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War in Ukraine

Against Russian Imperialism

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Note from LeftEast editors: Since the war started, the left has grappled with the questions of the extent of NATO's responsibility for it and the call for military aid to Ukraine. In publishing this statement sent to us by our comrades from the Russian Socialist Movement, we acknowledge the left's multiple fissures on these issues. While we all agree that any left worthy of the name should unequivocally condemn Russia's aggression on Ukraine, a number of LeftEast's editorial collective members have expressed reservations about the statement's stance on NATO and military aid to Ukraine. At the same time, we understand that the left's multiple geographies, concrete situations and strategies – whether in Ukraine, under Putin's bombs; in Russia, under Putin's persecution; in the West, where the war-lobby is pushing its own agenda; or, in the Global South, where the main enemy is different and Western hypocrisy more glaring – do result in different perspectives on these two more controversial points. At the start of the war, LeftEast issued its own anti-war statement, where we tried to articulate our own view. [1] Nevertheless, our primary mission is to provide a platform for solidarity with progressive voices from the region. In that spirit, we publish this statement.

Although the majority of the left has condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the left camp's unity is still lacking. We would like to address those on the left who still stick to "a plague on both houses" position that views the war as an inter-imperialist war.

It is high time the left woke up and carried out a "concrete analysis of the concrete situation" instead of reproducing worn-out frameworks from the Cold War. Overlooking Russian imperialism is a terrible mistake for the left. It is Putin, not NATO, who is waging war on Ukraine. That is why it is essential to shift our focus from Western imperialism to Putin's aggressive imperialism, which has an ideological and political basis in addition to an economic one.

Russian imperialism consists of two elements. Firstly, it involves revisionist Russian nationalism. After 2012, Putin and his establishment moved from a civic concept of the nation (as *rossiyskiy*, "related to Russia") to an exclusive, ethnically based concept of Russianness (as *ruskiy*, "ethnically/culturally Russian"). His aggression in 2014 and in 2022 was legitimized by the return of "originally" Russian lands. Moreover, this concept of (ethnic) "Russianness" revives the nineteenth-century imperial concept of the Russian nation, which reduces Ukrainian and Belarusian identity to regional identities. According to this view, Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians are a single people. Employing this concept in official rhetoric implies the negation of independent Ukrainian statehood. That is why we cannot say with any degree of certainty that Putin only wants the recognition of Russian sovereignty over Crimea and the Donbas. Putin may desire to either annex or subdue the whole of Ukraine, threats which appear in his article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" and in his speech on February 21, 2022. Finally, the perspective of Ukraine-Russia peace talks look rather bleak, as Russia's negotiation team is headed by former Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky, one of the most dedicated believers in the ideology of *ruskiy mir* (the ethnic Russian world) – a world where, believe us, no one will be happy.

Secondly, even though Putin's aggression is hard to explain rationally, current events have demonstrated that it may be reasonable enough, nevertheless, to take Russian imperialist rhetoric at face value. Russian imperialism is fueled by the desire to change the so-called "world order." Thus, Putin's demand for NATO's withdrawal from Eastern Europe may signal that Russia may not stop with Ukraine, and Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, or Estonia may be the next targets of Putin's aggression. It is very naïve to demand to demilitarize Eastern Europe, because in the light of current circumstances, that will only be appeasing Putin and will make Eastern European countries vulnerable to Putin's aggression. Discourse about NATO expansion obscures Putin's desire to divide the spheres of influence in

Europe between the US and Russia. Being in the Russian sphere of influence means a country's political subordination to Russia and subjection to the expansion of Russian capital. The cases of Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate that Putin is ready to use force to influence the political affairs of countries which he believes wish to leave the Russian sphere of influence. It is important to understand that Putin's understanding of key agents in the world order is basically limited to the US and China. He does not recognize other countries' sovereignty, regarding them as satellites of one of these agents of the international order.

