



## IV565 - February 2022

# A memorandum on the radical anti-imperialist position regarding the war in Ukraine

28 February 2022, by **Gilbert Achcar**

The fate of Russia's invasion of Ukraine will determine the propensity of all other countries for aggression. If it fails in turn, the effect on all global and regional powers will be one of powerful deterrence. If it succeeds, that is if Russia manages to "pacify" Ukraine under Russian boots, the effect will be a major slide of the global situation toward unrestrained law of the jungle, emboldening US imperialism itself and its allies to resume their own aggressive stances.

For now, the heroic resistance of the Ukrainian people has thrown into disarray the whole spectrum of reactionary admirers of Vladimir Putin, from the global hard right and far right to pseudo-left supporters of Russian imperialism. A victory for Putin in Ukraine would tremendously bolster this range of reactionary politics.

Beyond general condemnation of the Russian invasion, there has also been some confusion in the ranks of the true anti-imperialists about the specific position to take on issues related to the ongoing war. It is important to clarify these issues.

1. It is not enough to call for Russia to stop its attacks and to call for "an

immediate ceasefire and a return to the negotiating table". We did not use such UN-like language when the United States invaded Iraq but demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the aggressors, as we have done in every instance of invasion of one country by another. Likewise, we should demand not only the cessation of the aggression but also the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine.

2. The demand of Russian withdrawal applies to every inch of Ukraine's territory - including the territory invaded by Russia in 2014. When there is a dispute on the belonging of any territory anywhere in the world - such as Crimea or provinces in Eastern Ukraine, in this instance - we never accept that it be solved by naked force and the law of might, but always only through the free exercise by the people concerned of their right to democratic self-determination.

3. We are against calls for direct military intervention of one imperial force against another, be it with boots on the ground or the imposition of a No-Fly Zone from a distance. As a matter of general principle, we are against direct military intervention by

any imperialist force anywhere. Asking for one of them to clash with another is tantamount to wishing a world war between nuclear powers. Moreover, there is no way that such an intervention could be effectuated within the boundaries of international law since most major imperialist powers have a veto right at the UN Security Council. Even if one can easily understand that Ukrainian victims of the aggression may make such calls out of despair, they are nevertheless irresponsible demands.

4. We are in favour of the delivery of defensive weapons to the victims of aggression with no strings attached - in this case to the Ukrainian state fighting the Russian invasion of its territory. No responsible anti-imperialist did call for the USSR or China to enter the war in Vietnam against the US invasion, but all radical anti-imperialists were in favour of increased arms deliveries by Moscow and Beijing to the Vietnamese resistance. To give those who are fighting a just war the means to fight against a much more powerful aggressor is an elementary internationalist duty. Blank opposition to such deliveries is contradictory with basic solidarity with the victims.

5. We have no general attitude on sanctions in principle. We were in favour of sanctions targeting the South-African Apartheid state and we are in favour of sanctions targeting the Israeli settler-colonial occupation. We were against the sanctions imposed on the Iraqi state after it had been destroyed by war in 1991, for they were murderous sanctions serving no just cause but only the subjugation of a state to US imperialism at a quasi-genocidal cost for its population. Western powers have decided a whole set of new sanctions against the Russian state for

its invasion of Ukraine. Some of these may indeed curtail the ability of Putin's autocratic regime to fund its war machine, others may be harmful to the Russian population without much affecting the regime or its oligarchic cronies. Our opposition to the Russian aggression combined with our mistrust of Western imperialist governments means that we should neither support the latter's sanctions, nor demand that they be lifted.

6. Finally, the most obvious and straightforward issue of all from a

progressive perspective is the demand that all borders be opened to the Ukrainian refugees, as they should be for all refugees fleeing war and persecution from whichever part of the world they come. The duty of welcoming and accommodating refugees and the cost of this must be equitably shared by all rich countries. Urgent humanitarian aid should also be provided to the internally displaced persons within Ukraine's borders.

Solidarity with the Ukrainian people!

27 February 2022

## Putin's war in Ukraine: In Saddam Hussein's footsteps

27 February 2022, by **Gilbert Achcar**

Saddam Hussein invaded Iran's territory in the autumn of 1980, claiming he was seeking to rescue the Arabic-speaking residents of the province of Khuzestan after he had encouraged them to rebel against Tehran's rule and declare an independent republic of "Arabistan". That invasion was the beginning of an eight-year war, the first effect of which was to allow the new Iranian regime to end the chaos that followed the revolution against the Shah's rule and consolidate its ranks.

With casualties on both sides estimated at one million, as well as widespread devastation and destruction, the two countries were back at square one at the end of the war.

Ten years later, Saddam Hussein repeated his reckless behaviour, invading Kuwait while arguing that it was an Iraqi province carved out by the British, thus renewing an old claim that had led to military tension between the government of Abd al-Karim Qasim and British Protectorate authorities in Kuwait when they decided to grant the latter "independence" in 1961.

Saddam's second invasion gave an opportunity to the United States to deploy its forces in the Gulf region on an unprecedented scale. The United States also bombed Iraq "back into the stone age" - as then-Secretary of State James Baker III is reported to have threatened then-Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz of doing shortly before the war; and most importantly, it spectacularly asserted its supremacy as the only remaining superpower in a world that had entered a unipolar moment after decades of bipolarity.

Whether Khuzestan's Arabs have a right to self-determination and independence or not, and whether Iraq's claims on Kuwait are legitimate or not, is not the question here. Saddam Hussein's reckless adventurism manifested itself in his miscalculation of the balance of power in both cases.

Iraq thus emerged from the two wars devastated and extremely weakened, while Iraq's dictator only succeeded in strengthening his Iranian and US opponents. He had believed that the chaos that prevailed in Iran in 1980 would just worsen because of the Iraqi invasion, just as he thought in 1990

that the United States, which had been militarily paralysed since its exit from

The master of the Kremlin does not hide his nostalgia for the empire of the Russian tsars, repeatedly blaming the Bolsheviks for having applied the principle of self-determination in drawing the map of the Soviet Republics.

He is particularly and, from a Russian perspective, [understandably keen](#) on stopping NATO's further enlargement to republics that thirty years ago were part of the USSR and hence subject to Russian tutelage. In 2008, to prevent Georgia from joining NATO, Putin (then running the show from the prime minister's desk behind Dmitry Medvedev) justified the invasion of its territory citing his support for the secession of the provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which he encouraged to claim independence, as Saddam Hussein had done with "Arabistan".

In 2014, to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO, Putin invoked his desire to repair what he regarded as a mistake made by the rulers of the

Soviet Union when he invaded Crimea and formally annexed it to Russia - as Saddam Hussein had dreamt of doing with Kuwait.

Putin also intervened militarily in that same year in the provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine after again encouraging local separatists to declare independence. In the Georgian and Ukrainian cases, Putin estimated that the United States was too weak to confront him: in 2008 it was increasingly mired in the Iraqi quagmire, and in 2014, having withdrawn from Iraq after abysmal failure, it was experiencing a partial renewal of the military paralysis that afflicted it following the Vietnam war.

The circumstances in 2008 and 2014 and thereafter seemed to validate Putin's judgement. Relations within NATO hit rock bottom when Donald Trump won the US presidency in 2016, making Washington's traditional allies lose faith in the reliability of the US security umbrella. And those who wished that Joe Biden would erase Trump's legacy were quickly disappointed.

Indeed, after its [disgraceful retreat from Afghanistan](#) as the Taliban

advanced, US credibility reached its lowest point since its defeat in Vietnam. Putin must have considered that the situation has therefore become favourable for a further step.

Putin escalated his pressure on Ukraine, against the backdrop of renewed clashes between the separatists and Ukrainian government forces, and the involvement of NATO member Turkey in delivering drones to Kyiv. If we add to this the global supply chain crisis that has led to a steep rise in oil and gas prices, the Russian state's main sources of revenue, the picture of appropriate opportunity is complete.

Does this mean that Vladimir Putin's calculations are more rational than Saddam Hussein's, regardless of the similarities between their military adventures? Or is he giving Russia's adversaries exactly what they want?

To be sure, Joe Biden will welcome the opportunity to repair his image, and so will Boris Johnson: after their [self-fulfilling prophecies](#), both men must be happy that Putin is helping them distract attention away from their failures.

The transatlantic alliance is also now revitalized (remember Emmanuel Macron's [comment on "brain-dead" NATO](#) some two and half years ago?). Putin's behaviour may have even motivated Russia's neighbours, Finland and Sweden, to join NATO, after more than seventy years of neutrality.

What is even more dangerous for Russia, however, is that it will face considerably increased Western economic pressure, which will certainly weaken it much more than Putin and his entourage seem to believe. In fact, Russia is engaging in a typical instance of ["imperial overstretch"](#) to recall Paul Kennedy's phrase. It is acting militarily far beyond its economic capacity, with a GDP that is less than that of Canada, and even less than that of South Korea, equal to little more than seven per cent of the US's GDP.

Putin's calculations have proven to be correct, but only so far: For he has now taken with his recent actions a more adventurous risk than ever before.

Source [The New Arab](#).

# How do Russians interpret the invasion of Ukraine?

26 February 2022, by [Ilya Budraitskis](#)

**What is the situation at this point? How extensive is the damage?**

It is very difficult to judge, as reports from both sides are highly contradictory. But we can already say for sure that we are talking about dozens of dead Ukrainian citizens, as well as Ukrainian and Russian military personnel. Russian troops are advancing in several directions (including from the territory of Belarus), and their aim is to capture the largest cities in the country, Kiev and Kharkiv. There are also reports of

explosions in the Russian border town of Belgorod. The coming days will be decisive, as Russia obviously expects to achieve its military objectives quickly and force the Ukrainian leadership to capitulate completely. At the same time, despite the West's refusal to support Ukraine militarily, its army is showing combat effectiveness and the "special operation" announced by Putin may well escalate into a full-fledged, long-term war. There is already news of Russian army conscripts - i.e. soldiers aged 18-20 - taking part in the war.

Although so far the military leadership is trying to conceal this (including from the families of these soldiers), if this development continues it will no longer be possible.

**Many Western mainstream media outlets were consistently emphasizing the likelihood of imminent invasion, with many on the Left voicing a much higher degree of scepticism. Were you surprised by the extent of the attack?**

I, like most commentators in Russia, did not believe until the last moment that a full-scale attack on Ukraine was possible. Nevertheless, the aggressive orientation of Russia's foreign policy, and the Russian army's hybrid involvement in the war in Donbass were obvious to me. However, those Western leftists, who up to the last minute made Russia look like a victim and endlessly called the Ukrainian regime "Nazi", now bear their share of responsibility for the war. And if they want to be honest with themselves and their supporters, they should publicly admit their mistake.

**What are Putin's goals, both militarily and politically, in the short and medium term? What are Putin's intentions in Ukraine, and what does he hope to achieve with the invasion in terms of domestic policy in Russia?**

Putin's aims were made clear in yesterday's address to the nation: destroying Ukraine's military infrastructure, forcing Ukraine to surrender and replacing its leadership with a regime loyal to Russia. He also explained that this "special operation" is a coercive one (i.e. Russia is only defending itself with an attack) and is aimed at ending "genocide" in Donbass. Ukraine itself, according to his view, is an artificial state formation and actually represents historical Russian lands. This interpretation clearly goes against previous official propaganda, which ridiculed the very possibility of an invasion.

**In terms of the historical context in the run up to the invasion, how significant was Putin's strategy since early 2021 to further consolidate power and crush organized opposition?**

Certainly, the political repressions of the past year have allowed the elimination of the organized opposition within the country, which could have been the centre of the anti-war movement. Moreover, the aim of the repression was to create an atmosphere of fear in society and to suppress interest in politics. Nevertheless, even now we can see that society is highly divided in its attitude to the war that has started

and there has been no "rally around the flag".

**What is the significance of the two break-away "republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk in the broader conflict?**

The recognition of the independence of the "republics" in Donetsk and Luhansk was the key pretext for launching a military operation. For this purpose, an atmosphere of panic was artificially created among the local population (including through announced evacuations). An important point was that the borders of the territories where this recognition took place were not clearly marked and opened up a direct route to advance deep into Ukraine.

**How will the conflict affect the political economy of the region and beyond? What might be the results of an extended conflict?**

The logic of the Russian leadership in justifying the war with Ukraine easily opens up the possibility of further revising all post-Soviet borders (for they too, according to Putin, were created artificially). This is well understood by the leaders of all the post-Soviet republics, none of which have expressed support for Russia. Even Lukashenko, who provided the territory of Belarus for Russian troops, has publicly dissociated himself from the war and tried to present himself as a neutral party to the conflict. Putin's calculation is that possession of nuclear weapons gives him a guarantee against military intervention by the West on what he considers to be "historically" Russian territories. So it is very difficult to say at what point he will be satisfied. If his plan to establish political and military control over Ukraine is realized, it could well open the way for Russia to move further into the post-Soviet space.

