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Ukraine

# The Ukrainian left is building on several fronts

- Features -

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**On 17 September 2022 the Ukrainian socialist NGO Sotsialny Rukh (SR - Social Movement) held a national conference in Kyiv. [1]** Far from a simple factual account, the aim here is to shed light on the specific profile of this young left, based on its activist practice at the heart of Ukrainian society and breaking with the dominant contradictory interpretations of the 'Euro-Maidan' (2013-2014) that divide the left and are exploited by Putin.

In so doing, we will be 'going back' to the long-standing divergences between the Marxist lefts on the scope of a sovereign Ukraine in the construction and dismantling of the USSR - also mobilised by Putin to legitimise his 'military operation'. In the current context of a war with global stakes, we shall see that the questions facing SR are far from being solely Ukrainian.

I went to the SR conference in two capacities but with a single aim, consistent with the positions defended in the various networks in which I am involved: to consolidate internationalist links from below with this young Ukrainian left. Links forged at the heart of the Ukrainian crisis of 2013-2014 and renewed against the Russian imperial war of aggression. [2] And essential links because they represent a precious and fragile resistance to the dominant policies and ideologies that are clashing in the war and in the current imperialist world order.

Seen from Kyiv in mid-September, this war was both distant and very much present: as we know and as we can see in the streets of the city, activities have resumed and seem 'normal' since the strategic withdrawal of Russian troops towards the south and east of the country. And yet the war is still with us in many ways - in addition to the fall in living standards (with an average wage of around 400 euros), millions of displaced people or refugees, job losses, death, destruction and multiple acts of violence, particularly against women. The war is often remembered for the sirens that sound when Russian forces launch missiles, without anyone knowing which strategic locations in the country are being targeted. This was the case on several occasions in mid-September, when missiles in the Krivih Rih mining region targeted the hydroelectric power station and its dams, causing destructive flooding. This proved to be the cause of the alert that sounded in Kyiv in the middle of the day on 16 September, forcing the closure of the bank where we wanted to exchange money. However, we were told that the exchange services, which had to close in the street, were operating in the vast gallery set up in the basement, with various shops and offices ensuring continuity of activities. But at the time the conference was taking place, the alerts were clearly part of a certain 'normality' in Kyiv: the conversations started on the terraces around us continued peacefully that day, like most of the capital's activities.

In the city, two other 'traces' of the war remain: firstly, all the statues are protected by their own permanent shelters, sometimes covered with a picture or a sign indicating the nature of the camouflaged structure. Lastly, the anti-tank barricades set up at the start of the Russian offensive towards Kyiv at the end of February remain available here and there, but have been placed on the sides of strategic streets. Although the progress of the war now makes the entry of tanks and the dispatch of troops into the capital hardly credible, the country's authorities plan to protect certain ceremonies from possible missile fire (or to remind a few international personalities of the reality of the war) by organising them in the basement of Kyiv's very deep and beautiful metro (which resembles Moscow's) - to the great displeasure of the population, who are hampered in their movements. Unfortunately, the very failures of Putin's armies mean - particularly after the setbacks suffered by Moscow in the Donbass and on the bridge linking Crimea to Russia - real new threats of missile fire towards all the country's major cities and strategic crossroads.

## From one conference to the next - SR's social roots

But overall, in mid-September, the capital was still living 'normally' in this seventh month of the war, whereas last May the country's political, trade union and community forces - as well as diplomats - had moved their headquarters to Lviv (near the Polish border), deserting Kyiv. And so it was here that a first activist meeting was co-organised on 8 May by Sotsialny Rukh and the European left-wing network ENSU. [3]

In Lviv, Ukrainian activists who were members or close associates of SR presented their activities (political, trade union, feminist, LGBT, environmental and so on) in wartime and the ENSU delegates sought to make these activists known and to organise with them actions combining the defence of rights and self-organised humanitarian aid. The organisation of trade union convoys was the emblematic form of this type of action.

