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War in Ukraine

One Ukrainian democratic socialist's opinion on the war

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Bill Fletcher: Welcome to The Real News. My name is Bill Fletcher. For months in 2021, Russian president Putin denied that there was any sort of threat to Ukraine. Even while Russian troops were building at the border, maneuvers were being carried out, the numbers were increasing, he continued to deny that there was any threat to Ukraine.

In February 2022, that all changed. A full Russian invasion of a sovereign republic began. An invasion, I would add, that the Russian government seemed to believe was going to take place within a matter of days, leading to the submission of Ukraine. The Russian government made various excuses or explanations for the invasion, including the NATO expansion that had been taking place up until 2004, but more importantly, and actually more interestingly, was Putin's argument that Ukraine had no right to exist. That it was, I believe he called it, national fiction.

Immediately, a great debate began in Western circles about how to interpret the invasion. Was the invasion justified? Was the real threat from the United States? Was Putin's arguments that the Ukrainians were engaged in a fascist project, did that have any legitimacy? The debate has driven a wedge within left and progressive circles about how to respond – In fact, whether to respond to the invasion.

Today, we're fortunate to have a Ukrainian voice. Joining us is Vladislav Starodubtsev, who's a Ukrainian historian of Central and Eastern Europe, a social activist and member of RADA, a collective leadership body of an organization known as Sotsialnyi Rukh, now based in Kyiv. This organization is a Ukrainian organization that unites a democratic left against capitalism and xenophobia on the principles of Democratic socialism. The organization was established in 2015 by Ukrainian socialists with different backgrounds who participated in revolutionary events of Maidan in 2013-2014 with anti-capitalists and the democratic program. The organization brings together social, feminist, and eco-activists, trade unionists, and socialists for the goal of creating and registering a democratic left socialist and anti-capitalist party in Ukrainian politics. Vladislav, I want to welcome you to The Real News. Thank you for joining us.

Vladislav Starodubtsev: Thank you for inviting me. It's great to see you here.

Bill Fletcher: I want to just start with, what is the current situation? We get various reports in mainstream media, and I'm interested both in terms of your look at the war, but also what's happening within Ukraine itself with the Ukrainian government?

Vladislav Starodubtsev: Okay, I will probably start from afar. Once the war started, actually the day before, Russian officials called to the Ukrainian parliament and said that they want a complete surrender of Ukraine to Russia. Ukrainian officials said to them that we will wait a few months for the complete surrender of Russia. On the next day, there was a parliamentary brief where Zelensky gathered all the politicians of all parties, all the military personal and high government officials, and they were preparing for the invasion the next day.

Russians tried to capture Ukraine for a week, and US and European officials, at the day of the invasion, were calling Zelenskyy and people in parliament and asking them to leave to safety and abandon Kyiv, but as we see now in the

six months after the invasion, nothing like this happened, and all the Western governments that were saying that Ukraine will fall in three days just completely failed and cannot understand what to do now.

In this situation, Ukraine still fights and resists Russian occupation, and today they're starting a new counter-offensive to liberate [inaudible] from the occupation. It's a lot more... Ukrainians are doing a lot more than people from the West and general politicians expected from them. Actually, we are showing great resistance to the occupation.

But of course the war creates a lot of problems, a lot of social problems, a lot of political problems that we need to be honest with. What the Zelenskyy government does is absolutely awful and creates a lot more social instability [inaudible] in times of war by using the situation as a pretext for attacking the rights of trade unions, of the people who are in precarious conditions, attacking of housing rights, of social rights, depriving of basic social securities for the needs of advancing their market fundamentalist ideology.

This creates a lot of social tensions in Ukraine. A few weeks ago, there were a few laws adopted that just completely harm the rights of trade unions to defend their workers, and a few laws that introduced zero-hour contracts that actually deprives the right of eight-hour working days and the right to have minimum wage and stable working conditions.

At the same time, they are progressing privatization laws. They are even privatizing the [inaudible] industry, so in times of war, where war economy is needed and social dialogue and social stability is absolutely necessary to enforce, they are pushing for awful neoliberal reforms.

Bill Fletcher: Well, let me ask you this. It may be a naive question. But picking up on your last point, at a point where this invasion remains underway, why is the Zelenskyy government carrying out policies that, in effect, will destabilize Ukraine?

Vladislav Starodubtsev: I think it's more ideological. They believe that they're doing good stuff, that this policy should be done in times of war, and even before the war. They have this very market fundamentalist worldview, that everything could be solved by the market hand, and if you just let the market do everything, it will be done. Of course it's absolutely not working. It's actually collapsing the country in real time. They're doing tax cuts, prioritization, and cuts to the workers rights, but they're trying to push for their agenda to the final. They're actually using the situation of the war to push for the most horrible reforms in economic democracy and trade union rights that were introduced a few years ago, that they failed to push at that time. For them it's a possibility to achieve their vision of Ukraine. I wouldn't say that it's a pretty good vision, especially in times of war. It's absolutely compromising the Ukrainian defense.