**We are now seeing major protests in Russia, with many being arrested. What is your sense of the sentiment of the Russian people to the invasion?**

Unlike in 2014, there is no patriotic enthusiasm in Russia today. Part of

society is obviously outright opposed to the war with Ukraine, while the majority simply believes that it will soon be over and Russia will restore peace. There are very few actual revanchists who welcome the war and are prepared to make any sacrifice for the sake of Russia's geopolitical triumph. On the other hand, during the long years of Putin's rule, the vast majority of Russians have adopted the attitude that they have no ability to influence anything, and that everything will be decided without their participation anyway. This background of depoliticization and demoralization may provide passive support for the war for some period of time. However, if the war drags on and its economic and social consequences are felt by the majority of Russians, their mood may change dramatically. It should also be remembered that for Russia, the perception of Ukrainians as culturally and historically the closest people is very important. Also many Russians have Ukrainian roots or relatives who live in Ukraine. All this creates extremely shaky ground for continued approval of the war from below.

**What should the Left response outside of Russia amount to? How should we pressure our own governments, and what demands should be made?**

First of all, we need to demand an end to the war in Ukraine, and direct talks between Putin and Zelensky. It is necessary to demand the withdrawal of weapons in the Donbass and UN control. It is necessary to say clearly who started this war and not to look for any excuses for it. All this does not mean supporting the governments in question, still less the NATO bloc. Obviously, Putin has done a lot to provide justification for the existence of NATO and its strengthening in Europe. At the same time, one has to understand that sanctions targeting the entire Russian population, deepening the country's international isolation - not only of the government, but also of Russian society - can have the opposite effect and lead to a strengthening of the regime.

25 February 2022

Source [Verso blogs](#).

# A letter to the Western Left from Kyiv

26 February 2022, by **Taras Bilous**

First of all, I am thankful to those Leftists who are now picketing Russian embassies - even those who took their time to realise Russia was the aggressor in this conflict.

I am thankful to politicians who support putting pressure on Russia to stop the invasion and withdraw its troops.

And I am thankful to the [delegation](#) of British and Welsh MPs, unionists, and activists who came to support us and hear us in the days before the Russian invasion.

I am also thankful to the [Ukraine Solidarity Campaign](#) in the UK for its help over many years.

This article is about the other part of the Western Left. Those who imagined 'NATO aggression in Ukraine', and who could not see Russian aggression - like the [New Orleans](#) chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

Or the DSA International Committee, which published a [shameful statement](#) failing to say a single critical word against Russia (I am very thankful to US professor and activist Dan la Botz and the others for their [critique of this statement](#)).

Or those who criticised Ukraine for not implementing the [Minsk Agreements](#) and kept silent about their violations by Russia and the so-called 'People's Republics'.

Or those who exaggerated the influence of the far-Right in Ukraine, but did not notice the far-Right in the 'People's Republics' and avoided criticising Putin's conservative, nationalist and authoritarian policy. Part of the responsibility for what is happening rests with you.

This is part of the wider phenomenon in the Western 'anti-war' movement, usually called '[campism](#)' by critics on

the Left. British-Syrian author and activist Leila Al-Shami gave it a stronger name: the "[anti-imperialism of idiots](#)". Read her wonderful 2018 essay if you haven't done so yet. I will repeat only the main thesis here: the activity of a large part of the Western 'anti-war' Left over the war in Syria had nothing to do with stopping the war. It only opposed Western interference, while ignoring, or even supporting, the engagement of Russia and Iran, to say nothing of their attitude to the 'legitimately elected' Assad regime in Syria.

"A number of anti-war organisations have justified their silence on Russian and Iranian interventions by arguing that 'the main enemy is at home,'" Al-Shami wrote. "This excuses them from undertaking any serious power analysis to determine who the main actors driving the war actually are."

Unfortunately, we have seen the same ideological cliché repeated over Ukraine. Even after Russia recognised the independence of the 'People's Republics' earlier this week, Branko Marcetic, a writer for American Left magazine Jacobin, penned an [article](#) almost fully devoted to criticising the US. When it came to Putin's actions, he went only as far as remarking that the Russian leader had "signal[led] less-than-benign ambitions". Seriously?

I am not a fan of NATO. I know that after the end of the Cold War, the bloc lost its defensive function and led aggressive policies. I know that NATO's eastward expansion undermined efforts directed at nuclear disarmament and forming a system of joint security. NATO tried to marginalise the role of the UN and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and to discredit them as 'inefficient organisations'. But we cannot bring back the past, and we have to orient ourselves on the current circumstances when seeking a

way out of this situation.

How many times did the Western Left bring up the US's informal promises to the former Russian president, Mikhail Gorbachev, about NATO ("[not one inch eastward](#)"), and how many times did it mention the 1994 Budapest Memorandum that guarantees Ukraine's sovereignty? How often did the Western Left support the "legitimate security concerns" of Russia, a state that owns the world's second-largest nuclear arsenal? And how often did it recall the security concerns of Ukraine, a state that had to trade its nuclear weapons, under the pressure of the US and Russia, for a piece of paper (the Budapest Memorandum) that Putin trampled conclusively in 2014? Did it ever occur to Leftist critics of NATO that Ukraine is the main victim of the changes brought about by the NATO expansion?

Time and again, the Western Left responded to the critique of Russia by mentioning US aggression against Afghanistan, Iraq and other states. Of course, these states need to be brought into the discussion - but how, exactly?

The argument of the Left should be, that in 2003, other governments did not put enough pressure on the United States over Iraq. Not that it is necessary to exert less pressure on Russia over Ukraine now.

## An obvious mistake

Imagine for a moment that, in 2003, when the US was preparing for the invasion of Iraq, Russia had behaved like the US has in recent weeks: with threats of escalation.

Now imagine what the Russian Left might have done in that situation,

according to the dogma of 'our main enemy is at home'. Would it have criticised the Russian government for this 'escalation', saying that it 'should not jeopardise inter-imperialist contradictions'? It is obvious to everyone that such behaviour would have been a mistake in that case. Why was this not obvious in the case of the aggression against Ukraine?

In another Jacobin article from earlier this month, Marcetic went as far as [saying](#) that Fox News's Tucker Carlson was "completely right" about the "Ukrainian crisis". What Carlson had done was [question](#) "Ukraine's strategic value to the United States". Even Tariq Ali in the *New Left Review* approvingly quoted the calculation of German admiral Kay-Achim Schönbach, who said that giving Putin "respect" over Ukraine was "[low cost, even no cost](#)" given that Russia could be a useful ally against China. Are you serious? If the US and Russia could reach an agreement and start a new Cold War against China as allies, would that really be what we wanted?

## Reforming the UN

I am not a fan of liberal internationalism. Socialists should criticise it. But this does not mean that we have to support the division of 'spheres of interest' between imperialist states. Instead of looking for a new balance between the two imperialisms, the Left has to struggle for a democratisation of the international security order. We need a global policy and a global system of international security. We have the latter: it is the UN. Yes, it has plenty of flaws, and it is often the object of fair criticisms. But one can criticise either to refute something or to improve it. In the case of the UN, we need the latter. We need a Leftist vision of reform and democratisation of the UN.

Of course, this does not mean that the Left should support all of the UN's decisions. But an overall reinforcement of the UN's role in the resolution of armed conflicts would allow the Left to minimise the importance of military-political alliances and reduce the number of victims. (In a [previous article](#), I wrote

how UN peacekeepers could have helped to resolve the Donbas conflict. Unfortunately, this has now lost its relevance.) After all, we also need the UN to solve the climate crisis and other global problems. The reluctance of many international Leftists to appeal to it is a terrible mistake.

After Russian troops invaded Ukraine, Jacobin's Europe editor David Broder [wrote](#) that the Left "should make no apologies for opposing a US military response". This was not Biden's intention anyway, as he said multiple times. But a large part of the Western Left should honestly admit that it completely fucked up in formulating its response to the "Ukrainian crisis".

## My perspective

I will finish by briefly writing about myself and my perspective.

Over the past eight years, the Donbas war has been the main issue that has divided the Ukrainian Left. Each of us formed our position under the influence of personal experience and other factors. Thus, another Ukrainian Leftist would have written this article differently.

I was born in the Donbas, but in a Ukrainian-speaking and nationalist family. My father became involved in the far-Right in the 1990s, observing Ukraine's economic decay and the enrichment of the former Communist Party leadership, which he had been fighting since the mid-1980s. Of course, he has very anti-Russian, but also anti-American views. I still remember his words on 11 September 2001. As he watched the Twin Towers falling on TV, he said that those responsible were 'heroes' (he does not think so anymore - now he believes that the Americans blew them up on purpose).

When the war began in Donbas in 2014, my father joined the far-Right Aidar battalion as a volunteer, my mother fled Luhansk, and my grandfather and grandmother stayed in their village which fell under the control of the 'Luhansk People's Republic'. My grandfather condemned Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution. He supports Putin, who, he says, has

"restored order in Russia". Nevertheless, we all try to keep talking to each other (though not about politics) and to help each other. I try to be sympathetic towards them. After all, my grandfather and grandmother spent their whole life working on a collective farm. My father was a construction worker. Life has not been kind to them.

The events of 2014 - revolution followed by war - pushed me in the opposite direction of most people in Ukraine. The war killed nationalism in me and pushed me to the Left. I want to fight for a better future for humanity, and not for the nation. My parents, with their post-Soviet trauma, do not understand my socialist views. My father is condescending about my 'pacifism', and we had a nasty conversation after I showed up at an anti-fascist protest with a picket sign calling for the disbanding of the far-Right Azov regiment.

When Volodymyr Zelenskyi became president of Ukraine in the spring of 2019, I hoped this could prevent the catastrophe that is unfolding now. After all, it is difficult to demonise a Russian-speaking president who won with a programme of peace for Donbas and whose jokes were popular among Ukrainians as well as Russians. Unfortunately, I was mistaken. While Zelenskyi's victory changed the attitude of many Russians towards Ukraine, this did not prevent the war.

In recent years, I have written about the peace process and about civilian victims on both sides of the Donbas war. I tried to promote dialogue. But this has all gone up in smoke now. There will be no compromise. Putin can plan whatever he wants, but even if Russia seizes Kyiv and installs its occupational government, we will resist it. The struggle will last until Russia gets out of Ukraine and pays for all the victims and all the destruction.

Hence, my last words are addressed to the Russian people: hurry up and overthrow the Putin regime. It is in your interests as well as ours.

25 February 2022

Source: [Open Democracy](#).

# Ordinary Russians Don't Want This War

25 February 2022, by **Ilya Budraitskis, Ilya Matveev**

Vladimir Putin has made clear the military objective of the operation: the complete surrender of the Ukrainian army. The political plan remains unclear — but perhaps most likely means the establishment of a pro-Russian government in Kiev. The Russian leadership assumes that resistance will quickly be broken and that most ordinary Ukrainians will dutifully accept the new regime. The social consequences for Russia itself will obviously be severe — already in the morning, even before Western sanctions were announced, Russian stock exchanges collapsed and the fall in the ruble broke all records.

Putin's speech last night, in which he announced the outbreak of war, represented the unconcealed language of imperialism and colonialism. In this sense, his is the only government that so openly speaks like an imperialist power from the early twentieth century. The Kremlin is no longer able to hide behind other grievances — including even NATO enlargement — its hatred of Ukraine and desire to teach it a punitive "lesson." These actions are beyond rationally understood "interests" and lie somewhere in the realm of "historical mission," as Putin understands it.

Since Alexei Navalny's arrest in January 2021, police and the security services have essentially crushed the organized opposition in Russia. Navalny's organization was deemed "extremist" and dismantled, demonstrations in his defense resulted in some fifteen thousand arrests, and almost all independent media were either closed down or branded "foreign agents," severely limiting their operation. Mass demonstrations against the war are unlikely — there is no political force capable of coordinating them and participation in any street protest, including even a single-person picket, is swiftly and severely punished. Activist and intellectual milieus in Russia are shocked and demoralized by the events.

One reassuring sign is that no clear support for war is discernible in Russian society. According to the Levada Center, the last independent polling agency (itself branded a "foreign agent" by the Russian government), 40 percent of Russians do not support the official recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" by the Russian authorities, while 45 percent of Russians do. While

some signs of "rallying around the flag" are inevitable, it is remarkable that despite complete control over major media sources and a dramatic outpouring of propagandistic demagoguery on TV, the Kremlin is unable to foment enthusiasm for war.

Nothing like the patriotic mobilization that followed the annexation of Crimea in 2014 is happening today. In that sense, the invasion of Ukraine disproves the popular theory that the Kremlin's outward aggression is always aimed at propping up domestic legitimacy. On the contrary, if anything, this war will destabilize the regime and even threaten its survival to some extent, as the "2024 problem" — the need to put up a convincing show of Putin's reelection, when Russians next vote for president — is still on the table.

The Left around the world needs to unite around a simple message: no to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There is no justification for Russia's actions; they will result in suffering and death. In these days of tragedy, we call for international solidarity with Ukraine.

24 February 2022

Source [Jacobin](#).

# No return to 'normal' LGBT politics!

24 February 2022, by **Gary Kinsman**

We are hearing about the need to return to so-called 'normal' politics after the pandemic is over (if it ever ends). And now major governments and official agencies are declaring that COVID will become endemic and that we have to learn to live with it. They are calling for a return to normal

long before the crisis ends. This is because capitalists need to continue to make profit and exploit people's labour in spite of the continuing ravages of the pandemic.

There is increasing evidence that aside from the 5,833,777 global death

toll to date (35,474 in Canada), tens of millions are being left disabled with long COVID. During this crisis many of us have been deemed expendable (this also happened early in the AIDS crisis): those in the Global South, the elderly and disabled, the unhoused, and Black, Indigenous and racialized

people, among others.