The aim was to help anchor a political, trade union and feminist left within the global resistance of Ukrainian society to the war, whereas one of the major characteristics of the disagreements within the Western left is precisely to make an abstraction of Ukrainian society - either by ignoring it (in favour of purely geo-strategic analyses), or by reducing it to nothing more than a victim and cannon fodder at the heart of imperialist agendas, or even by identifying it only with the dominant reactionary currents of the right and extreme right.

It was because of this same objective - to raise the profile of the Ukrainian left within the popular resistance - that the conference held in Kyiv on 17 September was open to members of the international networks of the Western left in solidarity (either through our physical presence or through zoom links). But this conference had first and foremost an internal objective for SR: without being able to be a 'congress' (given the difficulties of functioning and preparation in the context of war), it was a question for the SR organisation itself of evaluating together its progress, fragilities and confrontation with challenges that are both general and specific to post-Soviet Ukrainian society: giving ourselves the means to better ensure and express collectively our political identity in a society where being 'left' is equated with the Stalinist past and support for the war and Putin's regime.

Yet Putin's own speeches on the eve of the launch of his 'military operation' explicitly referred to two major issues dividing the left and marking SR's political identity: on the one hand, the characterisation of the fall of Ukraine's last so-called 'pro-Russian' president in 2013-2014 - Viktor Yanukovich; on the other, the 'raison d'être' of Ukrainian independence.

A brief review of these two points is intended to clarify the profile of Sotsialny Rukh. This is because this socialist NGO was created in 2015 on the basis of essential political demarcations working to date on the 'post-Soviet' left in the face of Maidan and the counter-Maidan.

## The Left and Maidan

The Ukrainian crisis of 2013/2014 goes back to what has been called the 'Maidan revolution' - named after the large square in Kyiv which was then the scene of demonstrations, confrontations and occupations of public places and buildings that accompanied the fall of President Yanukovich. Yanukovich, we are always reminded by those who defend the thesis of a 'fascist coup d'état supported by the West', had been democratically re-elected as head of the Ukraine in 2010. [4]

What had become of the Yanukovich regime since 2010 and how Ukrainian society and Russia had evolved since then are at the heart of the differences that divided the Ukrainian and international left at the time and since then. I cannot go into detail here on the earlier phases and the background to what led to the crisis of 2013, which has had a lasting impact on Ukrainian society faced with 'its oligarchs and its "Troika"' (IMF, EU and Russia). Firstly, Yanukovich's election in 2010 came after the very serious financial and banking crisis of 2008-2009, which led to a

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massive flight of Western capital from Ukraine (it had been attracted by the regime change of the 2004 'Orange Revolution'), a drastic fall in its GDP and a major external debt. The country was therefore under two kinds of pressure: either from the IMF and its conditionalities, relayed by the neo-liberal 'partnership' criteria offered by the EU (higher energy tariffs paid by the population, savings on public services and so on); or from the relations of domination that Russia was trying to impose by exploiting the 'gas weapon' (quantity and tariffs weighing heavily on Ukraine as a key transit point for Russian gas to the EU). In 2010, Yanukovich's election expressed a kind of mandate for military neutrality and balance in international relations. The oligarchs, including Yanukovich and his family, were firing on all cylinders, Russian or Western, in their quest for profit. Yanukovich's democratic election said nothing about his subsequent practices. Basically, it was his unpopularity (like that of his predecessors and successors!) that led to his downfall - combined with corruption, anti-social policies and repression.

But it was in this context that the Ukrainian and international left saw the crystallisation (after the ordeal of NATO's war on Kosovo in 1999) of contradictory political and geo-strategic visions of what could be called 'neo-campism' - which were prolonged, recomposed or radicalised in the face of Putin's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

The Ukrainian crisis of 2013-2014 was described on the one hand as a 'democratic revolution' of the 'Euro-Maidan', with the emphasis on protests against Yanukovich's decision not to sign the association agreement with the European Union (EU). At the opposite extreme, a section of the radical left in Ukraine and Europe also referred to the 'Euro-Maidan', but rejected it outright. In both cases, it was a case of reducing the demonstrations (by rejoicing or regretting them) to a 'pro-European' movement, and assimilating any hopes of openings towards the EU to 'anti-Russian' positions - both simplistic reductions, erasing the self-organised and popular dimensions of the mobilisations, and their rejection of a corrupt oligarchic regime and its repression. The initial protests against the break-up of the 'partnership' with the EU were weak, but violently repressed. And it was this repression that triggered the mass occupation of Maidan Square and exasperated the demonstrators in favour of toppling the President and against compromise measures. And it was these mass mobilisations that brought about the fall of the regime through a profound rejection of Yanukovich's family oligarchy, which extended far beyond his own region (to the point where he had to flee to Russia).