Bill Fletcher: Now, as you know when the... There's been what I think to be a sort of strange response to the Russian invasion on the part of many leftists and progressives in the West, including but not limited to in the United States. When the Russians invaded Ukraine, I thought it was obviously a settled question that the Russians were the aggressors and everybody should oppose that and support the Ukrainian resistance. But a different set of different views began to surface. I'm curious how you and other Ukrainians look at this phenomenon within different left and progressive circles in the West, of some people actually supporting the invasion, others essentially adopting the point of view of Henry Kissinger, the former secretary of state, and insisting on what the terms of a settlement should be. Very different points of view about whether the United States or anyone else should provide arms to Ukraine, and people are all over the place. I'm wondering how you and your organization and others view this phenomenon.

Vladislav Starodubtsev: I would say that 99% of the left and general Ukrainian society have only one opinion on all

of these issues. They're, of course, supporting Ukraine for the fight to total victory, and for the, of course, sending heavy weapons to Ukraine, to Ukrainian resistance, because it's a question of survival. It's a question of their democratic rights, of their national rights, and of their lives in general, of being able to live a peaceful life, not in the horrible fascist occupation.

Of course, all these debates, they're just awful. A few days ago, I think yesterday, there was an event organized by Democratic Socialists of America, these very random people that have no legitimacy to talk about Ukraine, that were talking the same thing about peace negotiation, about US aggression, proxy war, that actually just denigrates any opinion of the Ukrainian population and what we are thinking, and tries to speak over our heads to ensure their word views and political agenda. It's, of course, absolutely awful.

This situation, I would say, is very colonial thinking, that only the US has some subjectivity in world politics. Even Russians cannot do it, or the Russian state, cannot do anything without their subjectivity. They're only reacting to the actions of the US government or other Western governments. These views deny a possibility of states to do independent politics and be imperialist without any relations to the US, and kind of justifies those aggressions on the US. But of course, it's absolutely untrue.

Such people are actually arguing for peaceful settlement with Russian imperialism, thinking that if they're compromising with the fascists, they will build a more progressive world order. They're, for some reason, thinking that building the world based on the rule of the strongest and based on the multipolar imperialists [inaudible] for world power. It's actually a more progressive and democratic world that we have right now, but there is nothing progressive in the multipower world of multiple imperialism. There's nothing progressive in the world where a status quo can be destroyed by the rule of the strongest against the weakest nations. There is no anything progressive or democratic, and that these beliefs and views are the same as Henry Kissinger should tell something to the left, especially the American left.

Bill Fletcher: One of the principal arguments that you hear is that the NATO expansion into Eastern Europe was what provoked Putin, and that had there not been a NATO expansion and had there not been discussions within Ukraine about the possibility of entering NATO, that none of this would've happened. How do you respond to that?

Vladislav Starodubtsev: There was a NATO in Chechnya, but no, of course, but Russia still went to war with the Chechnyan people and so destroyed their countries, actually two times, and they weren't needing any NATO expansion for this. But for some reason for now, everyone believes that Russia is a peaceful actor that only defended itself from, I don't know... This image of NATO expansion is absolutely untrue.

Ukraine actually never, ever after its independence, had any war. It didn't have an army and didn't have any aggressive ambitions against Russia or any other countries. Ukraine even gave its nuclear arsenal... It's the second country in the world that denuclearized all their nuclear arsenal just to show that it's a peaceful country that doesn't want any conflict, while Russia attacked Georgia, attacked Chechnya, and now attacking Ukraine from 2014, and they're using different explanations for all of this.

Chechnya, for example, was an integral part of the Russian republic. Georgia was a [inaudible] people. Ukraine was actually the... A multiplier argument. That's Ukrainians' nation shouldn't exist, that Ukrainians are – As an ideology. They're talking about Ukrainians as ideology, not as a nation – Is hostile to the ideal of Russia, that Russian people are somehow oppressed in Ukraine and so on and so on. They're using multiple arguments just trying to appeal to any authors they can possibly do. To the far right, to the far left, to centrists, and so on and so on.

But the fact of what they're doing now, they're doing complete justification of occupied cities.

They're prohibiting any Ukrainian [inaudible] of occupied cities. They're the stronghold of Ukrainian [inaudible] and all Ukrainian teachers that are teaching in Ukraine are prohibited in occupied regions. They're doing [inaudible] and oppression, killing people for engaging in... Actually their [inaudible] of their democratic rights. Their repressing trade unions and so on, is the reaction to the [inaudible] itself. It's really a country that wants to defend itself and would attack and enforce their culture, enforce radical assimilation politics, and kill thousands of people to defend itself. Is it really a realistic argument? Is this? I think no.