In the arena of LGBT+ organizing there is also advocacy for a return to 'normal' politics. This is the case with mainstream largely white LGBT groups such as Egale, a major 2SLGBTQI (Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Intersexed) rights organization, and the LGBT Purge Fund (that came out of the class action settlement for the purge campaigns in the public service and military), which have both received major federal funding. It is also true of various large-city Pride committees (which also receive funding from Canadian Heritage and Public Safety). These mainstream LGBT groups are longing for a return to the kind of LGBT+ rights agenda they promoted prior to the pandemic, without the complications of the anti-racism and anti-colonialism that have come to the fore in the last few years. This agenda includes many worthy objectives including:

- Ending conversion therapy aimed at changing the sexual orientation and/or gender identity of LGBT people (it took the federal government years to come through with a ban since it was never a high priority);
- Ending the blood ban, which mainstream groups have prematurely declared victory on and thanked the federal government and Canadian Blood Services despite anti-Black racism and a planned focus on anal intercourse that remains discriminatory;
- Getting institutions to fly Pride (rainbow) flags;
- Demanding regularized state funding for largely service-oriented LGBT groups;
- Continuing with

memorialization and other projects financed through funding for the 2017 apology for the purge campaign (this is organized through the LGBT Purge Fund and Egale);

- Calling for the Canadian state to intervene in other countries, especially in the Global South and Eastern Europe, to advocate for formal LGBT rights (which can cause major problems given Canadian homonationalism, which views Canada and the countries of the Global North as more enlightened with respect to LGBT rights).

These are objectives that warrant support, but what is absent from the agenda are efforts to address racism, white supremacy and colonialism. It largely echoes the white oriented approach to LGBT+ rights taken by these groups prior to the pandemic, which focuses on formal human rights that can be won using the Charter. By abstracting queer and trans experiences from relations of class, race and colonialism it constructs queer and trans issues as white and middle class in character. They view the pandemic as some sort of natural disaster that can be quickly forgotten about rather than a condensation of numerous social relations as in the AIDS crisis. But this also means returning to a point prior to the mass struggles that were waged during the pandemic, including the global uprising against anti-Black racism and police violence in 2020 and the 2021 No Pride in Genocide protests against Canada's genocidal practices at residential schools that were associated with a number of Indigenous landback struggles and support for the Wet'suwet'en against Coastal Gaslink and the RCMP.

It is as if queer and trans politics are to learn nothing from our profound

experiences during the pandemic, or from the global uprising, or from "No Pride in Genocide" organizing. These experiences are to be quickly forgotten—as part of a broader social organization of forgetting of our histories of resistance in these neoliberal and homonationalist times—so that 'we' can return to a largely white, middle class, neoliberal agenda of integrating a layer of queers (and, to a lesser extent, trans people) into social 'normality.' This can be summarized as a neoliberal queer perspective, one which regards integration into racial capitalist social and state relations as the only road to progress on LGBT+ issues. This not only obscures the everyday violence of racial capitalist patriarchal relations prior to the pandemic but also all those who were excluded on the grounds of race and class from the very rights revolution to which these groups want us to return.

This ignores what we have learned from surviving the pandemic about the need to end vaccine apartheid and transfer resources to people in the Global South, about the power of the pharmaceutical corporations, and the relegating of so many of us into expendable groups. This has also meant a refusal to learn from AIDS activism when addressing this pandemic since it raises too many radical (getting to the root of the problem) questions about the importance of health-care for all and about public health (which public and whose health is being protected?), about why and how people are designated as expendable, and about the power and profits of pharmaceutical companies, and about the need for direct action organizing. In the context of the pandemic, we should be recasting the AIDS activist slogan *Silence=Death!* as *Capitalism=Death!*.

Mainstream LGBT+ groups wish not only to have us forget all this but also to ignore the impact of the global uprising on queer and trans organizing that led many queer and trans activists to focus more on anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism and to call for the defunding and abolition of the police as an institution. This perspective already resonated in the queer and trans community but grew



stronger among Black, Indigenous and racialized activists and increasingly gained traction among some white activists. Even Pride Toronto in 2021 called for a 50 percent reduction in the Toronto Police budget, despite reverting back to plans for assisting in police training and working with the police on “harm reduction” shortly thereafter.

This anti-racist focus led some white middle class leaders to feel like they were being eclipsed. The roots of this attitude lay in a view of Black Lives Matter and other Black liberation activists as somehow being outside ‘our’ movement, which was coded as white. The departure from the ‘normal’ white middle class agenda and the centering by some activists of Black, Indigenous and racialized queer and trans people, along with broader commitments to challenge racism and colonialism, made them feel displaced. Now they want to return to centre stage. Organizing around the theme No Pride in Genocide also challenged attempts by white dominated mainstream groups like Egale to identify LGBT rights as deriving solely from the Charter and the Canadian state and to use Two-Spirit people as a cultural minority (or early forerunner of white LGBT people) which can somehow be separated from the history and current genocidal practices of the Canadian state and settler colonialism.

One material basis for this return to the politics as usual is state funding and how this ties organizations like Egale, the LGBT Purge Fund, and larger Pride Committees, to state institutions and shifts the focus of their accountability away from queer

and trans communities. It imposes corporate forms of organizing with executive directors, boards of directors, and a passive membership as well as increasing dependence on corporate funding. These state funding regulations seek to socially re-organize racial class relations within our communities to favour police participation. They celebrate the myth that the 1969 criminal code reform decriminalized homosexuality; and more generally they come to support homonationalism and neoliberalism. This regulatory process gives these groups far more financial power than more community-based groups. This is also part of how the long struggle for an apology from below for the purge campaign was transformed into an apology from above as new institutional sites for the hegemony of the neoliberal queer were established through legal and funding agreements. This funding, and the organizational infrastructures it creates, represents an accommodation with neoliberalism of major sections of our communities. The other side of this coin is the further marginalization of Black, Indigenous and racialized people, sex workers, the poor, and the unhoused, as well as the rejection of more radical approaches.

Learning from the pandemic, the global uprising, and “No Pride in Genocide”

However, many of us learned a great deal from the pandemic and the mobilizations of 2020 and 2021 about how we need to centre the experiences and needs of Black, Indigenous and racialized queer and trans people in our organizing. It follows that addressing racism and supporting demands to defund/abolish the police become central to queer

and trans organizing. Many of us took up and began to develop queer and trans liberation abolitionist agendas, which are very different from previous rights-based approaches. We were no longer interested in single issue LGBT organizing, which was always based on separating our struggles from race, colonial, class, and other forms of oppression and exploitation.

We cannot allow these important experiences to be forgotten with a return to ‘normal’ white middle class queer and trans politics which identifies with and seeks acceptance from the Canadian state and views the Charter as the road to rights and freedom. A return to politics as usual means facilitating the ways in which gains in the area of rights benefit some far more than others, expanding the powers of white middle class (mostly cis) men. Consider that Egale partnered with Toronto Police Services and other groups in 2021 to do inclusion training for police forces in Ukraine. This is the very same Toronto Police Services that is barred from participating in the Pride Toronto parade and festival.

A radical re-orientation of queer and trans organizing is in order, one that understands radical queer and trans liberation as part of an overall vision of social and racial justice.

We need to take leadership and direction from Black, Indigenous and racialized queer and trans people and espouse an approach that views different oppressions as interconnected and mediated, placing the needs of those left out of the rights revolution at the centre.

Source: [Canadian Dimension](#)

## A “step backwards” from Putin?

23 February 2022, by **Ilya Budraitskis**

**Did you expect such a speech from Putin?**

The basic logic expressed by Putin in this speech was to effectively deny the very existence of Ukraine on historical

grounds, i.e. to claim that it is an “artificial nation”. Ukraine, in its present form, would be nothing more

than a consequence of Lenin's mistakes. And this constitutes, according to Putin, the basis not only for launching a hypothetical war against the neighbouring country, but even for "annihilating" it as an entity in its own right: precisely because its existence is not justifiable either by current conditions or by historical developments.

Starting from here, in a somewhat strange way, Putin therefore arrived at the recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics, a sign that his speech also had other facets and ambitions. There are indeed rumours that the speech was prepared before yesterday's occasion with the intention of justifying a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, while the conclusion was changed in the run-up to highlight this (evidently more recent) decision to give full recognition to the Donbass republics.

Interestingly, Putin's speech focused almost exclusively on the past, but little or nothing was said about the future, either with respect to the independent republics or what the Russian population should expect. So we have to ask ourselves what this recognition actually means. I think it is a move on Putin's part to further certify and safeguard a situation that is already in place. On the other hand, in Donetsk and Luhansk there are institutions that are *de facto* independent of Kiev, there are Russian troops on the territory and the Minsk agreements have never been put into practice. So the Russian president recognizes this state of affairs.

### **What could change?**

From the point of view of those who live in the territories of the independent republics - who find themselves caught between the fires of both sides and without the implementation of the Minsk agreements - this recognition could represent something positive. However, the situation of non-recognition that has continued so far is certainly something negative from their point of view: I believe that most of the people are hoping to finally be integrated into a state form, be it Ukraine or Russia. It is no coincidence that many of the inhabitants of the

Donbass have moved to one side or the other. I think that what is at stake for them is not independence, but the possibility of becoming full citizens of an existing state: we are not dealing with a particular minority, but with a group of people with a mixed identity.

And on the other hand, in the last eight years the idea of an independent republic has lost considerable popularity and legitimacy: the leaders of the pro-independence movements have disappeared from the scene (some killed, others removed from their positions and forced to leave the republics); from many of the comments that the inhabitants of Donetsk and Luhansk have posted on the Internet during the recent escalation it is clear that they do not trust the authorities there.

Obviously, Putin's recognition means the final conclusion of the Minsk agreements, the end of the idea that there was an internal conflict in Ukraine and that an agreement could be reached between the government in Kiev and the self-proclaimed authorities in Donbass. So the central question concerns the form that relations between these territories and Ukraine will take. From Kiev's point of view, Russia's recognition of the independence of the Donbass (the formal recognition, I insist, of what has been a fact for years) could paradoxically represent something useful. In fact, Kiev is not willing to fully reintegrate Donetsk and Luhansk because this is a region that now lacks infrastructure and whose population is clearly not "friendly". Moreover, Ukraine's position has always been that it does not want to deal with the authorities of the independent republics, since they have always denied the "civil war" nature of those events, interpreting it as a clash between their country and Russia.

### **What then comes to Putin's mind?**

I think that from the Russian president's point of view yesterday's decision represented a sort of "step backwards". If we recall the demands made on NATO last December, Putin's underlying desire was to be an equal partner with the United States on global security issues. Now, however, the dynamics are recomposing

themselves within a local dimension, which is that of the Donbass. Some say that this is even a "shift of focus" agreed, or at least discussed, in advance with Macron and Scholz (with whom Putin had conversations the day before yesterday). For the Russian president, this may be a very advantageous way out of the crisis: he can present his people with a de-escalation of the conflict, but it is also a kind of victory, a territorial conquest of the country.

### **What are the reactions in Russia?**

I think Putin is convinced that a large part of the Russian population genuinely cares about the "imperial" fate of their country and therefore wants a more powerful position on the international scene. However, I believe there is a discrepancy. According to the polls, it seems clear that the attention of most people in Russia today is directed towards domestic rather than global issues: the economic crisis, inflation (much exacerbated, it should not be forgotten, by the escalation of recent times)... And above all, the polls show that about 60% of people are afraid of war.

So I think that with the decision to recognize the independence of the Donbass republics, Putin can present his citizens with some sort of victory, or evidence that we are defending the Russian populations across the border, and at the same time show how the risks of a heated conflict are being reduced. However, while there is a consensus on the feeling of fear, there is a great deal of disagreement on the interpretations of the nature of this war: some think it is a NATO attack, others a personal initiative by Putin, etc.

### **In his speech, the Russian president basically accused the Ukrainian elites of being puppets in the hands of others...**

Obviously, this approach by Putin is wrong and totally dangerous in terms of international relations. Given these premises, one can go on and on: following his logic, one can say that the Baltic republics do not exist and that they are only puppets in the hands of NATO, just as Italy itself is

completely in the hands of Atlantic interests, etc. etc. In practice, Putin recognizes the full sovereignty and legitimacy of dialogue only of the United States and would like to negotiate and discuss any issue with them, without recognising as interlocutors those same countries whose future is perhaps being decided (see Ukraine).

His rhetorical strategy seems to be pushing towards a sort of "de-subjectivization" and delegitimization of the East European national realities. During the meeting of the Security Council (perhaps the most influential institutional body in Russia) that preceded Putin's address, the head of the National Guard, Zolotov, claimed that Russia's western border is not with Ukraine but directly with the US.

*Added to this was the emphasis on "de-communization"....*

Putin expressed a very clear historical vision of how Russian reality should be conceived according to him: according to this vision, the Russian Empire represented a positive reality, Russia

(including Ukraine) came from there and Lenin made a big mistake because he created the various national republics. He created them because he had some utopian and revolutionary ideas that were completely wrong and still create problems in the present.

But after Lenin there was Stalin who, in this sense, was more effective because he governed the USSR in a more centralized way. What he did not do, however, was to formalize this centralization in the Constitution, on the basis of which the nationalist elites relied to gain independence when the USSR collapsed, with the mere intention of grabbing power.

