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**Ukraine**

# Ukraine under Russian occupation

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**Since the fall of President Yanukovych in 2014, all Russian interventions in Ukraine - from the annexation of Crimea and the hybrid war in the Donbass to the February 2022 invasion - have been presented by Putin as responses to an 'anti-Russian, NATO-backed fascist coup'. A part of the international left has embraced this narrative, unlike the small Ukrainian left in the making. The latter chose to take part in the 'Maidan uprising' - as it did later in the armed and unarmed resistance to Russian aggression - by fighting on several fronts. [1]** Its approach to Maidan as a non-linear 'revolution of dignity', with no model and no final outcome, is attentive to the agency of Ukrainian society, as opposed to the 'geopolitical' approaches that ignore it. These two articles look back over the last ten years.

# The Ukrainian crisis of 2013-2014

**A crisis that was neither a "pro-European revolution" nor a "fascist coup under NATO control"**

The aspiration for dignity was embodied differently in several phases of the construction of Ukraine, including the 1991 referendum where the population voted massively in favour of independence, including in the Donbass. After the bureaucratic blockages of the 1990s, a popular mood of "kick them all out" arose, notably in the "orange revolution" of 2004, against electoral fraud, clientelism and corruption [2]

**Ukraine coveted by the EU and Russia**

Certainly, with its 40 million inhabitants , its agricultural and mining resources, its strategic corridor for oil and gas between Russia and the European Union (EU), but also its external debt after the financial crisis of 2008-2009, Ukraine was subject to multiple internal covetousness (its rival oligarchs) and conflicting external offers. Russia proposed a customs union, while waging its "gas wars" and playing on supplies and tariffs; the EU offered a "partnership" (without membership) based on ultra- ¬liberal policies relaying the precepts of the IMF (International Monetary Fund) in the face of debt.

In this context, President Yanukovych was elected in 2010 in an internationally recognized democratic election. His initial programme aimed for a geopolitical balance desired by the majority of the population and reflected by foreign trade divided roughly into three thirds towards the CIS countries, the EU and China. But the forced privatizations advocated by the IMF/EU were sources of strong social tensions, unlike the generous loan and the reduction in the price of gas offered by Russia that Yanukovych chose at the end of 2013. He imposed his break with the EU without submitting this choice to a democratic vote. Worse, he launched his "Berkuts" (Interior Ministry forces) against the few hundred pro-EU demonstrators. And he had Parliament vote in early 2014 on a package of repressive laws against protest movements, sparking new mass demonstrations marked by several dozen deaths.

**Yanukovych discredited, Maidan angry**

It was popular disillusionment with a president whose oligarchic family practices and repressive excesses had become violent — much more than the European issue — that catalysed the mass popular anger against a discredited president. The occupations of public buildings and Maidan Square, with self- ¬organization, in early 2014 were far from being politically homogeneous. All the institutions of the regime, including the army but also the

institutional parties, were in crisis. The presence of Western diplomats in favour of "Maidan" was explicit, since they inserted themselves into the compromise negotiations towards early elections. The rejection of these compromises came from popular demonstrations that demanded the immediate resignation of the president. He fled to Russia. The next day, February 22, 2014, Parliament voted (by 72 per cent ) for his dismissal.

Yanukovych's discredit had become such that he could not find refuge in his own armed forces and in the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine where his Party of Regions dominated. He therefore turned to Putin. The latter seized on the crisis to advance his own evolving agenda. In the immediate term, the decomposition of Yanukovych's regime facilitated the intervention of the "little green men" in Crimea, which was annexed - despite the hostility of the Tatars - after a referendum with the "choice" of remaining in the supposedly "fascist" Ukraine or turning towards Russia. At the same time, there was the hybrid war of Donbass. [3]

**The reality of the far right**

Rejecting the false presentation of the "fascist coup" does not imply ignoring the reality of the far right. As elsewhere, it was composite and evolving. Its divisions concerned both its historical references and the racist and sexist "definition" of the Ukrainian nation ,as well as the conception of its relations with the West (EU, Israel, USA) and the relationship with violence and institutions. Neo-Nazi groups had an increased influence through their role in the "security service" of the demonstrations against the "Berkut " of the regime. However, the Ukrainian far right was very much a minority in electoral terms (although it crossed  the 10 per cent threshold in 2014), over-represented in the interim government after the dismissal of Yanukovych. Early elections were held in May 2014, bringing the chocolate oligarch Petro Poroshenko to power. His "anti-terrorist operations" in the Donbass and his support for far-right militias stirred up dimensions of civil war. At the same time, the "pro-Russian" fascist mercenaries were instrumentalized by the Kremlin - giving the war its external dimension, although Putin sought to maintain his profile as a negotiator (in the Minsk meetings).

