

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8797>



Ukraine

A Short Diary of a Trip to Ukraine: Resistance and Social Movement in a Country at War

- Features -

Publication date: Sunday 29 December 2024

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The trip was organised by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, the German left-wing foundation, which has a branch in Ukraine. The Left Alliance of Finland, the Red and Green Alliance of Denmark, Die Linke of Germany, the Left Bloc of Portugal and the Left Party of Sweden took part in it; these are organisations with different views on the attitude towards Ukraine in the current war. The author of the “short diary” is Catarina Martins from the Left Bloc of Portugal. Ed.

The night train from Przemysl in Poland to Kyiv in Ukraine is packed with displaced families. Most of them are women and children. Some are leaving, some are returning and some are visiting. Men between 18 and 60 years old are not allowed to leave the country. Of the 40 million Ukrainians, the war has forced almost 15 million to flee their homes. They are refugees in other European countries and internally displaced persons. These statuses, as you quickly realise, are not watertight.

To board the plane, you first have to cross the Polish border. Queues of people, trains of people, on the street, in the cold, late at night. On the way back, in the early morning, it will be freezing cold and winter has not yet arrived. There are exhausted mothers and grandparents, crying children and others who say nothing. Lots of suitcases. It is not a movie. It is everyday life on the border of a country at war.

There is an app (there is always an app) that informs you of airstrikes. On the train platform, some people look at the map on the app to see what is painted in red, but having the map of drone and missile attacks in the palm of your hand does not help on the journey. There is no shelter here. You just have to trust. The train, they explain, does not always work the same way. We also notice that, even without stops, it sometimes stops for a while. Sometimes it travels quickly. Whoever manages to sleep in the sleeper car will have made the most of their time. The journey takes more than 10 hours and the trains are almost always punctual.

Just before Lviv, the train stops and Ukrainian border guards enter. The person in charge of the carriage wakes up the passengers before the soldiers come to collect their passports. We wait, finally our passports are returned to us and we continue. What will happen to those who are not authorised to travel? We do not know. On the way back, everything is the same, but the soldiers add a question: do you have weapons? No, we do not.

Life Does Not Wait for the War to End

Arriving in the morning, Kyiv is a European capital like any other. The city is functioning, there are no air raid warnings, the front seems far away. The app only colours some of the easternmost areas red. We will notice that at night it is different and that not every day is like this. For now, we go to the hotel, shower and have breakfast, organise the day's busy schedule and head to Bucha in the minivan that looks like it has travelled thousands of kilometers and that says "tourists." Half an hour by car from the center of Kyiv, we see soldiers on the road and scrap metal on the roadsides.

In Bucha, we are welcomed by two local officials who are responsible for hosting internally displaced persons. They have already welcomed dozens of delegations like ours. They repeat the message: we cannot wait for the war to end before helping people and rebuilding. We have thousands of displaced people, some since the very start of the war in 2014. Many more joined after the full-scale invasion in 2022. We are absolutely dependent on direct

international aid; what goes to the government is used for the war effort. We need houses, nurses and psychologists, energy, solar panels. Only then do they talk about the massacre that filled the news.

They take us to the church where they have a memorial and photographs. They are also from there. These bodies are their neighbours, their family. They explain to us that they were killed by Russian soldiers who were no older than eighteen. At the memorial, we are shown the ages of those who died. In a row, the names of a one-year-old baby and a man who was one year shy of 100. Nothing makes sense. Babies and old people killed by children. The monstrous fury of the guns. [1]

There are tall trees and a huge peace mural. The wind is freezing. We know that neighbouring villages have suffered the same violence and occupation. We go to meet those who have stayed or returned to support them. Along the way, we see container houses, which are the only public housing in Ukraine. The displaced people have been living like this for ten years (and as many winters) - especially the elderly, the sick and the poor. Those who cannot leave the country or find work.

Caring in the State without a welfare state

We return to the road and to apparent normality. Suddenly, houses destroyed by bombs with a sign: people live here. People sitting on pieces of wall. Further on, in a housing estate, we discover our next encounter. The palliative care association is situated in the basement. There are nine women, health professionals, who support more than a thousand patients and their families. They distribute oxygen, adjustable beds, wheelchairs and diapers. They care for elderly patients, cancer patients, COVID-19 victims and war wounded. They explain their role like this: the government takes care of those who can survive. We take care of the rest. Everyone has the right to dignity at the end of life.