These are ideas that Putin has been expressing for some years now and, in any case, this negative attitude towards the figure of Lenin is worrying: when he speaks of "real de-communization", the Russian president could also mean that delegitimization of the communist ideology in our country on the horizon.

#### **Is there any dissent from this line?**

In Russia now the possibilities of expressing dissent are very limited.

Demonstrations are basically illegal. There have actually been a few demonstrations against the war in Ukraine, but they have only been a few dozen people in Moscow or St Petersburg. I think the reason for such low participation is not because of a general acceptance of our country's moves in Ukraine or in general, but because most people simply do not have a clear idea of what is happening.

The official media give very confusing interpretations: on the one hand they say that Ukraine is an enemy, on the other hand that Russia is a peaceful nation and therefore does not intend in any way to exacerbate the conflict, but at the same time they say that the independence of the Donbass republics must be guaranteed even at the cost of military intervention, and so on. In short, it is really hard to understand who is attacking whom and for what reasons, and therefore to position oneself politically.

22 February 2022

*Interview by Francisco Brusa for [Press Dinamo](#).*

## **The Truckers Convoy, Observations from a Veteran Socialist**

**22 February 2022, by Ken Hiebert**

There are regional tensions expressed in the so-called 'Truckers movement'. Many people, especially from the Western provinces, view Ottawa (the national capital) with hostility. This hostility seems to include anyone living in Ottawa, among them food bank volunteers and poorly paid fast food workers. And it even extends to inanimate objects in Ottawa such as war memorials. One of the biggest reactions against the convoy followed the disrespect shown by some of their supporters at 'The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier'. This incident must have cost them some support in the

general population. And the anti-social behaviour of the demonstrators provoked hostility from many people in Ottawa who have had to live through it.

### **Those seeking to be leaders of the anti-vax Movement in Canada**

There has been something of a land rush among various far right groups

scrambling to put themselves at the head of this movement. The publication *Druthers* showed up in my small town on the British Columbia West coast. An [early issue](#) of their paper carried an article by Caitlin Johnstone (at p.4), whose name will be known to some readers of *The Left Berlin*. They declared their intention of publishing an issue this month, but their November issue is the last one appearing on their website.

A competing publication *Common Ground*, is based in Vancouver, and has a reputation as a voice for peace

and the environment, mixed in with New Age ideas and advertisements. Their latest issue had the headline 'End the Circus of Coercion'. This is a remarkable statement for a periodical that in 2016 published an article praising the bombing of Aleppo.

Yet another strand in the far right is *The Epoch Times*, a well financed newspaper linked to Falun Gong. They have enough money to hire professional journalists and give themselves a veneer of dispassionate and objective journalism.

## Left Wing responses in Canada on this movement

Left organizations and publications have responded to the convoy. The [first article](#) I saw was by Judy Rebick and Cort Russell. In my opinion Rebick and Russell put too much weight on the stumbles and errors of leading health officials. I suppose that could account for some of the confusion, but I believe there are much deeper reasons for the wave of irrationalism

that has been part of this movement.

John Clarke was a long time leader of the 'Ontario Coalition Against Poverty'. He wrote "[Why Has The Fascist Canadian Truck Convoy Had Such An Easy Ride?](#)" In my view this article is long on denunciation and short on ideas as to what the left and the labour movement should do.

Perhaps the most useful articles I have read were on the website of 'Fightback', a Trotskyist group - that I am not close to ([here](#) and [here](#)). One of the strengths of their approach is that they have a perspective that does not write off all those drawn to this movement.

## What explains this movement?

In the US some people see the Trump phenomenon as being fuelled by fear among some white people over the gains made by blacks and Latin American people. This leads me to ask if there is something similar happening in Canada. Are some people reacting against the growing power of First Nations struggles? If

they are it would be hard to prove it, as even far right organizations are very careful what they say about First Nations people.

One exception to this is *The Epoch Times*, which took a sideways swipe at the First Nations struggle when they reported that the abuses suffered by First Nations children were not sanctioned by Canadian law. The simple answer to that is 'so what?' Are they suggesting the blame lies with First Nations people who failed to assert their legal rights?

A progressive Canadian doctor, Gabor Mate has suggested that some of the fervent attachment to bizarre beliefs we find among anti-vaxxers is fuelled by unresolved trauma. Certainly, I will agree that we cannot win among anti-vaxxers simply by appealing to reason. This does not mean that we must give up or resort to threats of violence.

A mass movement of support for hospital workers and for medical science can influence people by force of numbers. A mass movement does not rely exclusively on media outlets to get its message across, but can reach people in other ways.

Source [The Left Berlin](#).

# Banning Golden Dawn Hasn't Stopped Greece's Slide to the Far Right

21 February 2022, by [George Souvlis](#), [Rosa Vasilaki](#)

Yet there was something puzzling in all this. Key figures from Greece's main parties, including the ruling New Democracy, had for years maintained direct relations with Golden Dawn. Indeed, when the party was at its peak, mainstream media showed a conspicuous tolerance toward its anti-immigrant rhetoric and even violent actions. Yet now the emerging establishment consensus explicitly terms Golden Dawn a Nazi party steeped in criminal practices.

This condemnation has, however, taken a rather particular form, associating the neo-Nazi party with a generic extremism rather than investigating its real roots. The epithet "populist" (standing in place of "far-right") gave life to a popular version of horseshoe theory, attacking also the Left. This meant obfuscating this criminal organization's ideological origins: a litany of aggressive nationalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and antisemitism, typical of the contemporary far right

internationally.

In this sense, the condemnation of Golden Dawn by the political establishment, as well as media and public-opinion approval of the courts' decision to criminalize the party, were not followed by an equally emphatic rejection of its ideas and rhetoric. This is especially a problem given signs that these same ideas are mounting a comeback, including in Greece's institutions — potentially leading to a further radicalization toward the far

right.

## Institutional Heft

We can get a better sense of the mainstreaming of far-right ideology — how it produced a new common sense — by looking at three of Greece's key institutions: the media, the army, and the church.

Our recently published research on the mainstreaming of far-right discourses in Greece has traced the formation of discursive patterns resembling Golden Dawn's own, as developed by key broadcasters and newspapers, army officers, and Orthodox priests, as well the spread of key aspects of such discourses even within feminist and LGBT circles.

Far from a merely exceptional discourse confined to Golden Dawn's own supporters, this ideology has circulated among wider strata of Greek society, all the while being redefined and mediated by the professional and political assumptions of the institutions in question.

"Research found that Greek mainstream media followed representations and rhetorical patterns identical to those employed by far-right media."

These three institutions hold particular significance in Greece. Indeed, the armed forces and the Orthodox Church have been its most politically powerful and ideologically influential institutions ever since the Greek state was established two centuries ago. Both perceive themselves as gatekeepers of a Greek identity, seen as Orthodox in its religion, monocultural, heteronormative, and patriarchal.

Already in this sense, these institutions present direct affinities with the traditionalism endorsed and expressed by the Greek far right. The media has, however, also played a central role in the circulation of far-right ideas, with an ongoing convergence between mainstream and extreme-right outlets in a country that performs poorly in international press freedom rankings.

## Moral Panic

Over the last decade, mainstream media has especially contributed to the normalization of far-right discourse through its own recourse to a moral panic about Greece's future. After the collapse of the main parties during the crisis and Syriza's rise to power, the media landscape converged toward a new consensus, portraying Greece as a nation whose very survival was at stake.

The new media landscape demonstrated an impressive homogeneity in terms of the dangers it portrayed, which boiled down to the usual suspects: invariably the country's immediate neighbors (i.e., Turkey and North Macedonia) and refugees, who were portrayed as undeserving scoundrels and agents of an alleged "Islamicization" of the country.

Greek mainstream media followed representations and rhetorical patterns identical to those employed by far-right media, especially in moments of "crisis" like the Prespa agreement (the deal reached in 2018 between Greece and North Macedonia regarding the latter's name), the height of the refugee crisis in 2015, and the border events in February and March 2020, when Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan declared that he would no longer stop asylum seekers from entering Europe.

Dailies traditionally affiliated with the center right, like I Kathimerini and To Proto Thema, and similarly TV broadcasters, such as ANT1, Star, and ΣΚΑΙ, largely overlapped ideologically with the established far-right media, such as the newspaper Makeleio and the TV broadcasters Kontra Channel and Extra channel, infamous for their alarmist stance, extreme xenophobia, and glorification of far-right practices. Terms like "invasion" (i.e., of migrants, of refugees, of Muslims) or "alarming situation," or the idea of Greece being "under siege," were widely used to describe both the refugee crisis and the border incidents.

In the case of the Alexis Tsipras's government's Prespa agreement on

North Macedonia's name, terms like "traitors," the idea of "selling out the country," and the strong conviction that Greek civilization is de facto superior (especially in comparison to neighbors widely described as "barbaric" or "thieves of our own history") prevailed across the media spectrum. This convergence popularized and normalized those specific representations that originate in the far-right mentality and that gradually prevailed in the public sphere.

## Military Interventions

Even in a country with such a grim record of military intervention in politics throughout the twentieth century, literature on the contemporary far right often overlooks the armed forces. The ban on army officers publicly expressing their political views since the collapse of the junta, in 1974, surely makes it harder to research their understanding of politics and contemporary social changes. Yet there can be no doubt that far-right rhetoric overlaps with key tenets of the Greek nationalist ideology expressed by the army as an institution. On multiple core themes, army officers demonstrate a strong identification with far-right ideology.

Polling among army officers in November and December 2020 indicates their negative view of "others," whether defined in terms of ethnic or national origin, gender or religious identification. The overwhelming majority, at 92.5 percent, believe that neighboring countries (especially Turkey and North Macedonia) are hostile toward Greece, while 72.5 percent believe that Greece was "invaded" when the Turkish government opened the border to migrants at Evros in March 2020; 72.5 percent believe that Greece runs the risk of "cultural alteration"; 90 percent believe that there are too many immigrants, and 87.5 percent that immigration is related to crime; 90 percent want religious education (i.e., indoctrination in Orthodox Christian dogma) to continue in schools; and 52.5 percent

oppose gay marriage, with 87.5 percent opposing child adoption by homosexual couples.

But also notable here is that those polled don't see these views as derived from far-right, exclusionary ideology: tellingly, 65 percent think that Greece is "not a racist country." Rather, they consider the defense of such positions as "a duty to the nation," expressing a "patriotism" that is today underappreciated. In a nutshell, the main point of convergence between the far right and the dominant mentality of the armed forces is an understanding of recent social changes — migration, gender revolution, the transition from national uniformity to multiculturalism, and the appearance of other religions in the public sphere — as a threat to the core of Greek cultural identity.

"A traditionalist view of gender relations, aggressive nationalism, and unapologetic Islamophobia figure strongly in the discourse of the Greek Orthodox Church."

## Far-Right Orthodoxy

The core elements of far-right ideology — pertaining to a traditionalist view of gender relations, aggressive nationalism, and unapologetic Islamophobia — figure strongly in the discourse of the Greek Orthodox Church. Ever since its foundation as an independent church in 1833, it has been and remains an integral part of the state apparatus, highly influential in the legitimation and consolidation of official national ideology. Such relations of interdependence are particularly strong, given that Greece has yet to separate church and state, with the church intervening vocally on a wide range of issues, from foreign relations to immigration and school education.

However, from the 1990s onward, policy geared toward European integration — which also meant the alignment of Greek laws to European requirements — severely challenged the church's ideological hegemony, and a rift emerged between the church and the state. Increasingly

since the 1990s, the church has taken a more conservative and aggressive turn — at least on the level of official discourse, albeit with considerable deviations from this among the lower clergy.

The cultural syncretism unavoidably arising from the globalization of the economy and the influx of migrants in Greece leads a large part of the ecclesiastical body to more conservative political positions, with Islamophobia and a paranoid attitude toward alleged plots of Islamicization of the country being prominent. In this context, it is no coincidence that last year the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Ieronymos stated in an interview that "Islam is not a religion but a political party, it has a clear political intention and [Muslim] believers are people of war." As one of this country's most influential institutions — a crushing 81.4 percent majority of Greeks identify as Orthodox Christian — the church's endorsement of far-right ideology troublingly normalizes these ideas.

## Instrumentalizing Gender

Since the interwar years, far-right gender ideology has mainly centered on the so-called gender complementarity of sexes — the ideology which keeps women "in our place" in well-defined roles, rooted in religious conservatism but also popularized and glorified by fascism and Nazism.

However, the eclectic-to-opportunistic character of these regimes led to contradictory ideologies regarding women's place in society, and Greece's dictatorships were no different. Women also assumed modern responsibilities — through their involvement in the preparation of the imminent war, or in their compulsory participation in fascist mass organizations — thus paving the way for an unintended break with traditional roles. This brought a new political consciousness and, for some, even a certain individual emancipation.

Recent years have seen yet another

turn in this instrumental use of gender, with the convergence between a feminist and LGBT agenda and core themes of the far right. Aimed against immigration and especially Muslims accused of not accepting "our values," this creates a hybrid femonationalism and homonationalism. Since 9/11, the Euro-American political sphere has seen the rise of political figures and formations that seek to appropriate contemporary feminist and queer agendas for their own xenophobic purposes, as in the case of France's Marine Le Pen. Particular in the Greek case is that this co-optation of progressive social causes is not mobilized by the far right — as expressed in Golden Dawn's traditionalist, stereotypical, and sexist imagery of masculine men and feminine women — but by the mainstream right and the governing New Democracy.