The corrupt Ukrainian regime remained, despite its repressive excesses, an "oligarchic democracy" traversed by powerful and recurring social and political movements. The surprise election of the Jewish and Russian-speaking outsider Zelensky in 2019 was further proof of this, a sign of these "revolutions of dignity", such as Maidan, which the Putinist system feared like the plague.

# From hybrid war to war pure and simple

In 2014, Putin did not want to annex the self-proclaimed "Republics" of Donetsk and Lugansk.

As Daria Saburova points out : "To ensure control of its former semi-colony, Russia had […] more interest in the reintegration of the separatist territories by Ukraine on condition of the federalization of the country - no strategic decision could then be taken without the agreement of all the members of the federation - than in recognizing their independence or definitively attaching them to Russia, which is what the separatist leaders themselves wanted "

In this context, the 2015 Minsk agreements (involving Merkel, Hollande, Ukrainian President Poroshenko and Putin) "included several points with a security component (ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy weapons, exchange of prisoners, restoration of the Ukrainian border) and a political component (amnesty for people involved in the separatist movement, constitutional reform of Ukraine establishing a principle of decentralization of power, recognition of a special status for the regions of Lugansk and Donetsk, organization of local elections)".

**From the impasse of the Minsk agreements to the Russian invasion**

They failed because the Russian government wanted to impose a constitutional federalization at its beck and call, without prior withdrawal of Russian troops. Asking for a "return" to these Agreements is to ignore not only the causes of their impasse, but also the changes in context and the effects produced by the war. On the eve of the 2022 invasion, Putin knew that NATO was "brain dead" after the pitiful withdrawal from Afghanistan and in view of the internal dissensions, particularly between the United States and several EU member states, including Germany, interested in importing Russian gas. In addition, the Zelensky government had lost its massive popularity, unable to implement its electoral promises (against corruption and for peace in the Donbass), and Biden had clearly told it that he did not want a war with Russia.

**Strategic annexations**

Putin launched the Special Military Operation with the hope of the rapid fall of the government in Kyiv and a "Crimea effect": a gain in popularity in Russia and towards the Russian-speaking populations of Ukraine by new annexations that he assumed would be as easy as in Crimea. He was wrong. The territorial "withdrawal" also maintains a strategic aim: from 2014, as Daria Saburova explains "The territorial conquests in the East and South of Ukraine" have "as their objective the creation of a land corridor from Crimea to Transnistria." .Now, the experience of the "forced Russification" of the occupied zones is a fact. [4] Finally, as Ilya Budraitskis says , the war is also "a cultural war against the population" (in Russia) itself. [5]

The support of the Ukrainian left for the popular invention of "commons" in solidarity in the face of social attacks in order to better resist war is our guiding principle and source of "dignity" and hope. [6]

*5 September 2024*

*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from **l'Anticapitaliste**.*

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[1] Read "The Ukrainian left is building on several fronts" and "What internationalism in the context of the Ukrainian crisis? Wide open eyes against one-eyed 'campisms' ".

[2] Read "The Ukrainian left is building on several fronts" and "What internationalism in the context of the Ukrainian crisis? Wide open eyes against one-eyed 'campisms' ".

[3] "Questions about Ukraine".

[4] See Médiapart..

[5] See "La Russie sous Poutine : « Il y a une guerre culturelle contre le peuple lui-même »" and "Stop the bombing! Russian troops out! Solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance!.

[6] See the publications from the European Network in Solidarity with Ukraine (RESU / ENSU), the statements by the Social Movement (SR) and Oleksandr Kitral's analysis in the Ukrainian magazine Commons (in French "Un an sans lumière ». Comment des conditions extrêmes ont poussé les Ukrainiens à des «transformations sociales» pour la survie commune").