A section of the anti-Stalinist left and neo-Stalinist currents or those allied with former president Yanukovich's Party of the Regions converged in the analysis of the 'Euro-Maidan' as a simple instrument of Western capitalist institutions. The extent to which this kind of conspiratorial approach has permeated anti-imperialist analyses in the post-Soviet phase must be emphasised - with its share of truth, of course: the means of corruption deployed by CIA institutions against trade unionists in Russia or Poland during the crucial phase of the 1980s, or even later against bloggers or organisations active in the Arab revolutions, are well documented. But should this lead us to deny the authenticity of popular uprisings - and the possibility that they can learn from experience? This was the case in Ukraine with the evolution of popular perceptions of parties between 2004 and 2014 - with the discovery that the so-called 'democratic' parties of the Orange Revolution who had denounced corruption in 2004 were themselves deeply corrupt. And more generally, as everywhere in the world, we observed the rise of abstentions and distrust of institutional parties in the context of a terrible ideological confusion.

The tragedy on the left has been, and remains, on the one hand the accumulation of major divisions over the way in which the Soviet past is analysed, with a high level of ignorance about the scenarios and radical transformations of the countries that claimed to be socialist; this has also reinforced the de facto convergence of part of this conspiratorial left with the propaganda of the autocratic powers of Russia and other former post-Soviet republics: The latter have been radically afraid of aspirations to self-determination (as in Chechnya) or of mass protest movements, particularly in the 2000s. The conspiratorial interpretation legitimised their repressive turn (as in Stalin's time): all opposition was equated with infiltration by 'foreign agents'. When this 'foreigner' is also the (imperialist) 'main enemy', the logic of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' reinforces support for the Kremlin's policy against 'colour revolutions' (considered to have been manipulated by the West) - including the 2004 revolution in Ukraine and the 2003 revolution in Georgia, and the 2014 revolution in Ukraine.

The 2013/2014 Euro-Maidan was dealt with using this type of approach, adding to it the denunciation of the active role (real but overstated in the analyses) of far-right militias in popular mobilisations. The over-representation of these currents and their influence in the transitional government set up in Ukraine (before the new elections) after the fall and flight of Yanukovich was used as 'proof' of a 'fascist anti-Russian coup d'état supported by the West' - which is reflected in Putin's speech preceding the 'military operation' of 24 February 2022. The official glorification of the nationalist hero Stepan Bandera (who chose to ally himself with the Nazis against the Stalinist USSR), the calling into question of the 2012 law on languages (which had been adopted under Yanukovich's presidency and gave de facto co-official language status to Russian and the regionally dominant languages), and the affirmation of the Ukrainian language as the only official language have reinforced this narrative and popular concerns in the most Russian-speaking regions - at least in 2014.

But this did not imply 'separatism' and even less war. [5]

Even in 2014, in the context of anti-Maidan mobilisations and real distrust of Kyiv, the population grouped together in the self-proclaimed 'People's Republics' of Donetsk and Luhansk, dominated (without freedom of expression) by separatist forces, covered no more than 20% to 30% of the Donbas. As for the referendum held in Crimea (which had autonomous status within Ukraine) in the presence of the Russian armed forces, it certainly offered the 'choice' of joining Russia or Ukraine - but the latter was presented as fascist (and 'anti-Russian'). And, in truth, the fundamental issue for Putin was to reclaim Crimea and consolidate the military base at Sevastopol (including the Black Sea Fleet). By annexing Crimea, Russia was violating the protocol it had signed with Ukraine in 1994 in Budapest (in the presence of the United States and Great Britain) under which it promised to respect Ukraine's borders in return for recovering all its nuclear weapons. [6]

