capital

After hundreds of years of colonial rule, Ukraine is the most regionally unbalanced European country. The Donbas, adjacent to Russia, a big centre of heavy industry - the coal and steel region - is the main bastion of monopoly capital. From the point of view of the concentration of capital it far exceeds other regions. Two researchers who analyzed the restoration of capitalism in the Donbas, Vlad Mykhnenko and Adam Swain, have long warned that the dominant perceptions of the region “from both the liberal and the Marxist tradition, are at least in part the product of a colonial Western-centric view” [8]. The point is that “through the prism of nationality, ideology and geopolitics, the country is divided into an ‘east’, supposedly dominated by an anti-market nomenklatura influenced by the legacies of anti-Western Soviet ideology and the Russian Orthodox Church, and a ‘west’, supposedly the crucible of Ukrainian national identity and dominated by pro-reform, pro-Western and anti-establishment politics” [9].

However, comparative research on two old industrial regions, structurally similar, in Eastern Europe, indicates that capitalism has a more neoliberal character in the Donbas than in Upper Silesia (southern Poland), whereas Upper Silesia is a region which is part of the European Union. Mykhnenko demonstrates that “Upper Silesia’s [relatively, of course – zmk] generous social protection sector and high levels of public spending on health care and other social services have resulted in the region’s steadily improving human development indicators. In turn, the dramatic decline in a number of crucial human survival and development indicators, which has been experienced by the post-communist Donbas, was caused by ever decreasing public expenditure on health and additional social services, and, generally, by the relatively low role of the state in the welfare system” [10]

Predatory monopoly capital, largely formed in a very short time in the Donbas with political, criminal and other extra-economic means of accumulation, unified in the late 1990s, blocking access to the region to the other competitor capitals, and seized regional political power through the Party of Regions. In exchange for the support

given to President Leonid Kuchma (1994-2005) it obtained for the Donbas, that is to say for itself, large economic autonomy and great privileges. This is the only Ukrainian region that has benefited from such privileges. "This is only possible because of the co-operation amongst the local elite to defend their extra-profits (...) that in turn create the material preconditions for the elite groups to gradually penetrate the state administration. Whilst the region is de facto economically autonomous, there is no pressure for increased political autonomy but rather a concentration on business expansion beyond the region's borders." [11].

This is how it was in the early years of the 21st century. One of the best Western specialists in the history of the Donbas, Hiroaki Kuromiya, even said that the Donbas is capable of jumping ahead of other regions "to embrace a capitalist and democratic Europe" [12], in other words getting on with the realization of neoliberal reforms in the whole country.

Taking power centrally

In 2004 the expansion of Donbas monopoly capital led to its first attempt to seize power centrally: the falsification of the elections to ensure the presidency of Ukraine to its political representative, the candidate of the Party of Regions, Yanukovich. The outbreak of the "Orange Revolution" prevented it, for a short time. Employing sophisticated research methods, Mykhnenko determined that "a region's class composition was the single most important factor behind [Viktor] Yushchenko's electoral success in 2004", because "the Orange victory was achieved by the majority of votes cast in the *least* bourgeois areas of the country". Yanukovich, on the contrary, won the support of voters especially "where the urban capitalist class had been the most developed" [13]. Nine years later, in the different regions, popular support for the "Revolution of Dignity" on the Maidan was generally similar to that of the "Orange Revolution". At the end of January 2014 this support was very strong in the west (80 per cent), considerable in the centre of the country (51 per cent), low in the south (20 per cent) and very low in the east (8 per cent, ten times less than in the west). To the contrary, support for the regime of Yanukovich was strong in the East (52 per cent), low in the South (32 per cent), very low in the centre of the country (11 per cent) and insignificant in the West (3 per cent, seventeen times less than in the East) [14].

The fact that the support for the revolution that overthrew the domination of Donbas monopoly capital was strongest where the bourgeoisie is weakest, has not so far paved the road to power for any political force with a programme representing a radical alternative to neoliberal capitalism. On the contrary, the "Revolution of Dignity" has paved the road to power for other neoliberal political forces, representing capitals that are less concentrated and much more divided politically. Reflections on why this happened will be sterile if their starting point is not the decisive element: the fact that revolutions do not produce anti-capitalist political forces. They can only put such forces at their head, which is possible only when they exist and when they materialize not in the imagination of activists, but in the reality of social movements.