Over the past two years, the right-wing government, along with more extremist voices mostly related to the Orthodox Church, have not only called for a return to traditional gender roles but also systematically appropriated identity politics. New Democracy's appointment of an openly gay politician as a deputy culture minister was a first in a country where the Left has yet to address its own patriarchal issues, as was taking a positive stance vis-à-vis the Greek #MeToo movement and rhetorically denouncing domestic violence and the wave of femicides that marked Greece in 2021.

However, women's rights along with LGBT rights are increasingly projected as endangered by the presence of immigrants and refugees, terms largely functioning as metonyms for Islam. Telling is the example of New Democracy MP Konstantinos Bogdanos (who became an independent in October 2021): while leading the attack against gender studies and academics and activists in the field, Bogdanos also depicted Muslim women's presence as unacceptable for "the dominant culture of our country as well as our legal culture," since female Islamic garments are supposedly a statement against free will and women's rights. "The blatant misogyny and homophobia of the past is increasingly replaced by blatant xenophobia and

Islamophobia."

In short, the blatant misogyny and homophobia of the past is increasingly replaced by blatant xenophobia and Islamophobia, with the newly ceded rights of women and LGBT people being predicated on a hardening of rhetoric and policies against migrant and Islamic communities. By this logic, which sees different minorities' rights as in competition, it is no surprise that 61.3 percent of Greeks think that Islam threatens the rights of women in the West. In other words, gender issues constitute the ground where we can observe the emergence of the Greek "alt-right" — and a prime example of what happens when identity politics are severed from larger political stakes of equality and emancipation.

Swing to the Right

So despite the criminalization of Golden Dawn, Greece is experiencing a shift to the right, also indicative of a wider such droitisation in Europe. This

radicalization is taking place on two different levels, both in society at large and in a neoliberal center moving ever further rightward.

Far-right ideas have proven extremely persistent in wider Greek society, and their corrosiveness has inflicted considerable damage on the country's body politic. While during the economic crisis Greece seemed to be at a crossroads between the Left and Right, especially with Syriza coming to power, in the long run it was conservative, if not outright reactionary, approaches that prevailed on several key issues. Syriza's failure and its reluctance to take the necessary reforms has led to great disillusionment on the progressive side of politics, facilitating the swing to the right.

As for the neoliberal center, despite its self-representation as the enlightened representative of Europeanism in Greece, the current New Democracy government has made a sharp authoritarian turn. It

has become clear — also through the tight control it exercises on the media — that its ideological agenda also draws on far-right sources. In this sense, the presence in senior government roles of three key far-right figures who joined New Democracy in recent years (Adonis Georgiadis, who is today its deputy leader; Makis Voridis, the interior minister; and Thanos Plevris, the health minister) is no coincidence, for it serves the implementation of this agenda in concrete policy measures.

For years, Golden Dawn promoted fear of "cultural alteration," a view of neighboring countries as inherently inimical to Greece, and Islamophobia, xenophobia, and racism. Today, the most worrying trend is the unawareness of the discriminatory nature of such views, which are now embedded as normal and expressed unapologetically in the guise of the mainstream right.

Source: [Jacobin](#).

## "The ugly reality of our global jungle"

20 February 2022, by [Gilbert Achcar](#)

It is hard not to think of the 1997 film when contemplating the fact that the two Western leaders who are displaying the harshest attitude towards Moscow in the present confrontation about Ukraine are Joe Biden and Boris Johnson, who both are embroiled in embarrassing situations at home. Biden started seriously ruining his reputation with his spectacular failure in organising the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. He lost any remaining credit by proving impotent in the face of his own party's right-wingers who blocked his considerably watered-down economic projects. Johnson reached the nadir of his prime ministership with the "partygate" scandal [1], after a series of embarrassing woes, all stemming from an obvious difficulty in sticking to

principles and the sober truth.

Both are championing the tough stance in confronting Moscow. Washington's and London's heavy insistence on the imminence of Russian aggression sounds almost like wishing that the prophecy may prove self-fulfilling. Moscow easily mocks their statements as "hysterical". Their military gesticulations are pitiful when compared to the concentration of Russian forces around Ukraine. And their very exaggeration of the imminence of invasion gives the Ukrainians the feeling that these stances are hot air and that both capitals have resolved to abandon them since they are pledging not to get militarily involved in the conflict and moreover are calling on their nationals to leave Ukraine to avoid any risk of being forced to intervene.

Joe Biden probably believes that, after failing to inspire comparisons with Roosevelt in pushing through an ersatz of New Deal, he could make up for this by managing an ersatz world war situation. Boris Johnson, whose hero is Winston Churchill, probably dreams of delivering to the British people something as dramatic as the "blood, toil, tears and sweat" speech, after his first Covid-related attempt at this exercise has now turned into embarrassment.

As for Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, who is poised to replace Johnson in case "partygate" ends up forcing him to throw in the towel, her hero is Margaret Thatcher, whose military feat was the Falklands war. Her performance at the Kremlin was pathetic: she had strictly nothing to offer, and her threats were

contemptuously dismissed by her Russian counterpart. Most importantly, however, the trip included for Liz Truss “a visit to Red Square clad in a fur hat despite the unseasonably warm weather in an apparent attempt to channel images of Margaret Thatcher on a Moscow tour”, as noted by the Financial Times correspondents.

By such ostentatious behaviour, Boris Johnson’s government is trying its best to confirm the “special relationship” with the Big American Brother that was so dear to Tony Blair. And like the latter with regard to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, it turns its back on its European peers, France and Germany, to act as trailer to Washington’s lorry, with greater leeway now that the UK has left the EU.

The calculation is even more shortsighted this time than it was in 2003.

The US is much less respected today than it was twenty years ago – not least due to the catastrophic failure of the two wars it conducted in Afghanistan and Iraq over that period. And Paris and Berlin are perfectly wise in showing some understanding for Moscow’s security concerns, which are certainly not extravagant when compared to Washington’s or their own.

If tragedies are doomed to repeat as farces, the Westminster’s elite’s attitude today is indeed a farcical reproduction of that of 2003. Then the Conservatives supported Tony Blair’s war. Today, Blair’s heir, Keir Starmer, supports the Conservative government’s gesticulations and tries to outbid everybody in swearing allegiance to Nato. The new Cold Warriors’ pretence to defend Ukraine’s sovereignty by insisting on

keeping the door open to her to join Nato is pure casuistry.

Moscow’s demand is not addressed to Ukraine but to the Alliance. It is not forbidding Ukraine to apply for Nato membership; it is demanding that the Alliance itself acknowledges that it has reached the limit of its eastward expansion. In 1962, Washington did not forbid Cuba – part of whose territory the United States still occupies, by the way – from inviting Moscow to deploy missiles on the island. It demanded from Moscow that they be removed. Great powers bullying each other at the expense of weaker countries, reduced to bargaining chips: that’s the ugly reality of our global jungle.

17 February 2022

Source **Labour Hub**, under the title “Wag the Poodle.”

## Expelled from the Support System: Austerity Deepens in Syria

19 February 2022, by Joseph Daher

The latest decision of the government, like previous austerity measures, increases economic marginalisation and political tensions. In Syria, it must be remembered, more than 90% of the population live under the poverty line and at least 13.1 million individuals need humanitarian aid.

### One Decision: Millions Excluded from the Subsidy System

In November 2021, the Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Protection stated that around 500,000 people would be excluded from the subsidy system by the end of that year. At the time, those to be excluded included individuals from the highest

strata of society: high-ranking businessmen; private bank managers; shareholders of large-scale investments; large and medium-income taxpayers; lawyers; and certain categories of doctors, and medical specialists who have more than ten-years experience. However, in February, the government widened the list of excluded people. State employees, retirees, military staff, owners of small shops, etc were also excluded. The criteria for exclusion ranged from owning a car produced in 2008 or later, with an engine capacity of 1,500 cc, to owning a commercial licence to having a family member (generally a father or a brother) abroad.

The government justified its decision by the need to reduce state expenditure and the deficit, which is estimated at approximately 4.1 trillion

SYP (equivalent to 1.6 billion USD at the official exchange rate 2,512 SYP/USD) for 2022. This grim situation has been compounded by the absence of significant revenues as a result of the war; particularly in the oil and gas sectors and in tourism. According to the pro-regime newspaper [al-Watan](#), the annual savings from this measure are estimated to stand at 1,514 billion SYP (equivalent to USD 602.7 million). The savings on oil derivative products are the most significant, amounting to 1,001 billion SYP (equivalent to 398.5 million USD), while other savings are on rationed materials and bread. This measure will diminish social support allocation for 2022: it was initially about 5.53 trillion SYP (equivalent to 2.2 billion USD). [2]

This new measure came as subsidised products became increasingly



expensive and with the reduction of the share allocated to families, especially in 2020 and 2021. [3] Many families excluded from the subsidy system will be forced to further reduce their consumption of essential goods and commodities because of the substantial gap between subsidised and unsubsidised prices. In some cases, they may even stop purchasing a given product altogether (Table 1).

Before the government's decision, a family required around 200,000 SYP (equivalent to 79.6 USD) per month to purchase subsidised goods and commodities. Now a family will, at unsubsidised prices, probably need more than 600,000 SYP (equivalent to 238.9 USD) to acquire these same items: this according to different pro-regime newspapers.

Table 1: Differences between the subsidised and unsubsidised prices (set by the government) for essential commodities and goods (February 2022)



Source: Information gathered by the author

This latest measure will also likely create a new inflationary trend in the market and an expansion of subsidised products on the black market, where prices are much higher. In the days following the government's decision, the price of bread in Damascus on the black market had jumped to **2,500 SYP**, instead of a previous average of 1,300 SYP. The price of some food products also increased in various markets throughout the country.

The cost of living will, therefore, rise even more. The average cost of living for a family of five in Damascus had, indeed, continued in the past few months to increase, from 1,847,200 SYP in September 2021 (equivalent to 735 USD) to 2,026,976 SYP (equivalent to 807 USD) in December 2021. This represents an increase of about 9.7% in just three months, or 177 % over a year. Meanwhile, the minimum wage rose from SYP 71,515 (equivalent to 28.5 USD) to 92,970 SYP (equivalent to 37 USD) in mid-December 2021. But this only covered

4.5% of the average cost of living in December.

The government has taken measures, notably raising the salaries of public sector employees, military staff and pensioners twice in 2021. But these are clearly not enough to counterbalance the rapidly eroding purchasing power of Syrians. Most state employees have a second job and other forms of revenues, such as remittances, to secure their daily necessities. The ability of Syrians to survive as the social and economic situation deteriorates is once again in question.

## Broad Criticisms and Limited Protests

Large sectors of the population, as well as various trade unions, professional associations and business associations, have publicly criticised the government's decision. However, popular protests have, so far, remained limited.

Numerous professional associations have complained about not being consulted in the decision process of the government and are still trying to determine the numbers of their members excluded. The [union of doctors](#) for instance stated that they had not yet sent to the state institutions all the data regarding the doctors who have been practising for more than ten years. The process of collecting them was, the union insisted, ongoing.

Individuals with commercial licences have also contested the government's decision. [4] As a reaction to it, the commercial registry offices in the governorates of Damascus, Tartous and Sweida witnessed large queues in the following days, with citizens requesting to be removed from any commercial records, in order to be able to be reinstated in the subsidy mechanism. [5] [Mohammed al-Hallaq](#), a board member of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce, explained that people with commercial records should not be automatically excluded from the subsidy system, because the

vast majority only own a small business. They are affiliated with a chamber of commerce on the grounds that it is considered an umbrella for all types of economic activities. Moreover, the [Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce](#) issued a statement decrying the government's decision to disqualify from the subsidy system all those who had a commercial licence .

Many have similarly criticised the exclusion of individuals from the subsidy system because their family owned a car produced in or after 2008 of an engine capacity of 1,500 cc. 47% of all the people excluded are private vehicle owners (450,000 vehicles out of a total of 957,447). Critics also pointed out the inability of the government to secure affordable and wider public transportation networks for workers and the population in general, in a way that would allow workers to forgo cars.

Forms of organised public contestation against government measures have, however, been restricted. There are multiple reasons for this situation. They include general fatigue as a result of the war and the continuous impoverishment of large sectors of the society. But there is also the fear of repression and the regime's elimination of nearly all forms of organised opposition, both social and political, in the areas under its domination following the 2011 uprising. This has severely limited potential dissent against Damascus. There was a sign of popular anger in the [city of Masyaf](#), in the governorate of Hama, where individuals raided Takamul's office, the company in charge of the management of the smart card. This took place a few hours after the announcement of the new decision. [6]

The governorate of Sweida alone has witnessed more serious forms of organised dissent and popular protests in opposition to the government's decision. There have been a few thousand protestors within the governorate as a whole, and several hundred in the city of Sweida. However, the local population widely supports for demonstrations. In the past few years, the [governorate of Sweida](#), which has been able to gain

some forms of limited autonomy from Damascus and its repressive apparatus, had already witnessed dissent. Protesters, as well as local non-state armed forces, such as the Rijal al-Karama Forces (the Men of Dignity Movement), blocked roads in the governorate, including the Damascus-Sweida road, for several days. In the [city of Sweida](#), demonstrators obliged city council employees to stop working and to leave the building, while forcing merchants to close their shops. In some towns and villages in the governorate, groups of protestors also compelled bakeries to sell bread to everyone at the subsidised price. The demands of [various groups of activists](#), and protesters more generally, have not been restricted to the cancellation of the government's latest decision. They have also included appeals for wider socio-economic claims such as: dramatic salaries increases for workers, both in the state and private sectors; securing oil derivatives for citizens and health insurance for the elderly and for people with special needs; redistribution of the national wealth; and accountability against corrupt businessmen. In some cases, slogans also became political. This included the implementation of UN resolution 2254 for a peaceful political transition. There have also been demands for the departure of all foreign forces from Syria, as well as the establishment of a civil state opposed to any forms of discriminations.