At the same time, if the country had indeed undergone this 'Western-controlled fascist coup', Ukrainian society would have brought a Nazi force to power in the 2014 elections, supported by a consolidation of 'pro-EU' parties. However, this 'thesis' is contradicted by the recurring difficulty of all the institutional parties (particularly on the right and far right) in forming majorities or even entering parliament, as well as the successive scandals and crises affecting the Poroshenko presidency (2014-2019). The surprise election of the Russian-speaking Jewish actor Volodymyr Zelensky in 2019, elected on the promise of overcoming corruption and negotiating a peaceful settlement to the conflicts in the Donbas, is a case in point.

The currents that formed Sotsialny Rukh in 2015 have distanced themselves from these postures - which had powerful state propaganda relays at their disposal. Independent of any regime - in Kyiv or Moscow - SR's approach, however marginal and fragile, is invaluable for any critical view and internationalist resistance 'from below'.

## A new left within the 'revolution of dignity'

In 2014, this Left under construction chose to become part of what it prefers to call the 'revolution of dignity', with its aspirations for social justice. Admittedly, this revolutionary dynamic had been incapable of challenging an oligarchic system and the movement was permeated by reactionary ideologies. The current that had formed under the name of 'Left Opposition' fought against them, seeking to turn the egalitarian popular aspirations towards progressive responses, critical of the neoliberal policies of the IMF and the EU - notably associated with the Ukrainian debt aggravated after the global and European financial crisis of 2008/2009 - and anti-fascist.

Bringing together activists from different regions of Ukraine and from different political cultures (notably anarchist, Trotskyist and post-Stalinist), it had also gauged the reasons for the popular distrust expressed in the anti-Maidan movement in eastern and southern Ukraine towards the new government in Kyiv. Putin's policies in 2014 - and since 2022 - have undoubtedly strengthened 'anti-Russian' feelings but also the defence of a plural Ukraine. [7] This is also true on the left, among the anarchist currents that identify with the struggle of the anarchist leader Makhno, but also

among the anti-Stalinist Marxists who claim to be the descendants of Roman Rosdolsky, founder of the Communist Party in western Ukraine and close ally of the Trotskyist Left Opposition against Stalin. In his speech in February 2022, Putin denounced an independent Ukraine as Lenin's 'creation'. The centrality of the issue of the self-determination of peoples in the constitution of a free and egalitarian socialist union was fundamentally recognised by Lenin, particularly in the face of the assertion of an independent People's Ukraine - initially against the Bolsheviks. But this obviously came into tension with several dimensions of the socialist revolutionary project - how to combine the sovereign rights of the peoples with redistributive planning from the richer regions to the less developed? What form of democracy to invent, combining individual and collective, social and national rights?

But all this past and its sources have been largely buried and need peace and democracy to be laid bare and shared. In the post-Maidan context, anarchists and, more generally, anti-fascists and anti-imperialists found themselves on either side of confrontations in which 'pro-Russian' or, on the contrary, viscerally 'anti-Russian' extreme right-wing currents were at work. Here, as elsewhere in the world, the greatest opacity of political labels and concepts inherited from a bygone century reigned. [8] While part of the left supports Putin as 'the enemy of my main enemy' (NATO, dominated by the United States), Putin's 'anti-Western' course combines the questioning of all the revolutionary dimensions of the USSR that emerged from October 1917, support for Stalin's logic of great power, and contempt for any protected and egalitarian social status for workers, women and LGBT people. And, as he explicitly stated in his speech prior to the invasion in February 2022, for him independent Ukraine is an artificial and aberrant creation of Lenin and his desire to create the USSR in 1922 on the basis of sovereign states. The global currents of the far right can be found in the ethnicist approach to the nation and the rejection of the 'decadent' West - which should raise questions for those on the left who see it as support against Western imperialism.