The Russification of the Donbas

"From the 1940s until the first half of the 1980s the apparent internationalization of society masked the planned policy of Russification, which progressively formed the imaginary view of the Donbas as a "Russian-speaking region". [15] In independent Ukraine this policy was pursued by the regional oligarchic authorities. In the course of the years 1970-1989-2001, the percentage of Ukrainians considering the Ukrainian language as their mother tongue declined in the Donetsk oblast from 79 per cent to 59.6 per cent and then 41.2 per cent, and in the Luhansk oblast from 87.5 per cent to 66.4 per cent and then 50.4 per cent. Today, in the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk, Ukrainians make up less than half of the inhabitants and Ukrainian-speaking residents are only 11.1 per cent in the first and 13.7 per cent

in the second city. On the contrary, in the countryside the Ukrainians are a dominant majority – 73 per cent in both oblasts - and a big majority of them use Ukrainian. At present in the two oblasts Russians make up almost 40 per cent of the population [16].

“In the linguistic structure of the urban milieu we observe the maintenance through inertia of the influence of the ethno-linguistic processes of the Soviet period, marked not only by mass migration of Russians but also by their transformation into a dominant minority, while the Ukrainians became a mass ethnicity (subaltern majority)”. [17] But it is not just a question of inertia. In the same way as it happened in the Soviet Union, where large urban centres were the principal terrain of the Russian colonial policy aimed at the Russification of the periphery, after the fall of the USSR the oligarchic power has pursued an active policy of the enlarged reproduction of a vision of the Donbas as a Russified region tending towards Russia.

In the geopolitics of domination of Russian imperialism in Ukraine and all along the western extent of the “Russian World” – conceived in the monarchist-orthodox manner and that of the Black Hundreds and White Guards – the Donbas is extremely important. A few years ago the Ukrainian historian Yuri Nikolaets was very clear and very farsighted on this subject. He wrote: “In the present conditions, the Donbas, as a border area between Ukraine and Russia, has become in fact one of the variants in the expansion of the Russian Federation as dominant country. This country actively plays the card of ‘Donbas identity’ with the aim of settling some of its political, economic and social problems by expanding its sphere of influence on Ukrainian territory. The ‘language issue’ linked with the expansion of the Russian language and the imaginary vision of the ‘eternally Russian Donbas’ thus becomes one of the means of destabilizing Ukraine. It seems however that in the economic sphere the Russian side is more interested in controlling the steel industry than in the extraction of fossil fuels. The point is that the mining industry requires significant subsidies, and even during the existence of the USSR, the profitability of coal mining in the Donbas was questioned. The control of steel-works, on the contrary, is a source of profit and of extension of the zone of influence on Ukrainian territory. For this reason what is most probable is that the Russian population of the region will once again become hostage to the interests of the political leadership of the Russian Federation, when due to the price of Russian gas the competitiveness of Ukrainian industrial enterprises will be reduced and the standard of living of the population will decline. So, using populist slogans such as the ‘brotherhood of Slavic nations,’ ‘support to the Russian population’ in Ukraine and ‘development of the spheres of use of the Russian language’ in order to oppose the Ukrainization of Donbas, the social stability of the Ukrainian state will be put in question and a conflict between the eastern and western Ukrainian populations will be provoked.” [18]

The oligarchic “contra”

The “Donbas contra” - such a term is particularly appropriate to the oligarchic rebellion in the Donbas because it strongly reminds us of the armed counter-revolutionary movement sponsored by the United States in Nicaragua after the overthrow of the Somoza regime. The barons of the Party of Regions and the industrial magnates already began to mobilize this “contra” during Maidan, to prevent its extension to the Donbas and to support the repressive apparatus with militias - the infamous “titushki” - sent to Kiev. A propaganda campaign on the deadly danger coming from the “Nazis, fascists and Banderaites” of the Maidan, about whom terrifying stories were spread, was unleashed, supported by the television channels of the Russian regime, hegemonic in this region. The Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU), quite influential there, did not hesitate to copy the Nazi discourse on the Jewish ghettos, speaking of the Maidan – “white on the outside, black on the inside” – by comparing it to the black ghettos of the United States, described as being inhabited by idle parasites.