Bill Fletcher: Putin has made a number of threats, implied and, actually quite explicitly, regarding nuclear weaponry and the potential use of tactical and maybe even strategic nuclear weapons. There are those that say that US military support to Ukraine simply prolongs this conflict and brings us closer to a nuclear exchange. How would you respond to that?

Vladislav Starodubtsev: I would respond very easily, that if you always compromise with fascist powers and dictators, you will come to the period that there will be nothing to compromise left. If you want to stop a fascist terrorist state that is engaged in genocides, just by feeling that it could continue to do horrible things and completely continue to do aggressions, they will continue to do this. They will have all carte blanche to go for the other countries, to go for Poland, to go for Baltic states, and just expand farther and farther. This argument that says that if you want to stop Russia, if you will give weapons to Ukraine, that it could promote nuclear war and escalation and problems and conflicts, it just shows that people want to compromise with fascist states and compromise their... Actually not their, but freedom of other people, to appease the dictatorship and the fascist regime that have as its ideology expansion and occupation of foreign territories. With such compromises, it'll be giving a very strong signal to the world that any state can expand and attack any state that they want if they have nuclear weapons.

Is it a correct argument for abolishing nuclear weapons? It just gives a lot more privileges to the states that already have them. It creates the world order, as I said, based on the rule of strongest and based on the rule of the countries that have nuclear weapons. It's actually not helping to de-escalate everything. It only gives a carte blanche for continuing such actions for forever. Because if you don't give any answer to this, these powers will just continue to invade and show other countries that there is such a possibility to attack bigger states.

Bill Fletcher: Let me ask you one final question, and it's something that's been rolling around in my head since I interviewed professor Noam Chomsky a few months ago. In effect, he said that, while he opposed the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that there was very little that we in the United States, progressives, could do to influence Putin, but what we could do is influence the Biden administration, the United States government, and put pressure on them to not expand the war. That was essentially his orientation. It led me to wonder several things that went beyond what he was raising, and one is, what is it that you and other Ukrainian leftists would recommend? What would you like progressives, liberals, leftists in the United States to be doing now that they're not doing to support Ukraine's right to existence?

Vladislav Starodubtsev: There's been a war going on already for six months. A lot of people in the West are tired of speaking about Ukraine over and over again. They're thinking that their countries or their governments already sent too much weapons, gave too much help to Ukraine, and that it's a settled question, but in reality, the Ukrainian army is absolutely, the Soviet army has some equipment dating to the '50s of the last century. There are some artillery shells made during Stalin times. And of course such an army couldn't effectively resist the second largest army in the world.

What the left should do, it's actually what left all throughout history did. It's supporting oppressed people and oppressed nations, and giving them the right to resist and to fight against the oppression. In this situation, the most

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empowering and emancipational thing is to demand sending more weapons to Ukraine, heavy weapons, artillery, tanks, planes that are empowering Ukrainian people, a weak nation, oppressed nation, to fight for their rights for existence, and to put an end of the world order that is based on the rule of the strongest, of imperialism, and of military aggressions.

Defending Ukraine, at the moment, is defending democratic rights in all of the world, and actually defending the world order, because if Ukraine will fall, and there will be no strong answer from any of the world powers, it means that any other country could do something like this. Turkey can destroy all its opponents, continue invasion to [inaudible] and so and so on, and continue their military aggression in all other states, for example. China can do something [inaudible] Taiwan, Serbia, and Kosovo. So it creates a carte blanche for the world to be a lot more dangerous and a lot more authoritarian than it was ever before. Practically, the left wing should oppose this and do everything for Russia to lose this war. It includes sending weapons and adopting the most heavy sanctions on the Russian state that will hamper the war economy and won't allow the Russian state to pay wages for their military personnel, for the workers that are working in the plants that are producing tanks and other military equipment.

The most important thing to do is to agitate for the weapons and agitate for the sanctions, to continue pressure from the grassroots organizations and popular movements, and for the government to adopt such positions. The fact that governments are still supporting Ukraine, it's not because they're very altruistic, very democratic, and so on and so on. It's because popular opinion is with Ukraine. They can't just ignore this issue. All of their governments, US, even Britain, wanted to sell Ukraine. They didn't adopt any strong sanctions in 2014 and they didn't provide any help, practical help, in 2014. The first [inaudible] Ukraine, absolutely imperialist Minsk agreement, and continued business as usual with Russia. They are trading arms with Russia, they're doing their capitalist cooperation, and now they're just waiting for any possibility to continue this cooperation. For there to be any possibility at all, trading with fuel and gas with Russia, trading arms with Russia, and so on.

The things that the left should do is to pressure, from the popular movements, their governments, the same governments that wanted to sell to Ukraine in the first three days of the invasion and were calling Zelenskyy to move to leave and just to [inaudible] war, to pressure their governments to support Ukraine, and continue to support until the Ukrainian people will have their total victory.

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