The Maidan Left, which went on to found Sotsialny Rukh, was therefore bound to find itself at cross-purposes on these various fronts - and therefore very marginal. Fundamentally, it was the expression of a new generation of activists (the average age is around 30) who wanted to take a critical look at the revolutionary heritage of the twentieth century, incorporating the contributions of the emancipation movements (and of the 'intersectional' logics that intersect the oppressions of class, gender, 'race', sexuality, etc.) and environmental protection. Its desire to be socially rooted in an 'impure' society and movements, and its intellectual references, place it at the opposite end of the spectrum from bookish and dogmatic approaches - without, of course, providing ready-made answers on subjects that are open to multiple controversies.

Its anti-capitalist convictions, its concrete and critical analysis of Ukrainian society and its critical Marxist knowledge of the Soviet past protected it from 'campist' postures: it had contested as counter-productive (from the point of view of the struggle against secessionist forces) the 'anti-terrorist operations' of the Kyiv authorities against the populations of the Donbas; but at the same time it denounced the role of Moscow and the Ukrainian bureaucratic-military apparatus in crisis behind the pseudo-referendum in Crimea against a 'fascist Ukraine', and then the self-proclamation of the pseudo 'people's republics' of Donetsk and Luhansk (DPR and LPR). It sought to identify popular aspirations common to the whole of Ukraine and hoped for an OECS- or UN-monitored ceasefire, the dismantling of all paramilitary forces, and a rejection of all Russian interference as a precondition for updating the Ukrainian constitution on a democratic basis and taking control of its own choices and conflicts - against any logic of sharing areas of influence between Moscow and Washington over Ukrainian society. [9]

I first met this young left in Kyiv in 2013 and 2014, when I took part in the debates at the conference it organised on 'The Left and Maidan'. I am indebted to it in my own articles on these events for a 'look' associated with its insertion against the tide on several fronts at the heart of a 'revolution of dignity' - an unfinished and impure revolution opening a phase of hybrid war that radically transformed into full scale war in 2022.

## The three Russian dolls of Putin's war

SR's stance on this war is consistent both with its analytical and militant approach in the 2013-2022 phase, and with its commitment to a sovereign Ukraine as part of a socialist struggle.

It is Putin's aggression that has shifted many questions and hesitations in the direction of the construction of a plural Ukraine - which will have to democratically (and pluralistically) assume and overcome its own internal conflicts and conflicting readings of the dark pages of the past. [10] In his speech of 22 February 2022, Putin himself provided the keys to interpreting his war offensive, the uncertain ways in which it will be implemented having become clearer since 2014 following the annexation of Crimea. They can be summarised as three interlocking Russian dolls.

The first is explicitly based on the 19th century 'Great Russian' discourse on 'a single Russian people' with three dimensions (Russia, Belarus and Ukraine). Putin contrasts it with Lenin's decision to found the USSR on the basis of a challenge to the Russian Empire (and its oppressive relations), in other words an act of free union signed on an egalitarian basis between republics (of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine) recognised as sovereign.

Like the first, the second Russian doll has nothing to do with NATO and feeds on far-right ideologies about the 'Russian world' of Eurasia (against the feminist, LGTB and atheist decadence of the rest of the world). Putin fits various ideologies together in his own way. He pragmatically backs them up with two constructions that respect the new sovereignties of non-Russian post-Soviet republics (autocratic and anti-social): the Eurasian Economic Union, which aims to counter the EU's 'Eastern Partnership' projects; and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a mini-NATO that proved its effectiveness in the face of the social riots that destabilised autocratic power in Kazakhstan last year.

Thus comforted on his 'own space' of domination, Putin hoped to enlarge the dimensions of the third doll: his place in the Court of the Great Powers and vis-à-vis NATO to negotiate from a position of strength the sharing of 'spheres of influence'. The audacity of the Russian offensive (in defence of the imperial and imperialist interests of these projects) was catalysed by the 'brain-dead' state of NATO after the pitiful withdrawal from Afghanistan and in view of the flagrant disagreements between the US, France and Germany over energy issues and relations with Russia: it was therefore not a threat from NATO but, on the contrary, its crisis that formed the basis of Putin's offensive scenario at the start of 2022 - reinforced by his assessment of the situation in Ukraine. He hoped to gain domestic popularity similar to that which the annexation of Crimea had brought him.