The president of the association has already been to the front and then returned. There is a front here too. It is the only organisation that tells us that it has no international support. After all, no one wants to talk about those who are dying. They live off community solidarity and local donations: the soldier who has gone to the front and wants to be sure that someone will support his parents, the mother who has her son at the front and wants to be sure of support when he returns wounded.

Back in Kyiv, we had lunch with film crews caught up in the war in Mariopol. They fled at the last minute, before the total siege. They were working with excluded communities. They talk about their ongoing project with Gypsies. They explain that they are now using their films to raise funds and support the war effort. They support small artisanal factories that produce protective equipment using 3D printers. Their films are shown at festivals and screenings around the world and they participate in conversations with the public via video conference. They have never screened a film in Portugal. Next year they will release another one.

They are concerned about misinformation concerning the country. They want us to know that Ukraine has more than one language and that being a Russian speaker does not mean being Russian or less Ukrainian. Although now, as a reaction to the invasion, some people have chosen to speak only Ukrainian. They want us to know that the men fleeing war are not Putin supporters. They are just men afraid of war and death, and that is the most human thing there is. They want us to know that even in the midst of war, we cannot erase the grey areas or give up thinking about the difficulties. And they want homes. This is what we will hear most often: we need houses. People fleeing the front have nowhere to live. There will be no conversation without talking about the difficulty of finding houses. The privatisation of all Ukrainian public housing in the 1990s turned into a nightmare.

From humanitarian personnel to the Ukrainian Social Movement

We walk from the restaurant to the offices of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. The city is beautiful, everything is calm. The building that welcomes us is cozy and we settle into a large room with large windows. No one thinks about the risk of air raids.

We met with the largest non-governmental organisation on the front. They are responsible for evacuating the population. They work with UN funding and in collaboration with the Ukrainian government and armed forces. Evacuations are carried out exclusively by NGOs. They say there is a lot of resistance, especially from older people. They refuse to leave their homes as long as there is no fighting outside. They only agree to be evacuated when things get tough. Russian drones do not spare humanitarian personnel. As explained to us by the head of the UN mission, whom we will meet the following day, Russia has informed us that it does not recognise notifications concerning the movement of humanitarian personnel.

With more than 5 million internally displaced people, this has become one of the biggest challenges facing Ukrainian society. We met the lawyers of another large NGO, which is dedicated to trying to find homes (the most difficult), work and health care for those who have fled the front. They have many years of experience in the field. They used to support refugees from all over the world, and now they support internal refugees. There are more and more of them, and Russia is advancing on the front.

We leave late at night and walk to the restaurant. We have to have dinner and get back to the hotel before curfew. When we arrive, they show us where the bomb shelter is. That's where we'll end up meeting just before 4am. Air raid warnings come through loudspeakers in the hotel corridors and via mobile phone apps. In the underground car park, which has been converted into a dormitory, we can go back to sleep. Back to our rooms, only to pick up our bags and leave.

The second morning in Kyiv will again be accompanied by air raid sirens. Again and again, until early evening. But the city continues to function. In addition to the app, everyone is following Telegram channels to find out more precisely what is happening. As one mother explained to me the night before, even at night they only go to the shelter if they hear drones nearby. She knows the risk, but fatigue is more important.

The Portuguese ambassador in Kyiv arrives early at the hotel for a coffee and an exchange of ideas. It is not usual for elected representatives to travel on unofficial missions, but Portuguese diplomacy is at their disposal and the air warnings do not change what has been agreed. We will hear some explosions throughout the day, but we will stick to the order of the day. We will do as the people who live there do.

The headquarters of the Ukrainian Social Movement is full. Members have come from all over Ukraine, even from the frontline regions. We listen to trade unionists, students, student movements, LGBTQI+, feminists. They explain to us their two goals: to fight against Putin and against neoliberalism and the corrupt oligarchy in Ukraine. There is no contradiction here. A Russian occupation is power for fascists and oligarchs.

