Russia

"The right to self-determination is something the left has always defended"
Russian journalist and philosopher Ilya Budraitskis announced earlier this week the launch of a new anti-war media, >A;5/Posle (After) His team will explore and make sense of Russia and the post-February 24 world from the perspective of left-wing, socialist forces, now experiencing, like almost everyone else, a crisis of political identity under the new wartime conditions. The revue "Cherta" talked to Budraitskis about how this project will differ from previous left-wing media projects, how Russian aggression is appropriating socialist symbols and what the left can counter the rapid militarisation of the world.

There are already a number of left-wing media outlets - OpenLeft, Novo.media, Rabkor, Socialist.news by Socialist Alternative. Why did you decide to create a new left-wing media rather than taking one of these projects as a basis? Is ">A;5/Posle" more of a personal project?

To begin with, the situation for all media, not only left-wing, has changed very dramatically in the last three months. In fact, all media outlets that exist in Russia have to choose between following censorship or speaking openly about the war and exposing themselves to the risks of harsh state restrictions and repression. Our new project is uncensored. We will talk about the war; we will analyze the war, its causes, and its course. We will talk about the position that the left can take against Russian aggression and propaganda.

">A;5/Posle" is an open platform, it will not only feature the statements of our collective members, but will also feature a variety of voices, such as those of the Ukrainian left, many of whom are now involved in resisting Russian aggression. It is also very important that our site will be bilingual - almost all the material it will contain will be dubbed into English. We are open to an international left-wing audience, which currently feels an acute lack of information about what is happening in Ukraine, and which now needs to hear the position of the Russian and Ukrainian left. At least by these criteria, our publication will be quite different from anything that exists now.

Who else is on the team apart from you? Do you aspire to a unifying role for the whole left?

Besides me, there's Ilya Matveyev, with whom we've been doing the podcast Political Diary for quite a long time - it will now be published as part of >A;5/Posle. There are also a whole range of other participants whom I can't name at the moment. We plan to expand our editorial team over time, but I wouldn't say that we're claiming a unifying role - we're not planning for our media project to develop into a political organisation. But of course, we want to be part of the discussion that is taking place on the left in Russia, Ukraine and the world, and to make sense of the challenges we will face on February 24th.

Just about the challenges: your project has clearly stated an anti-war stance. But some parts of the Russian Left also have this stance: there is a war between two right-wing projects in Ukraine, one western Atlanticist-liberal and the other reactionary Putinist, which means that the Left should be "above the fray" and wish "a plague on both houses". What do you think about this position? And do you think the Russian left should be on the side of Ukraine in this war?

We in ">A;5/Posle" do not believe that this is a war between some "projects". It is Russia's war against Ukraine in which Russia is the aggressor. Any attempt to move away from this simple statement is a departure from the leftist, internationalist position, for which there has always been a fundamental distinction between the aggressor and its victim, between a large imperialist nation and a small nation defending its right to self-determination. The fundamental right to self-determination is something that the left has always defended, something that was extremely
The right to self-determination is something the left has always defended. It is this right that is now being challenged by Russian aggression and the Putin regime.

If we recall the speech Putin made on the eve of the invasion of Ukraine, in it he said quite clearly that it was Lenin's national policy, its principles of self-determination of the nation that led to the "mistake" that Putin considers the very appearance of Ukraine on the map - and which he intends to "correct". Thus, Russian aggression against Ukraine also means aggression against Leninist ideas.

Ukraine is now an example of a nation's struggle for self-determination - a struggle which is extremely important to all leftists. This does not mean that we think the Ukrainian regime is leftist or progressive. We understand that it is a right-wing, nationalist regime, and its level of nationalism will only increase as the war drags on and takes more violent forms. But that does not mean that Ukraine, fighting for its independence, should not be supported by progressive forces.

Indeed, Putin has threatened Ukraine with "real decommunisation". On the other hand, the symbols and symbolic actions of the Russian side in this war refer back to the USSR. These include the red Soviet flag, the restoration of Lenin monuments demolished by Ukrainians, and the renaming of streets in the occupied territories from the names decommunised by Ukrainians back to the conventional "Volodarsky Street". How should the Russian left deal with this dialectic?

It is no secret that the Putin regime has long and actively exploited Soviet nostalgia and Soviet symbols, almost entirely excluding their original socialist content. The red flag in the hands of Russian soldiers is no different from the Russian flag - it is simply a sign of statehood, of state power, a sign of the Russian armed forces, which from the perspective of the Russian regime is a direct continuation of the Soviet army. We believe that this symbolism covers the deep gulf between what Russia is today and what the Red Army was when it was first established by Lenin and Trotsky during the Civil War.

There should be no illusions here - Russian aggression against Ukraine does not turn Russia into a socialist state. The social relations that Russia brings to the occupied territories are not socialist. It is a relationship that exists within Russia itself, only in an even harsher, more perverted form. It is the power of the siloviki, the power of the elites, the power of Russian capital and state corporations over a population deprived of political and social rights. We see that in the occupied territories - in Kherson, Donetsk, Luhansk and part of Zaporizhzhia regions - there is not even a fictitious expression of popular will to join Russia. This is a direct military occupation - people living on this territory must simply submit to brute force. It has nothing to do with socialism, democracy and the Soviet government of any form.

Perhaps the CPRF party would argue with the latter. Before the war, we saw a desire on the part of the progressive left to cooperate with the party, to integrate with it and to change from within. After the outbreak of war, when the CPRF in its majority supported the aggression and even acted as its instigator by voting for the official recognition of the LPRR's independence by Russia, is there any point in attempting such cooperation? Or should we acknowledge that it is a dead cause - and the CPRF itself has buried itself with it? The huge protest potential that this party certainly had - is there any of it left after the start of the war?