## Governmental Errors and Responses

Numerous errors occurred in the exclusion process. Individuals have, for instance, been disqualified because the state's administration registered them wrongly as expatriates, when they were actually resident in the country. More than 60,000 errors of this sort were reported.

The Syrian government has announced it will reconsider some of the exclusion processes because of these errors, apologizing for them and

describing them as "technical" problems. Two days after the government's decision to lift the subsidy from around 600,000 families, more than [200,000 objections](#) had already been sent in.

Damascus has already stated that permanent or temporary state employees, military staff and retired civil or military employee will not be removed from the support list because - as first announced - of the ownership of a family car: the relevant names will be restored after the submission of a request to the designated website for objections and after the accuracy of the information has been verified. Similarly, individuals with a fourth category commercial license (shops with one employee) will be reinstated in the subsidy system, [according to the government](#), in order to "support small business owners". By 8 February, around [17,000](#) individuals had successfully appealed against disqualification. The re-evaluation of the exclusion processes for some segments is certainly a reaction to the deep wave of criticisms against the government. But it also demonstrates, once again, the absence of economic planning. Many times, the Syrian government has reconsidered its decisions, u-turning on announced measures, creating uncertainty among economic actors and the population more generally.

As for the Sweida protests, Damascus has opted for intimidation, with objective of preventing the participation of more of the local population and its spread to other regions. Pro-regime medias and social medias also [ the nature of the protests, by describing them as violent and religiously motivated. Additional security forces were sent in the governorate to try to scare off protestors. On 11 February, large numbers of regime security forces were deployed in all the main squares and roads in the city of Sweida, along with armoured vehicles. This did not prevent, however, demonstrations.

## Conclusion

Damascus has stated that the decision to exclude segments of its people from the subsidy system will not prevent the government from continuing its support to the population in different sectors. The government will seek through these measures to direct support and assistance to the most vulnerable groups in society. Savings (from the cuts to subsidies) could, according to Syrian officials, also be invested in specific economic sectors by increasing wages or investment projects, especially in manufacturing and agriculture.

These statements are, however, mostly for internal consumption, to appease deepening frustrations among the population. The most marginalised and vulnerable groups in society will probably not see their situation improve, while the cost of living increases as a result of the latest decisions of the government. Moreover, the Syrian government's actual investment in the economy has generally been well below the budgeted amounts, which were not, in any case, much more than 15% of the total budget. [7] Productive sectors of the economy (manufacturing and agriculture) have been continuously neglected by the government, while they have been facing increased production costs and other difficulties. The government favours, rather, networks of businessmen who are mostly involved in the commercial and service sectors.

Damascus will most likely pursue its austerity policies and subsidy reductions. Only significant social and political forces with a cogent socio-economic alternative and the capacity to galvanise large sectors of the population against the government's policies could change its economic direction. The regime's domination over its territories is not under threat for now. However, its ability to maintain a form of passive hegemony over the population is far from being guaranteed and regular protests and forms of dissent will likely continue. Frustrations are building, and Damascus lacks the means and the willingness to tackle them, save through repression and fear.

Source [MEDirections Blog](#).

# “We are in a worse situation than during the Cold War”

18 February 2022, by **Ilya Budraitskis**

Bulgarian political writer Ivan Kristeva, one of Eastern Europe’s most relevant analysts, calls him a “maverick, incisive, sharp and polemical” analyst who denounces liberal and illiberal clichés about Putin and his regime. Budraitskis lives in Moscow and teaches political science and art history at two universities. In 2014, when Crimea was occupied, he published with Arseniy Jilayev the book *Pedagogical Poem, Archives of the Future History Museum*, based on an exhibition bringing together fine arts, history and literature in an interpretation of the contemporary world they had organized in Moscow in 2012-2013.

As the first shipments of military equipment sent by the United States and the European Union arrived in Kiev, he spoke to Ervin Hladnik Milharčič with some thoughts on the political tensions that seem to herald a military confrontation between the West and Russia on the borders of the European Union. [8]

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**While you are in Moscow and I am in Ljubljana, are we talking through a future front line? People are talking about war. In Europe, the policy strongly encourages the Russians to do something, using all media channels for this. And on your side, what does it look like?**

Do you mean how ordinary people perceive the situation or what imaginary scenario the regime creates?

**To begin with, how do the Russian media present the tensions on the Russian-Ukrainian border?**

The Russian official media, including all the television channels, are controlled by the Kremlin. Other media are almost non-existent. About Ukraine, these state media have been using a language of war since 2014. In recent months there have been no changes in this way of talking about it. It’s still the same vocabulary.

**What do you mean by the language of war?**

Endless debates about the deep divide between our country and the West, with which we are in historical conflict. The use of extremely aggressive military rhetoric. We hear about our bombs, tanks, planes and other weapons. We hear that we can destroy the USA in two or three minutes, or that we can easily win a world war again. This has become the common language of the official media.

**What effect does this have on public opinion?**

Fabulous. In our country, to help children fall asleep, we tell them the story of a boy who cried “wolf”. You know that story, don’t you? The boy ran around the village shouting “wolf, wolf, wolf” to draw attention to himself. He did it. The whole village was stirred up several times. When finally, the wolf came to the village, no one paid attention to him anymore. At least since 2014, the official media has been talking incessantly and in a very fanciful tone about an inevitable conflict with Ukraine, which has never materialized. Now they want to sound the alarm. In recent weeks, the official media have tried to make it known that the situation has become very serious. That this military confrontation is real. However, the public does not perceive this message as something different. The common

reaction to this news is to say: We know we are in conflict with Ukraine, we know that we are in conflict with the United States, “you tell us all the time, so it’s normal.”

**No particular emotion?**

It’s more complicated than that. On the one hand, people see it as a continuation of the usual strategy of pointing the finger at the oddities of the ruling elites. The language of conflict is so familiar to them that they are no longer moved. But at the same time, there are growing fears of the possibility of a real escalation. The fear of war is slowly making its way.

**Is this malaise also noticeable in the official media?**

No, according to them we have already won the victory. But people are increasingly worried. It’s not just my feeling. The fear of war has always been the second greatest fear after that concerning one’s personal health and the worries that accompany it because of the functioning of public institutions and their responsibility for individuals. Recent opinion polls, however, show that at least 60% of the population fears the possibility of armed conflict, and that this fear is stronger than health concerns related to the pandemic. These two elements are present simultaneously in the collective consciousness. People are so used to militaristic rhetoric that they don’t take it too seriously, but on the other hand, there is growing concern. For my part, I think the fear stems from the events we witnessed last year. A fear linked to the growing repression of the state, the growing violence that accompanies it and the climate of anxiety it generates. I would say that this question is at the heart of the political thinking of the masses on our situation. But you must

bear in mind that in our society there are no serious political reactions, no demonstrations, no protests. There are no more massive demonstrations of discontent, no more occupations of streets or squares. Nothing.

### **How did Putin achieve this?**

Thanks to a year of direct blows to the nuclei of the opposition. The political regime is increasingly repressive. After the arrest of Aleksei Navalny, leader of the opposition Russia of the Future party, and the dispersal of the protests that followed, public opinion was silenced. The entire opposition is now in a very depressing situation. Last year, we were the target of total repression. All of Alexei Navalny's structures were declared extremist organizations and his collaborators were considered extremists. Anyone who expressed support for Navalny could be arrested. The oldest civil rights organization, Memorial, recognized in 1989, was dissolved by a Supreme Court ruling because it supposedly fell under the Foreign Agents Act. Symbolically, it was very destructive: the oldest human rights organization suddenly became illegal. They have also targeted all independent media with extreme aggression. The Foreign Agents Act can be used against anyone. There is no longer a single independent media outlet in Russia that cannot be accused of being a foreign agency. The accusation is a warning. This means that they can be liquidated at any time, just like Memorial was. Much of the repression is related to what is currently happening on the border with Ukraine. They wanted to make sure that there would be no unpleasant surprises, opposition, reactions or resistance on the home front.

### **And ordinary people are only familiar with the official version?**

More or less, yes. People are thus psychologically prepared for war. You can follow state television and believe the propaganda. It is not difficult. On the other hand, surviving in the event of conflict is a different matter entirely. In this area, the situation is already very different, because we live in a very poor country, which has seen the quality of life deteriorate in recent

years, giving the impression of a country in decline in all areas. Only in the event that the situation - already bad - deteriorated very quickly and people saw no way out, could we expect a change and more pressing demands for a different policy. However, so far, nothing like this is in sight.

On the other hand, the situation is really unclear. The official discourse systematically maintains such ambiguity. On the one hand, they use aggressive and uncompromising militarist language. On the other, they also talk about the desire for peace, talks between Russia, the United States and European countries. They attribute this tension to the anti-Russian hysteria of the Western media and the politics behind it. They say that Russia has no plans to attack, that it does not plan any armed invasion, that the army is only doing normal manoeuvres on sovereign Russian territory, and that in the West they are creating panic because of their own problems. Many people wonder what is really going on. Should we really prepare for war, or is this yet another propaganda storm with no future? This dilemma is familiar to us. Are these just successive waves of disinformation, or is the danger of a military confrontation really near?

### **The United States and some European countries are indeed sending military equipment to Ukraine. Has this been brought to your attention?**

Yes, that's clear. The fear of war has two faces. People are naturally afraid of military conflicts. If the West provides real military support to Ukraine, there could be a major war. On the other hand, there is a strong fear of additional economic sanctions, which could undermine the already battered economy. It may be that the West really sees Ukraine as a country where it can finally confront Russia on all fronts, and that it becomes a battlefield. But it is difficult to launch a slightly more serious debate on this issue in Russia. The official media are controlled and there is no possibility of engaging in a serious analysis of the situation and a confrontation of opinions. They deal with propaganda,

information is secondary. There are still a few liberal opposition media. They are still there, but fewer and fewer and constantly under terrible pressure from the state. There is still a certain sense of revolt among the population. But the regime keeps sending two contradictory signals.

The official message is that, unlike the West, Russia wants talks and does not plan war, but is ready for anything. In this picture it is Ukraine - supplied by the West - that is the aggressor. Despite all the bellicose rhetoric, the official media conveys the Kremlin's message that this battle will be waged through talks and that war will be avoided.

### **How do they justify such a message?**

We remember the experience of 2014, when the Russian army occupied Crimea and the reaction of the West was mainly rhetorical. Crimea was annexed to Russia, there were protests and turmoil, sanctions were imposed, but it did not occur to anyone to try to return Sevastopol and Yalta to Ukraine through war. The Kremlin can point to the Black Sea and say that it has established its authority there without being seriously embarrassed by anyone.

The liberal media is trying to tell a different story, but they are confused. The political opposition is also confused. No one knows what the secret content of the talks between Russia and the West is. Most citizens have the impression that relations between Russia and the West have been completely broken. The breakup, however, did not happen last year, but much earlier. Those who live in big cities and travel to other countries know that relations have been bad for a long time. The situation is clear. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow has not issued visas to Russian citizens for three years. If you want to go to America, you must first go elsewhere, such as Zagreb or Ljubljana, and apply for a visa there. It started in the days of Donald Trump and continues under Joe Biden.

### **But if there is a war, what will we fight for? In 2014, the Ukrainians ceded Crimea without a fight. The**

## **Ukrainian army did not even fire a shot in the air. Is the purpose of the conflict clear to you?**

That's the main question, isn't it? What are we fighting for? There is no dilemma for the Russian authorities. Over the past year, it has become clear that the Minsk agreement is not working. In Donetsk, the situation is at an impasse. The idea that the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics could be used to control the Ukrainian government collapsed. Putin thought he would find in the Donbas a pillar on which to build a policy concerning Ukraine. The deal was supposed to at least prevent Ukraine's cooperation with NATO, but it failed. Meanwhile, elections were held in Ukraine, and it quickly became clear to Putin that it would be impossible to reach an agreement with the new president, Volodymyr Zelensky. When he was elected in May 2019, there was some hope in the Kremlin that they could reach an agreement with him on normalizing relations. But then he turned out to be, in many ways, an even tougher nationalist than his predecessor, Petro Poroshenko. Putin had to find a way out of the impasse of the Minsk agreement, which had no future. He decided to move the centre of gravity from Donbas to all of Ukraine. He began to wonder what place had been reserved for Ukraine in NATO's plans. Will Ukraine be at least a neutral country, or an open military ally? He wanted to divert attention from the frozen situation in Donbas and start talking about interstate and global relations.