Zelensky's attempts to negotiate with Putin over the fate of the Donbas met with the full force of the Russian autocrat's contempt. But they also confronted the Ukrainian president with threats from his far right. Turning to Biden, he received an explicit refusal to defend Ukraine against threats of Russian intervention. All in all, the Ukrainian president's popularity had plummeted by the end of 2021. This strengthened Putin's conviction that Zelensky would fall and be replaced by a Ukrainian Pétain as part of a nationwide deployment of forces, particularly towards the capital - with the same type of narrative as for the referendum in Crimea: 'against a Nazified Ukraine, return to the Russian home'.

## Sotsialny Rukh and the war

From the outset, like the great mass of the Ukrainian population, led by President Zelensky, the members of SR chose to resist the invasion and refuse to disappear into the straitjacket of the Russian doll. This profile has never eliminated their anarcho-communist anti-capitalist profile or, therefore, their critical independence from the Zelensky government. The Zelensky government is considered to be the 'least worst' possible on the Ukrainian political scene as it stands and has a strong popular legitimacy as an expression of the defence of Ukrainian sovereignty - which implies, in the war phase, that the left-wing criticisms formulated are (also) popular, concrete and not contradictory

with the commitment against this war.

The violence of the Russian invasion has forced even the most pacifist of us to recognise the right to defend ourselves, to refuse to equate the aggressor's weapons with those needed by the people who decide to resist and defend their dignity, their rights and their lives. Our long-standing links with the Russian Socialist Movement enabled us to adopt a common position on 7 April 2022 which confronted the arguments of the Western left:

“We want to address a very controversial demand, that of military aid to Ukraine. We understand the impact of militarisation on the progressive left movement around the world and the left's resistance to NATO expansion or Western intervention. However, a broader context is needed to give a fuller picture. Firstly, NATO countries have supplied arms to Russia despite the 2014 embargo (France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Slovakia and Spain). So the discussion about whether weapons sent to the region end up in good or bad hands seems a little overdue. They are already in the wrong hands, and the EU countries would simply be making up for past mistakes by supplying arms to Ukraine. Furthermore, the alternative security guarantees proposed by the Ukrainian government require the involvement of a number of countries, and can probably only be achieved with their involvement as well.

Secondly, as many articles have pointed out, the Azov regiment is a problem. However, unlike 2014, the far right is not playing a leading role in today's war, which has become a people's war - and our comrades on the anti-authoritarian left in Ukraine, Russia and Belarus are fighting imperialism together. As has become clear in recent days, Russia is trying to compensate for its failure on the ground with air attacks. Air defence will not give Azov any extra power, but it will help Ukraine keep control of its territory and reduce the number of civilian deaths, even if negotiations fail.”

All the requests for aid (military, material, financial) expressed by SR have been accompanied by a rejection of all neoliberal and anti-social conditioning - a position which is also in the platform of the ENSU solidarity network. The slogans and concrete implementation of two SR campaigns (supported by ENSU) illustrate the reality of this front of social resistance within the struggle against Russian aggression: on the one hand, the denunciation of the causes and content of the Ukrainian debt (sparing the oligarchs and weighing on the country's social budgets) accompanied by the demand for its cancellation, particularly in the face of the disasters inflicted by the war. There was also the more concrete campaign launched by the trade unions against the Zelensky government's laws attacking the social safeguards inherited from the Soviet era. In the permanent background, the question of what kind of Ukraine was being built (and would be rebuilt) in the face of the destruction of war was raised. This is the theme of the three-day conference on 21-23 October: ‘What should the new Ukraine look like? Is there any chance of building a society based on solidarity, justice and sustainable development? What should we do with the ruins of the global security system? What is the role of the world's progressive movements in restoring it?’

These same questions - which challenge the international left without simple answers - were at the heart of the resolution adopted by the September 17 conference in Kyiv, which begins as follows: “The Ukrainian people have faced difficult challenges, but they have proved their ability to fight for the right to decide their own destiny, and their determination to defend the country and end the war as soon as possible. The authorities and representatives of the fundamentalist ideology of the market, together with big business, continue to push through an economic model based on the profit of a minority to the detriment of the well-being of the absolute majority. In this model, workers are completely subject to the will of their employers, while the social and regulatory functions of the state are abolished in the name of ‘business needs’, ‘competition’ and the ‘free market’.”