I think that the huge gap between the position of the CPRF leadership and the expectations that exist among its rank-and-file supporters and voters will only increase over time. These people voted for the CPRF not as one of the backbenches of Putin's regime, but as an opposition party capable of opposing the government's plans for social policy and the strengthening of authoritarianism in the country. The CPRF was voted for as a force capable of returning basic democratic rights to the people of Russia.
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We can see that, despite the aggressive imperialistic statements of the CPRF faction members in the State Duma and the party leadership, on the ground, in the regional and city legislatures, deputies from this party are often almost the only ones capable of voicing an anti-war stance. The most recent such story took place a few days ago in Vladivostok; before that, some Communist deputies in the Moscow city Duma and other regions voiced similar views.

It is possible that these contradictions will, in the foreseeable future, lead to the emergence of a truly independent active socialist force on the wreckage of the current CPRF. And an important part of this force will be the current CPRF members and supporters. In its present form, the CPRF will undoubtedly face a very serious crisis.

Perhaps I am wrong, but in three months we have not seen many forms of peaceful left-wing protest self-organisation in the form of, for example, strikes and other trade union anti-war actions. On the other hand, we see active guerrilla action, perhaps partly carried out by people of left-wing, left-anarchist views. Can we expect the former to develop and what do you think about the latter - which of these is more promising, which of these should left-wing opinion leaders support more?

I don't think there is much choice in the Russian situation, where almost all forms of legal protest are banned. Any form of protest critical of the existing regime is somehow illegal. The only thing that can be done legally now is to stand in solidarity with Putin. The deterioration of the economic situation and the continuation of the war, for which ordinary people are paying with their money, jobs and lives, will all inevitably lead to growing social discontent.

When all political possibilities for expressing discontent have been suppressed, protest takes forms which can hardly be openly promoted by the leftist media. But on the "A:5/Posle" platform, we will be discussing all kinds of protest and resistance: student initiatives, feminist anti-war movements, and forms of self-organization that we aren't currently able to predict.

In principle, in the Russian context, will we be able to see something similar to what happened in Belarus in 2020, when against the backdrop of street protests, massive strikes at state enterprises were an equally important parallel story? Or was this impossible in Russia because of its different economic system?

Russian capitalism is structured differently than the Belarusian one. We do not have so many state enterprises, state corporations prevail. Of course, the authorities are very much afraid that these enterprises will become a source of protest, not only political, but also social. Especially if we face massive wage arrears in the near future and an expansion of the practice of so-called "unpaid holidays". This could be something similar to the Belarusian strikes, and to the strikes that took place in Russia in the 1990s - remember at least the rail war of '98.

The war has rolled world politics back badly to the days of the Cold War, or maybe even earlier. The number one issue on the agenda of European states now is literal physical security. It is as if it is a retreat into right-wing conservatism, as has happened before in Poland, in Hungary. Will this process become global and what can the left oppose it? You should agree that in conditions of a clear physical threat, such conservative cohesion makes sense.

Undoubtedly, Russia's actions have provoked a dangerous and incipient process of militarisation of Europe. This has presented the Left with a serious contradiction - the Western Left has always consistently maintained an anti-militarist position, while today participation in NATO and its reinforcement is seen by many Eastern European countries as almost the only real guarantee of security. The left in these countries understands this, but it is difficult for them to do anything about it. Obviously, the left should now reassess all the positions it has taken in previous decades, including the position that only NATO and the US were imperialist powers.
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What can the left offer in a situation where the whole world risks being divided into opposing imperialist blocs, each with no progressive alternative? During the Cold War it could at least be said that the Soviet bloc, for all its obvious faults, was a bearer of ideas of social liberation and anti-colonial struggle. Today we see the choice between the reactionary NATO bloc and the even more reactionary potential Russia-China bloc. It is not enough for the left today to simply criticise their governments for militarisation. It is necessary to think about the global alternatives they can offer to this world divided into military blocs and sinking into barbarism, which is on the brink of a new deadly global war.

What about those on the left who still refuse to adequately perceive the threat from Russia? For example, we know that [French far-left politician Jean-Luc] Melanchon opposes arms sales to Ukraine; we know about the call of [American left-wing philosopher] Noah Chomsky to sit down with Putin as soon as possible and make concessions to him. Such declarations have left many people disillusioned not only with these figures but also with the leftist idea as such. Some European leftists go further and see Putin's Russia as a force that plays on the "left" side - as it "opposes US imperialism". How to explain to them that this force is actually worse and that there is nothing leftist about it?

You are right, this is an important issue for the Western left. Even though they are unequivocally against Russian aggression, both Chomsky and Melanchon cannot welcome the militarisation of their countries and the expansion of NATO. We are talking about the need for a very serious revision of all the foundations of the strategy of the left in Western countries.

None of the sane left is a fan of Putin or believes in his anti-fascist or anti-imperialist rhetoric. Even those Western leftists who still had some illusions about the Russian regime lost them after February 24. This even happened to the German Die Linke, which has always had a strong pro-Russian wing - the party has changed its general position towards Russia and Putin drastically. This process of rethinking in the mainstream left-wing parties is just beginning. Our platform “After” is going to participate in this rethinking, it is one of our main tasks.

Now more than ever, the European Left needs confirmation or, conversely, non-confirmation of some of its intuitions about Russia's role in this war - from, first and foremost, the Russian and Ukrainian left who see the situation from within. Less than a month ago a large delegation of the Western European Left, including MEPs and national MPs, visited Lviv and held a conference there with Ukrainian independent trade unions and left-wing activists. Such actions of solidarity now also play a very important awareness-raising role.

PS:

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