### **How did he do it?**

Very simply. He began to move troops to the border. The idea was to force the West to react. Putin thus asked the West a very simple question: to what extent do you seriously consider supporting Ukraine militarily in the event of a military conflict? Or even more simply: will you go to war if I invade the country? He wanted to see what happens at the borders of the European Union in the event of military intervention. He asked the question in the way he prefers. Putin likes to challenge his opponent. He stands in front of them, looks them in the eye. "Well, what are you going to do? Are you going to strike, or are you

just talking?" Who will back down first? He did this in Crimea in 2014, and then in Donbas. It wasn't really about preparing an invasion, he wanted to force the negotiations. But the West's response last January was surprising to Putin. He sees the West as a territory where scoundrels live who continue to preach human rights and are not prepared for real conflict. They are always the first to retreat before being challenged. But in recent weeks, the tone has changed in the West, first in the United States, then in the United Kingdom, and then in many others. Putin must now take note of the fact that the West has accepted his challenge and has begun to challenge him. First, diplomacy began to say that Putin was already the aggressor and that he had crossed borders. Putin was just moving tanks along the border and the West got the impression that he had already occupied Ukraine. Politics, diplomacy and the media have sown panic in the West by claiming that Russia is about to launch a major offensive in Ukraine. Now they are sending weapons to Ukraine and talking about intervening themselves. Putin did not expect this.

### **Do you mean that Putin saw this whole movement of tanks as a negotiating tool?**

That's what I think. When Russia prepares an invasion, it usually has clear military objectives in front of it. What could be the military objectives of a frontal attack on Ukraine? All you hear are political responses. On the one hand, the desire to change the government in place in Kiev. On the other hand, there is the desire to create an atmosphere conducive to a hybrid war, i.e., the desire to divide the Western alliance, split Ukraine in two and take political control of one part. Suppose that favourable political currents could emerge from military intervention. But how to carry out the military part of the operation? Occupy Kiev? To win what? A military success would bring more problems than Russia already faces. The result could only be the most total confusion. Even the occupation of much of Ukraine would provide Russia with no guarantee of security vis-à-vis the West. There would be resistance, a large number of troops would be needed, and any stability could be

forgotten. Ukrainian nationalist sentiments would be strengthened, and Russia would lose the country for good.

Today, the Russian government also overestimates Russia's popularity in Ukraine. It dreams of having a majority of the population speaking Russian and having no problem accepting Russia as their homeland. It is pure fabrication. For my part, I do not see a clear military plan for the invasion, nor any major preparations of the country for war. The only practical effect of the war would be to destabilize the situation in Russia.

### **But maybe Putin thinks Russia is threatened?**

Yes. I think there's a lot of anxiety about power. They are convinced that the United States and its European allies also want regime change in Russia. They feel that Russia is surrounded by hostile countries. And Putin has publicly stated on numerous occasions that he does not recognize the borders created after 1989. According to him, the borders are the result of a historical error, which he considers a tragedy. Since 1991, Russia has lost territories that Putin says historically belong to it. Ukraine is one such territory.

### **What makes Ukraine so important? Why not Tajikistan or Uzbekistan or the Baltic States? He never talks about Poland. Why Ukraine? Is it for strategic and economic reasons or for other reasons?**

The strategic and economic reasons are probably important to him. After Russia, Ukraine had the largest population of all Soviet republics and was its most important economic centre. It remains the largest post-Soviet country after Russia. Ukraine is also the link between Russia and Western Europe, the key country for control of the Black Sea. Russian gas and oil transit west through Ukraine. There are many objective reasons why this is important.

But there is yet another aspect. The problem is the idea that Ukraine can only be an independent state by being an anti-Russian state. Ukraine is the

country that most closely resembles Russia culturally: language, religion, food, customs. There are no major differences. But it can only exist as an independent state by being an adversary of Russia. I am not the one saying that. This is what Putin wrote this summer in a 20-page program document on the history of Ukraine, from the time of Asian rule to the twentieth century. He published it on the government's website. "Russians and Ukrainians are one people," he wrote. The main idea of the article is that Ukraine is not only a specific part of Russia, but also an organic element of it. So, the project of an independent Ukraine still corresponds to a plan of the Western powers, which have used the country as a weapon against Russia. Putin's doctrine says that it is no different today, that the West wants to make Ukraine an anti-Russian state. Putin also believes that an independent Ukraine has no positive value, but that it is a negative project to undermine Russia. This is not speculation on my part, but an original article published by Putin in July this year. For him, the debate on a possible subjectivity of Ukraine is useless. That is why Russia is negotiating with the United States, Germany and the European Union, but not directly with Ukraine.

### **Can we conclude that for Putin, Ukraine is not a subject of international politics?**

There is no point in drawing any conclusions. Putin wrote this as his contribution to the understanding of the country. He negotiates without the presence of Ukraine. For Putin, this is an appropriate presentation of reality. Ukraine is not a subject in this story, Russia and the West are. The United States is the centre of gravity of the West. This is Putin's worldview.

### **Could the controversy degenerate into a military confrontation between Russia and NATO?**

Let's be realistic. You can't compare NATO and Russia. NATO is an alliance of thirty countries, Russia has no allies in the West. Russia is alone in this story and has no chance of victory in a direct head-on confrontation. In his analysis, Putin concluded that NATO is fragmented and will not be able to

formulate a common strategy against him. Above all, that NATO will not be able to take the decision to defend Ukraine militarily against an invasion. That he can therefore launch a challenge. He did not expect that the United States after its show of impotence in Afghanistan would be able to restore its decision-making monopoly over its allies so quickly. He did not think they could regain a leading role in European affairs and reconstitute NATO as a functioning military alliance, only a year after Trump. Putin saw the defeat in Afghanistan as a sign of NATO's weakness and a new united front seemed unlikely. But within weeks, the situation has turned around and NATO seems much more united than before. If this situation continues, NATO can only benefit. In recent days, Sweden and Finland, neutral countries, have revived the debate on the possibility of joining NATO. Finland will now be more of a concern for Putin than Ukraine. Finland's neutrality was a victory for the Soviet Union after World War II. It may well be that the result of the attempt to push NATO back from Russia's borders is Finland's entry into NATO.

### **So, in your opinion, Putin is losing ground?**

Yes, but there is also something to be gained. They will now look for a solution where both sides can claim victory. I think an agenda - which is not shared with the public - is being worked out in the course of the negotiations that we can follow. Negotiations began with the announcement of the Russian ultimatum. This is a very strange way to start negotiations. They presented a list of demands, but the Russian representative said before negotiations began that this list was not a menu from which the West could order whatever it wanted. This is not a very diplomatic approach. Usually, the objective is not announced before the negotiations. An ultimatum is what is imposed on the vanquished. It was therefore clear that the Russian requests would be rejected. However, negotiations are still ongoing and Russian troops are on the border. This context is dangerous. Nevertheless, I think they are looking for an agreement. Perhaps an assurance that

Ukraine will not join NATO in the coming years. Nothing signed, no written guarantee, just an informal agreement.

### **Is Putin right when he says that the West wants to push Russia out of Ukraine and make it even weaker? Or is it just paranoia?**

That's a big question, you know. If by a weak Russia you mean a country that cannot play the same role as the Soviet Union in a US-led world order, Putin is right. If you mean that Russia will not be allowed to be part of the world order on its own terms as a sovereign power, I think that is also true. Putin's problem is that he does not understand politics other than as a competition between world powers. For him, political opposition to his regime is also a way for the West to make Russia appear weak in international relations. For him, defending human rights means the same thing. A weak Russia. That is why he bans movements defending rights. The fact that the presidential elections in Ukraine were won by a candidate who was not supported by Putin is also a defeat for Russia. I do not think anyone will be able to change his mind.

### **Are we going back to the Cold War? Is any progress made by one side a failure of the other?**

We are in a worse situation than during the Cold War. Compared to the Cold War, there is a significant difference among the world's elites. The Cold War and the policy of détente were influenced by what Max Weber called the ethics of responsibility. Both sides thought the same way during the Cold War: "We are cynical and do not spare any punches in politics. But our cynicism has a specific purpose. We want to prevent nuclear war at all costs. This was the logic of politicians such as Leonid Brezhnev or Richard Nixon. Both were insensitive and cynical to the end in their policies, but what they really wanted was to prevent the nuclear-tipped missiles from taking off. The entire construction of the Cold War was built on the prevention of the destruction of the world by nuclear weapons. The elites in Russia, the United States and probably Europe no

longer operate according to the principles of this ethic of responsibility.

The second difference is just as important. Unlike the Soviet Union during the Cold War, modern Russia has no project with which it could address the world. It cannot claim to offer any ideological, political, social or economic alternative to the American order. There is no Russian political, social or economic model that can be opposed to American liberal democracy. Putin has not even been able to export the Russian way of doing politics in Ukraine. That is why he took over Crimea in 2014. In recent history, Putin's Russia's position is weak. Much weaker than the position of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

**Russia has no friends in the West. Does the opposition have any?**

The Russian liberals are in opposition. The West appreciates them. Many are already abroad. Hundreds of liberal opposition figures have recently left the country for political reasons. Liberals have many friends in the West and are welcomed by the European Union and the U.S. administration. In this case, there is no problem. From the point of view of the left, the situation is completely different. The European left has lost interest in internationalism. They see the world as a conflict between US imperialism and those who oppose it. The anti-imperialist position is dominant among many left forces in Europe. Among them we find, quite surprisingly, sympathy for Putin,

because he resists the political domination of the United States. It seems to me that, in the light of the conflict in Ukraine, there is an urgent need to renew the internationalist approach of the European left to international politics. That would be very useful for us.

**Our last conversation was late last spring, when the 20-year-old environmentalist Anastasia Ponkina was imprisoned in Siberia. At that time, a new generation seemed to be emerging in Russia, bringing a different vision to politics. Then it disappeared. What happened?**

It has not disappeared. This generation is still here. But all the political structures through which it could express its ideas were almost completely destroyed. We are now in a similar situation to the Kazakhs.

**The situation is not so bad, is it?**

Really? I know Kazakhstan very well. I've been there several times recently. The events of the last few months have been very complex. They have been presented in an overly simplistic way. There was a real popular revolt in Kazakhstan. True, there were many provocateurs and people who came to loot the shops, but at the heart of the events there was a mass revolt of the most ordinary people. The workers, the poor, people from all walks of life resisted. A classic popular revolt. It took place in a country ruled for decades by a totally repressive regime. Much more repressive than Putin's. Nursultan Nazarbayev became president of the country in 1990 after serving as general

secretary of the Communist Party. He ruled until 5 January this year, when he resigned as head of the country's Security Council. Immediately after taking power, he dissolved all opposition parties and organizations. First, he banned the Communist Party and all independent trade unions. It dismantled all organised liberal groups and effectively banned all independent political activity. He banned any form of organization, any activity. In January of this year, there was a revolt that had no political representation. Because it couldn't have any. There was no organization and no leaders. There were no clear symbols, political activists, visible parties or movements with programs and leaders. Everything was destroyed a long time ago. Banished, broken, forgotten or exiled leaders. All that remains are angry people on the street. If Russia continues its momentum, we will find ourselves in a similar situation.

**From Moscow, do we see that the countries of Eastern Europe are following the same path and that the authorities, from Poland to Hungary to Slovenia, are tempted to transform democracy into authoritarian regimes?**

We see a lot of things. I think we understand what is happening to you. In many ways, we share a common experience, don't we?

29 January 2022

*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from the French translation by Jan Malewski for **Inprecor**.*

## **US sanctions on Afghanistan could be deadlier than 20 years of war**

**17 February 2022, by Mark Weisbrot**

But if more Americans knew how many innocent civilians actually die as a result of these sanctions, would the

worst of them be permitted?

We may be about to find out in

Afghanistan. Sanctions currently imposed on the country are on track to take the lives of more civilians in the

coming year than have been killed by 20 years of warfare. There's no hiding it any more.

Projections through the winter estimate that 22.8 million people will face "high levels of acute food insecurity." This is 55% of Afghanistan's population, the highest ever recorded in the country. An estimated 1 million children are suffering from "severe acute malnutrition" this year. Children who are malnourished are more likely to die from diseases, even when they can get enough calories and nutrients to survive. Already, 98% of the population is not getting enough food, according to the U.N. World Food Programme.

The biggest and most destructive sanction currently facing Afghanistan is the seizure of more than \$9 billion of the country's assets that are held at the U.S. Federal Reserve. This is equivalent to about half of Afghanistan's economy, and about 18 months of the country's imports — which include food, medicine and infrastructure needs that are vital to public health.

But the effect of this loss of Central Bank assets turns out to be much deadlier than the loss of essential imports. The assets confiscated are in dollars; countries need these hard currency international reserves in order to maintain a stable financial system and economy. Since the freezing of the country's reserves, "Cash shortages and the loss of correspondent banking relationships

have crippled Afghan banks," reports the International Monetary Fund.

Press reports from the ground describe the calamitous human cost of the disruption that results when these reserves are lost: desperate mothers seeking medicine for emaciated children; soaring numbers of people going without income; farmers giving up on working their land.

Afghanistan's currency has depreciated by more than 25% since August, driving the price of food and other essentials beyond the reach of many people in what was already the poorest country in Asia. Banks have imposed a \$400 limit on cash withdrawals, and also restrictions that make businesses unable to meet their payrolls. This pushes more people into unemployment and acute hunger.