Let us quote this vile propaganda: “Huge piles of garbage, all kinds of infections and diseases previously unknown to medicine, is a feature of life on these reservations. Their inhabitants do not work anywhere and only receive money because they wander aimlessly in the streets. They motivate their refusal to work by the fact that they are no longer

slaves. Over there, in America, there are graffiti of Martin Luther King. Here at home, the portraits of Tymoshenko and Bandera. Here and there, they are dressed in what kindly souls have given them. Here, as on the other side of the ocean, this mess has the charming name of ‘democracy.’ But in this case we no longer have democracy. At least in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco the police sometimes make raids on such places and simply kill a few rabid Negroes. (...) Even the dark-skinned vendors in Kiev secondhand shops seem a bit more civilized than our ‘light-skinned brothers’ from the western regions of the country, who have gathered on the Maidan. ‘White’ on the outside, but ‘black’ on the inside.” [19] There is nothing surprising in this explosion of racism - the CPU is a colonial party.

After the fall of the Yanukovich regime, that is to say after the loss of state power by the political and economic élite of Donbas, this élite panicked. The monopoly capital of Donbas decided to retreat to its stronghold in order to preserve its power at least there: to impose the autonomy of the region, this time political, to accept the support of Russian imperialism and if necessary, with its military support, organize secession. We know what was the role of Rinat Akhmetov, Donetsk industrial magnate and most powerful oligarch in Ukraine: “The Donetsk People’s Republic was his project,” admitted bluntly *Russkaya Vesna*, the website of the separatists [20]. One of the leaders of the rebellion, Pavel Gubarev, blithely recounted to the Russian media the role played in this by the Party of Regions alongside Akhmetov: “In every city the leaders of the so-called voluntary people’s militia began to appear. And the party of power, our eastern oligarchs (...) started working with activists of the militia. It turned out that two thirds of these activists were already paid by Akhmetov. A small group of people remained faithful to the idea, but they still took the money. Everybody took the money!” [21]

“I pulled the trigger of war”

In the Luhansk oblast the rebellion was inspired by Aleksandr Efremov, the right hand man of Yanukovich in the Party of Regions and a man whose interests are as wide as they are shady. When in 1998-2005 he was at the head of the oblast, he organized corporate bankruptcies on a massive scale and a profound economic and social collapse [22].

It was Valery Bolotov - his former chauffeur and bodyguard, responsible for controlling the “kopanki”, the illicit mines of the poor, from which he levied tribute for his boss - who became the leader of the rebellion in Luhansk and was at the beginning “Prime Minister of the Luhansk People’s Republic.” The “contra” and the Russian special services, which began to be active, needed more combative elements than the bureaucrats of the Party of Regions and the CPU, so the separatist movement was rapidly taken in hand by the networks of the Russian nationalist far right, long-established in the Donbas. They were soon supported by many far-right elements from Russia.

On April 6, at the head of several thousand people brought in by bus, the separatists stormed the office of the Security Service of Ukraine in Luhansk, where they seized 1,300 Kalashnikovs, assembled there for some unknown reason. It was not, however, the turning point of the first phase of the rebellion, because “in practice, it was our detachment that launched the flywheel of the war, which continues,” says Strelkov, who had then entered Ukraine at the head of a detachment of 52 people and installed himself in Sloviansk. This monarchist, a supporter of the restoration of the Orthodox Russian Empire, a dog of war, typical of colonial and peripheral wars, who fought in Transnistria, in Bosnia alongside the Serb nationalists, in Chechnya and who is on the list of war criminals prepared by the Russian association Memorial, said of himself: “I pulled the trigger of war” in the Donbas [23]. A few weeks after his arrival in Sloviansk he publicly complained in a dramatic declaration that there was no popular uprising or mass separatist movement and that the people of the Donbas did not want to enlist in the rebel ranks [24].