Putin and his establishment are very cynical. They use the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, American intervention in Afghanistan, and the invasion of Iraq as a shield for the bombing of Ukraine. In this context, the left must show consistency and say no to all imperialist aggression in the world. Today the imperialist aggressor is Russia, not NATO, and if Russia is not stopped in Ukraine, it will definitely continue its aggression.

Furthermore, we must have no illusions about Putin's regime. It offers no alternative to Western capitalism. It is an authoritarian, oligarchic capitalism. The level of inequality in Russia has risen significantly during the 20 years of his leadership. Putin is not only an enemy of the working class, but also an enemy to all forms of democracy. Popular participation in politics and voluntary associations is treated with suspicion in Russia. Putin is essentially an anti-Communist and an enemy to everything the left fought for in the twentieth century and is fighting for in the twenty-first. In his worldview, the strong have a right to beat the weak, the rich have the right to exploit the poor, and strongmen in power have the right to make decisions on behalf of their disempowered population. This worldview must be dealt a severe blow in Ukraine. In order for political change to come about inside of Russia, the Russian army must be defeated in Ukraine.

We want to address a highly controversial demand, that of military aid to Ukraine. We understand the repercussions of militarization for the progressive left movement worldwide and the left's resistance to NATO expansion or Western intervention. However, more context is needed to provide a fuller picture. First of all, NATO countries provided weapons to Russia despite the 2014 embargo (France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Slovakia, and Spain). Thus, the discussion about whether weapons sent to the region end up in the right or wrong hands sounds a bit belated. They are already in bad hands, and EU countries would only be righting their earlier wrongs by providing weapons to Ukraine. Moreover, the alternative security guarantees that the Ukrainian government has proposed require the involvement of a number of countries, and probably can be achieved only with their involvement, too. Secondly, as numerous articles have emphasized, the Azov regiment is a problem. However, unlike in 2014, the far right is not playing a prominent role in today's war, which has become a people's war – and our comrades on the anti-authoritarian left of Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus are fighting together against imperialism. As has become clear in the last few days, Russia is trying to compensate for its failure on the ground with air attacks. Air defense will not give Azov any additional power, but it will help Ukraine keep control of its territory and reduce civilian deaths even if negotiations fail.

In our opinion, the Left should demand:

- the immediate withdrawal of all Russian armed forces from Ukraine
- new targeted, personal sanctions on Putin and his multimillionaires. (It is important to understand that Putin and his establishment care only about their own private assets; they are oblivious to the state of the Russian economy overall. The left can also use this demand to expose the hypocrisy of those who sponsored Putin's regime and army and even now continue selling weapons to Russia)
- the sanctioning of Russian oil and gas
- increased military support to Ukraine, in particular the provision of air defense systems
- the introduction of UN peacekeepers from non-NATO countries to protect civilians, including the protection of green corridors and the protection of nuclear power plants (Russia's veto in the UN Security Council can be overcome at the General Assembly)

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The left should also support those Ukrainian leftists who are resisting, giving them visibility, centering their voices, and supporting them financially. We recognize that it is the millions of Ukrainian essential workers and humanitarian aid volunteers who make further resistance possible.

A number of other demands – support for all refugees in Europe regardless of citizenship, the cancellation of Ukraine's foreign debt, sanctions against Russian oligarchs, etc. – are broadly accepted on the left and, therefore, we do not discuss them here.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine sets a terrible precedent for the resolution of conflicts which involve the risk of nuclear war. This is why the Left must come up with our own vision of international relations and the architecture of international security which may include multilateral nuclear disarmament (which will be binding for all nuclear powers) and the institutionalization of international economic responses to any imperialist aggression in the world. The military defeat of Russia should be the first step towards the democratization of the global order and the formations of an international security system, and the international left must make a contribution to this cause.

Source: [Left East](#).

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[1] Left East, 26 February 2022 "[LeftEast Condemns Putin's Imperial War Against Ukraine](#)".