Of the three texts put to the vote, the one that was adopted is the one that most develops SR's identity. But the time for debate was short. The aim of this interim conference is to provide basic theses and guidelines for the continuation of the tasks of formation and collective development in the coming period. Here are the ‘priorities’ that the text puts



forward for the reflections and actions of Sotsialnyi Rukh 'in the current struggle':

"1. Complete victory and security for Ukraine.

The Russian army must be defeated now, as a precondition for the democratic and social development of our country and the world.

Ukraine's independence and democracy can only be preserved by developing its own defence capabilities. On this basis, a new international security system must be built to effectively counter any manifestation of imperialist aggression in the world (...)

2. A socially-oriented reconstruction of Ukraine.

Neoliberal forces are trying to impose their vision of a post-war Ukraine, a country owned by big business and not by its people, with no social protection or guarantees. Contrary to this, we believe it is necessary to advocate a reconstruction that focuses on the progressive development of the standard of living of the majority of the population, and of our social infrastructure, the provision of economic guarantees. Reconstruction must be ecological, social, decentralised and democratic, inclusive and feminist (...)

3. Social democratisation.

Democratisation at all levels of life, eliminating the influence of money and big business on politics, increasing the representation and importance of trade unions, national minorities and communities in power and their full participation in decision-making. (...)

4. Identity and inclusiveness.

The new Ukrainian identity that is emerging before our very eyes is multi-ethnic and multicultural, because most of the Ukrainians who are defending our country today are at least bilingual. Multilingualism and the diversity of Ukrainian national culture must be preserved and developed, emphasising that the Ukrainian language must become a universal means of exchanging and producing knowledge in all areas of public life, culture, science and technology. The entire cultural heritage of humanity should not only be available in Ukrainian, but Ukrainian should also be used to produce advanced literary and artistic works, as well as world-class scientific and technical knowledge.

It is necessary to ensure the development of Ukrainian culture and language in all their diversity, a Ukrainisation with a social vocation, based on decent and competent public funding for education, publishing, popular science, festivals, cultural projects, cinema and so on.

5. International solidarity against imperialism and climate catastrophe.

Although Ukraine is the largest country on the European continent, it is relegated to the periphery of regional politics. Having no influence on decision-making, it is reduced to a market for European states.

The growing contradictions between the centres of capital accumulation in the world capitalist system will not stop, even after the complete destruction of Russian imperialist power. (...)

The climate catastrophe unfolding before our eyes demands urgent action. Humanity must mobilise resources for the immediate and complete rejection of hydrocarbons (...).

6. A free world for creativity and knowledge.

Access to knowledge must be free and available to all. Everyone must have the best possible conditions for learning and pursuing their own creative and research interests. (...)

Protect the victory of the Ukrainian people against privatisation by the oligarchs!"

The aim of the conference was also to tackle the organisational tasks associated with this programme. The introductory report by SR's President, the employment rights lawyer Vitalyi Dudin, pointed out that in six months SR had seen its membership double, which did not lift it out of marginality, but presented it with new challenges. [11] It had to find ways of operating that were adapted to a larger number of members in their various fields of intervention - trade union organisations, feminists, young people, socio-political research, the journal *Commons*, social and international media - and, in so doing, it also had to face up to the responsibilities raised by its growing influence.

SR was emerging as the left that opposed both the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the neo-liberal and anti-democratic ('decommunisation' law) policies of the Zelensky government. In other words, the question of workers' political "representation" is raised on the Ukrainian political scene - as it often is elsewhere. In response to this challenge, the task of building a 'party' was raised in two ways. On the one hand, such an objective is included in the political resolution adopted by the conference, which states in its introduction: "A party is needed to implement an alternative vision of Ukraine - democratic, social and socialist. Such a party would protect and unite the working class and the disadvantaged, those who today lack political representation and suffer constant abuse. Such a party must protect the absolute majority of the working population from the diktat of employers. The ultimate goal of such a political force must be the emancipation of humanity and the radical democratisation of economic, political, national and social life."