The new leader of the Ukrainian Social Movement introduces herself as a trade unionist and mother. Her son is fighting at the front. Her husband, a miner, died in a work accident. She points the finger at a regime that sends its workers to war but gives them no say in the running of the country. She talks about the labour and trade union rights suspended by martial law and denounces that the war has a wide backstory; attacking the rights of those who work is the political project of the regime and it is long before the war. She calls for more military support for Ukraine, the cancellation of the country's public debt and more political support for the Ukrainian left and free trade unionism.

Difficult debates and the intersection of struggles

The debate on support for Ukraine is not easy for this delegation. We agree on the importance of diplomatic avenues towards peace, of effective sanctions against the Russian regime and we choose, at each meeting, to speak openly about the different positions on military support of the parties we represent. The Nordic countries even support the use of long-range weapons on Russian territory; I explain that the bloc supports the defence of Ukraine but is against attacks on Russian territory because of the risks of nuclear escalation and because it rejects war by proxy; the new leadership of Die Linke speaks of its principled anti-militarist position. Our interlocutors almost invariably feel comforted by the Nordic position. But they do not in any case reject the debate or attack different positions. The Ukrainian Social Movement, which is now trying to establish itself as a party, declares its willingness to join the new Alliance of the European Left.

We ended up having to leave rather hastily. One of the members of the Movement explains that the airstrikes are getting closer and closer. But before we leave, lots of photos and videos. Some of the leaders will have to stay out; the persecutions - organised and unorganised - are real. As one researcher explained to us over lunch, the extreme right has trained many young people. They have obtained public funding for supposedly educational work in schools and recruited. Today, with their elders at the helm, there are violent attacks perpetrated by kids who are not even old enough to be held criminally responsible.

The far right is organised within the armed forces. Not so much in the famous Azov Battalion, but concentrated in one of the army battalions. Its symbols are popular and confused with symbols of the Ukrainian resistance. And, of course, they have international support. As we have seen in our discussions, even ensuring that soldiers have the right socks or boots requires informal networks of solidarity. Anti-fascist activist networks also gather national and international support for their soldiers on the front. One of the T-shirts they sell reads: "I am slowly stripping you of millennia of patriarchal oppression." Here, the intersection of struggles is a fact.

The air raid warnings have ceased. The city continues to function as usual and we hold a final round of meetings in the office of the Rosa Luxemburg foundation. We met with students fighting to prevent the age of mobilisation from being lowered and to prevent them from being forced to leave university for the war; with the nurses' union that organised an illegal strike and won a pay rise in the middle of the war; with the LGBTQI+ movement that rejects the commercialisation of the Pride march. We listen to the UN official talking about humanitarian aid and the enormous risks of the coming winter. We realise that there is no data on what is happening in the occupied territories.

The return

The trip was organised by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, the German left-wing foundation, which has a branch in Ukraine. The Left Alliance of Finland, the Red and Green Alliance of Denmark, Die Linke of Germany, the Left Bloc of Portugal and the Left Party of Sweden took part. An international delegation with seven languages that, for the most part, we only got to know during the trip. It was on the train back that we identified some common paths for the future.

Ten of us sat in a four-person compartment, with our lunch packs and cans of beer. The differences between us are clear, but also that which unites us. Solidarity with self-determination, commitment to international law, rejection of NATO as a solution. And the enormous desire to support a new left, far removed from nostalgic misunderstandings, capable of mobilising and articulating struggles in the most difficult circumstances. The commitment to support the Ukrainian Social Movement is immediate. This will be followed by joint work in the European Parliament on sanctions against the Russian government and a European conference on peace and reconstruction next spring.

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The trip ended on Sunday, November 3. The following Tuesday, Trump won the US election. Putin stepped up his attacks on essential infrastructure in Ukraine. Joe Biden has decided to authorise Ukraine to use long-range missiles against Russia, something it had always refused to do. Escalation is the only way to de-escalation, they explain to anyone who wants to believe. I remember the words of one of the researchers we met: no one knows when peace will come or what it will be like. Much less if it will last.

December 24, 2024

Originally published in Portuguese at [Esquerda.net](https://www.esquerda.net). Portuguese to Spanish translation by [vientosur](https://vientosur.com) vientosur. Translated from Spanish by David Fagan.

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[1] Wilfred Owen's line that gives its title to the book *Monstrous Anger of the Guns. How the Global Arms Trade is Ruining the World and What We Can Do About It*, published with the support of Jeremy Corbyn's Peace and Justice Project.