As “Minister of Defence” Strelkov did not succeed in forming even the nucleus of a command or general staff of the rebellion, which remained divided between various commanders and armed groups acting on their own account.

Despite the support of Russia, the rebellion was able to last only thanks to the extraordinary weakness of the Ukrainian army - which, as a fighting force and not just a bureaucratic institution, was formed in practice only during the war - and because of the lack of experience of the National Guard and volunteer battalions, but mainly because of the incredible incompetence, inertia and corruption of the military apparatuses. The accounts from the battlefield, telling of attempts to stop wounded soldiers bleeding with toilet paper, are only the tip of the iceberg of reports of soldiers who are untrained, hungry, wearing sneakers, without bullet-proof vests, dressings or medical aid, holding the front thanks to the material assistance brought by dedicated volunteers belonging to independent associations. The Ministry of Defence and the General Staff are constantly criticized for the shady deals they make by selling equipment and military equipment, which is lacking on the front, or by making purchases at excessive prices, which allow generals to fill their pockets. These institutions lie constantly about the state of the equipment, about supplies, about the situation of the troops on the front lines and about the number of victims. They lie in saying that the evacuation of hundreds of wounded has been organized, that reinforcements have arrived, that troops have broken out of encirclement, that anti-tank weapons have been delivered, that food, vests, and warm clothing have been provided...

Programme of national defence

Despite this, the Ukrainian armed forces gradually began to win victories. At the beginning of July, Strelkov managed to escape with his detachment of several thousand from the encirclement of Sloviansk, at the last moment and almost miraculously, despite the order of Moscow to in no case abandon the town. He managed to get to Donetsk, the defence of which the separatist troops had not planned. "If we had stayed at Sloviansk, then Donetsk would have fallen in one or at most two weeks. Due to the fact that we came out, we were able to hold Donetsk for 40 days - until the arrival of the 'leave-takers', in spite of the fact that the situation was desperate in the last days." [25] The "leave-takers" are the Russian troops. They are so called because the Russian authorities claim that they are soldiers who are taking advantage of their leave to go to war in the Donbass, rather than going to the beach. About 35,000 to 40 000 of such "leave-takers", who wage war in regular military units, have already passed through the Donbas.

The Russian aggression in August 2014 saved the separatists, but in exchange Moscow posed a condition, which they obediently fulfilled: Strelkov had to make himself scarce. The role of the dogs of war, warlords and adventurers was coming to an end, especially since they could become heroes of the "Russian World" and dangerous for the Kremlin. Military power, and following on, political power in the Donbas was gradually taken over by the apparatuses of the Russian state.

The former colonial possession is conducting alone an unexpected and overwhelming war against the great power. The desperate calls for Western military aid have not provided much help. If Ukraine can count on help, it is probably only from the societies which have experienced in the past the domination of Russian imperialism and which feel in danger again. The problem, however, is that it is not very likely that Ukraine will manage to defend itself, since its fate is in the hands of a government representing the interests of the bourgeoisie and carrying out radical neoliberal reforms.

The search for support or rescue from the major Western imperialist powers is the repetition of the error, already made by Tadeusz Kosciuszko when he addressed to the Western governments a sterile proclamation saying that "Poles want to free themselves from the yoke of Russia and call for help against an empire that, if it once succeeds in gaining the advantage, will unbalance the whole of Europe." There was however in Europe at that time no kind of balance, such as he was calling for [26]. Tadeusz Kościuszko (1746-1817) took part in the American War of Independence and organized the armed uprising in 1794 against Russian occupation during the Second Partition of Poland. He is considered as a national hero in Poland, in Belarus and in Lithuania.]]

Only a programme of national defence that is compatible with the most vital interests of the majority of Ukrainian society can be effective. Because of its class character, the present government cannot produce it. The starting point of such a programme was indicated by Maurycy Mochnacki: "it is necessary to count more on the movement of the masses, on the action of an entire people than on the regular army" [27]. Maurycy Mochnacki (1803-1834), a political activist and journalist, who was also a pianist and one of the theoreticians of Polish Romanticism, led the revolutionary current during the Polish insurrection of 1830-1831 against Russian rule.]].

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