In addition, the question of the links between current trade union activity (or social movements) and the party was addressed in a concrete way, after the introductory report on the state of activity. It was on this very subject that the President of SR invited Vasili Andreev, president of the building trade union, to address the conference and present its current experience: it has begun to lay the legal foundations for the recognition of a political party, which it sees as an extension of its trade union. The SR organisation has set itself the objective of evaluating more closely, in dialogue with Vasili Andreev, the programmatic closeness between the two organisations and, on a practical level, of testing the possibilities of joint operation in the various branches and regions.

To follow up the various tasks, the conference elected a new collective 'Council' (or Rada) of seven members - three of whom are involved in trade union work (including the widely acclaimed president Vitalyi Dudin), three women involved in feminist networks and one of the leaders of the Direct Action youth networks in student circles. In all sectors, the conference was a step towards a better joint pursuit of the various types of activities in a relationship of 'trust' - emphasised by Vitalyi Dudin. Those begun before the war, associated with the defence of rights (including popular education); but also the various forms of broad self-organisation striving to respond in solidarity to the damage and disasters of the war - its destruction of jobs and therefore loss of resources and often of roofs, but also the inadequacy of collective services and multiple forms of violence, particularly for women. [12]

Vitalyi Dudin's report itself underlined two tasks that SR will endeavour to take on: that of 'translating' the socialist convictions expressed in the resolution into concrete formulas that are comprehensible, mobilising and conducive to a break with the existing order (a 'transitional' logic, one might say?). And the task of consolidating the confidence necessary for the functioning of a 'collective intellectual' who will carry forward this type of project. These are tasks that challenge every left-wing organisation in the world. Difficult tasks when you look at the bigger picture: SR is an organisation which, while still small, is already very diverse (fortunately!) in terms of the political cultures of its members - predominantly ecologist-anarcho-communist, feminist, LGTB - anti-fascist. A rich resource.

But what does it mean, as the SR texts state, to be in favour of 'democratic socialism'? The question was raised by one of the comrades present at the conference. And on closer examination, it turned out that it was the content of the notion of 'democratic' that questioned him the most. Criticism of the Stalinist past in no way resolved the questions which in fact question not only the Ukrainian left but all anti-capitalist currents: how to organise the new society (what

## The Ukrainian left is building on several fronts

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forms of democracy, and therefore what institutions behind the socialisation of planning, the market and property?) What's more, how do we move from the struggle within/against the existing system to the construction of other decision-making powers and other eco-communist rights and priorities - and at what levels do we need to organise territorially to be credible and effective? What can we expect from the EU? The Ukrainian population has suffered the effects of radical 'peripheralisation' in the capitalist order and has been confronted with the EU's neoliberal criteria in the 'partnership' relationship since 2009. The great mass of the population aspires to have the status, the rights - and hopefully the protections (from all points of view) of a full member. This is a debate that SR has not had - but has begun with its members, and which (also) divides the European left. It is part of the global issues raised by the war. The resolution adopted by SR stresses: "The left in Europe and around the world proved powerless and disoriented when the Russian aggression in Ukraine took place. Unless the international socialist movement realises the mistakes it has made and builds a new, genuinely internationalist cooperation and coordination, we simply have no chance of preventing the growth of the inter-imperialist struggle in the future."

The only prospect that opens up margins for progressive resistance against all imperialisms is for Ukrainian popular resistance (which makes the weapons received effective) to lead to Putin's downfall - in particular by arousing in the Russian Federation and the former Soviet republics an identification of non-Russian nations with the Ukrainian decolonial cause and, more broadly, a mass refusal to die for a dirty war.

It is up to the internationalist left to make known the proximity of the decolonial stakes of the Ukrainian and Russian left to those of the peoples of the 'global South', as the Indian feminist and communist Kavita Krishnan points out. [13] The decolonisation of the Russian Federation is the key to making the dissolution of NATO and the CSTO credible, as well as the debates (initiated by Taras Bilous within Sotsialny Rukh) on a different global 'security' architecture that rejects any logic of 'bloc' and shared spheres of influence.

18 October 2022

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