Supporters of the sanctions, in the U.S. government and elsewhere, have responded that people who are starving, malnourished or unemployed as a result of sanctions can be helped with international aid. However, it is clear that the logic of destroying an economy and then trying to save people with aid does not work. Aid will replace only a very small fraction of the country's loss of income, which the IMF estimates could fall by an astounding, unprecedented 30% in the months ahead.

And there are enormous difficulties in delivering the aid: the banking system is hobbled, international banks and even some aid groups are reluctant to

take the risks involved in transferring funds, and there are breakdowns in transport, as well as other essential services because of the sanctions and resultant economic contraction.

Washington and its allies have argued that sanctions are a necessary response to Taliban human rights abuses, including repression of women. But it's the people, especially the poorest, who pay the price. How many tens or hundreds of thousands of women and girls should be sacrificed in order to punish the Taliban?

Western governments, led by the United States as during 20 years of war, are not likely to get any concessions from the Taliban by destroying the Afghan economy. But an enormous price will be paid by millions of innocent people, many of whom will die, as food, health care, employment and income become increasingly scarce.

Members of the U.S. Congress are starting to push back: four dozen sent a letter to President Joe Biden in December noting: "The U.S. confiscation of \$9.4 billion in Afghanistan's currency reserves" is plunging the country "deeper into economic and humanitarian crisis."

This collective punishment is hideously wrong and immoral. The Biden administration can remove the biggest contributing factor with the stroke of a pen. They should do so immediately, before it is too late.

Source [\*The Sacramento Bee\*](#)

## **'There is no money left': Covid crisis leaves Sri Lanka on brink of bankruptcy**

**16 February 2022, by Hannah Ellis-Petersen, Minoli de Soysa**

The meltdown faced by the government, led by the strongman president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, is in

part caused by the immediate impact of the Covid crisis and the loss of tourism but is compounded by high

government spending and tax cuts eroding state revenues, vast debt repayments to China and foreign



exchange reserves at their lowest levels in a decade. Inflation has meanwhile been spurred by the government printing money to pay off domestic loans and foreign bonds.

[The World Bank estimates](#) 500,000 people have fallen below the poverty line since the beginning of the pandemic, the equivalent of five years' progress in fighting poverty.

Inflation hit a record high of 11.1% in November and escalating prices have left those who were previously well off struggling to feed their families, while basic goods are now unaffordable for many. After Rajapaksa declared Sri Lanka to be in an economic emergency, the military was given the power to ensure essential items, including rice and sugar, were sold at set government prices - but it has done little to ease people's woes.

Anurudda Paranagama, a chauffeur in the capital, Colombo, took on a second job to pay for rising food costs and cover the loan on his car but it was not enough. "It is very difficult for me to repay the loan. When I have to pay electricity and water bills and spend on food, there is no money left," he said, adding that his family now eats two meals a day instead of three.

He described how his village grocer was opening 1kg packets of milk powder and dividing it into packs of 100g because his customers could not afford the whole packet. "We now buy 100g of beans when we used to buy 1kg for the week," said Paranagama.

The loss of jobs and vital foreign revenue from tourism, which usually contributes more than 10% of GDP, has been substantial, with more than 200,000 people losing their livelihoods in the travel and tourism sectors, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council.

The situation has got so bad that long queues have formed at the passport office as one in four Sri Lankans, mostly the young and educated, say [they want to leave](#) the country. For older citizens, it is reminiscent of the early 1970s when import controls and low production at home caused severe

shortages of basic commodities and caused long queues for bread, milk and rice.

The former central bank deputy governor WA Wijewardena warned the struggles of ordinary people would exacerbate the financial crisis, which would in turn make life harder for them. "When the economic crisis deepens beyond redemption, it is inevitable that the country will have a financial crisis too," he said. "Both will reduce food security by lowering production and failing to import due to foreign exchange scarcities. At that point, it will be a humanitarian crisis."

One of the most pressing problems for Sri Lanka is its huge foreign debt burden, in particular to China. It owes China more than \$5bn in debt and last year took an additional \$1bn loan from Beijing to help with its acute financial crisis, which is being paid in instalments.

In the next 12 months, in the government and private sector, Sri Lanka will be required to repay an estimated \$7.3bn in domestic and foreign loans, including a \$500m international sovereign bond repayment in January. However, as of November, available foreign currency reserves were just \$1.6bn.

In an usual approach, government minister Ramesh Pathirana said they hoped to settle their past oil debts with Iran by paying them with tea, sending them \$5m worth of tea every month in order to save "much-needed currency".

The opposition MP and economist Harsha de Silva recently [told parliament](#) that foreign currency reserves would be -\$437m by January next year, while the total foreign debt to service would be \$4.8bn from February to October 2022. "The nation will be totally bankrupt," he said.

Central Bank Governor Ajith Nivard Cabraal made public assurances that Sri Lanka could pay off its debts "seamlessly" but Wijewardena said the country was at substantial risk of defaulting on its repayments, which would have catastrophic economic

consequences.

Meanwhile, Rajapaksa's sudden decision in May to ban all fertiliser and pesticides and force farmers to go organic without warning has brought a formerly prosperous agricultural community to its knees as many farmers, who had become used to using - and often overusing - fertiliser and pesticides, were suddenly left without ways to produce healthy crops or combat weeds and insects. Many fearing a loss decided not to cultivate crops at all, adding to the food shortages in Sri Lanka.

The government made a dramatic U-turn in late October and farmers are now struggling to cover the high costs of imported fertiliser without help.

"The costs of cultivating paddy [rice] have gone up astronomically ... The government has no money for fertiliser subsidies. Many of us farmers are reluctant to invest money because we don't know if we will make any profit," said one farmer, Ranjit Hulugalle.

In an attempt temporarily to ease the problems and stave off difficult and most likely unpopular policies, the government has resorted to temporary relief measures, such as credit lines to import foods, medicines and fuel from its neighbouring ally [India](#), as well as currency swaps from [India](#), [China](#) and [Bangladesh](#) and loans to purchase [petroleum from Oman](#). However, these loans provide only short-term relief and have to be paid back quickly at high-interest rates, adding to Sri Lanka's debt load.

Anushka Shanuka, a personal trainer, was among those who used to have a comfortable life but now is struggling to get by. "We can't live the way we used to before the pandemic," he said, saying the prices of vegetables had gone up by more than 50%.

"The government promised to help us but nothing came, so we are just managing the best we can. I don't know how much longer we can go on like this."

Source [CADTM](#).

# The “Big Pink Elephant in the Room”

15 February 2022, by **Marian Jones**

In the face of such a horrific bill, reproductive rights organizations failed to mount an effective counteroffensive. In my opinion, the shortcomings of the reproductive rights movement are related to racism within the major reproductive rights groups, which resulted in critical problems, such as allowing the repeal of the Hyde Amendment to fall by the wayside, the nonprofit-industrial complex—which negatively impacts independent clinics that perform almost all abortions, and the siloing of small independent clinics. These missteps are reversible, but whether or not the political will exists is debatable. For the pro-choice movement to endure and become bigger and more powerful, we must reevaluate and work outside the system. Change is going to have to come from the grassroots.

According to abortion organizer Jenny Brown, low-wage, jobless, and uninsured people have more abortions than those with wealth or good health insurance. [9] Because birth control is expensive and requires regular clinic or doctor visits, low-income persons who cannot afford it or cannot take time off work are more likely to have unintended births. Brown claims that Black women had double the rate of abortion as white women. Since Black women encounter discrimination at work, they are less likely to have adequate medical coverage, making it even more difficult for them to get reliable contraceptives.

Yet, to its own detriment, the reproductive rights movement is not being led by these, the most oppressed in the movement. Women of color in the movement face marginalization, hostility, and tokenism. Workers of color at key reproductive rights groups have spoken out against racism, in interviews, internal meetings, and social media, reports *Buzzfeed News*. [10] These are progressive

organizations that espouse diversity yet inwardly marginalize Black personnel. While reproductive rights are a key concern for people of color, the movement’s leaders are primarily white. *Buzzfeed News* cites significant turnover rates among personnel of color and alleges they are routinely subjected to microaggressions such as tokenization and other types of discrimination. Workers at four Planned Parenthood affiliates alleged discrimination in the form of being disciplined and dismissed by their bosses whereas their non-Black peers were not.

White supremacy also manifests in the battle over the Hyde Amendment. Since 1976, the Hyde Amendment has prohibited the use of federal funds to pay for abortion procedures for anyone on Medicaid, Medicare, or the Children’s Health Insurance Program. It hampers reproductive services for many working-class and poor women, and it disproportionately harms women of color. Because the abortion rights movement failed to battle and defeat Hyde, the discriminatory effects of his legislation continue to damage women. [11]

According to Amy Littlefield writing for *Lux Magazine*, Planned Parenthood, like many other large nonprofits, has begun to resemble the business sector. [12] Littlefield writes, “Nonprofits of any stripe are beholden to wealthy donors who want to fund marquee projects with trackable outcomes rather than invest in unglamorous line items ... that build sustainable organizations.”

The abortion movement’s NGOization and white leadership have made major nonprofits moderate and corporatist. This is because funders and foundations have links to the centrist Democratic Party. Both Obama and Biden had a majority in both chambers but failed or refused to enact legislation enshrining the legal right

to abortion. Moreover, Nancy Pelosi said Democrats don’t have to be pro-choice, [13] and Biden reiterated his support for the Hyde Amendment during a presidential debate. [14] Democrats blame the undemocratic filibuster, as well as West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin and Arizona Senator Kyrsten Sinema. Yet, they choose not to protect abortion rights even though they can, since it would enrage the ruling class. (In *Birth Strike*, Jenny Brown argues that the elite opposes both abortion and birth control since their power is dependent on high birth rates, surplus labor, and keeping wages down. [15])

The movement for reproductive justice, on the other hand, is smaller and less well-funded. Reproductive justice is an interdisciplinary concept and practice pioneered in 1994 by women of color who have suffered from reproductive injustice. They founded the group SisterSong, which says reproductive justice is the ability to choose whether to have a child as well as the freedom to raise that child in a safe environment. [16] Reproductive justice includes comprehensive sex education in schools, prevention of domestic violence, affordable and reliable contraception, fertility treatments, accessible child care options, safe pregnancies and postpartum care, and other support services for low-income families. [17] Reproductive justice organizations are already working relentlessly to solve these and other challenges, doing the critical work we need to have real reproductive justice in this country, but they are hampered by a lack of the high-powered donors that major reproductive rights groups have. The focus put on organizations like Planned Parenthood results in public money and donations getting diverted from independent clinics or reproductive rights groups with less influence.

Consider the grassroots organization

Jane's Due Process in Texas, which assists teens seeking safe abortions. Apparently, you can still get an abortion in Texas, but you have to go to a judge and acquire court authorization. Jane's guides patients through the process, provides a free attorney, covers any abortion-related costs, and offers emotional support. [18]

When Alabama adopted a nearly total abortion ban in the summer of 2019, celebrities and liberal donors poured money into Planned Parenthood, even though independent clinics perform the vast majority of abortions. Planned Parenthood did not provide abortions in Alabama at the time. (They stopped performing abortions in Alabama in March 2017. Planned Parenthood regional affiliate president Staci Fox told the *New York Times* that the organization planned to resume services late last year, which they did. [19] Autonomous clinics are mainly inconspicuous and unable to garner funds like Planned Parenthood.

Only about 4 percent of all abortions are conducted in hospitals, and 1 percent, in doctors' offices; the majority of abortions are performed in private clinics. Furthermore, clinics unaffiliated with Planned Parenthood perform about 60 percent of all abortions in the United States, according to groups who track the figures. [20] Such clinics have no political influence or lobbying abilities.

According to Pamela Merritt, co-

founder of Reproaction, a reproductive rights group, Planned Parenthood's judicial priorities are similar to those of a lobby for a for-profit corporation such as McDonald's, which is concentrated on maintaining the company's own survival. [21] She went on to say that activists refer to the group as "the big pink elephant in the room" because of its unchecked influence and its fundraising ability.

In her book *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*, Melinda Cooper details why feminists had to open their own abortion clinics. [22] In the late 1960s, militants with the Chicago Women's Liberation Union learned how to perform abortions, and by the time of the Roe v. Wade decision in 1973, they were purportedly doing up to fifty procedures each week. Deinstitutionalization was strongly pushed among feminist groups that questioned the epistemic power of professional medical elites to pathologize non-normative behavior. So, feminists began creating their own self-governed institutions outside of the medical establishment.

However, this isolation has now led to a weakening of abortion clinics. As argued by Anne Rumberger in *Jacobin*, [23] there were several compelling reasons for the independent clinic model in the years that followed Roe, including "the massive increase in demand that hospitals were not incentivized to meet." But this puts those clinics at

risk of physical and financial harm while also perpetuating prejudices associated with this common procedure.

The issues are complicated, and no one knows how to answer the question, "How do we start winning again?" The elimination of the Hyde Amendment should be a central demand. This issue emphasizes the difference between liberal feminism and socialist-feminist abortion policy. The former stresses the rule of law and individual liberty, which are vital but insufficient. After initially focusing on free abortion on demand, the latter expanded to include child care, jobs that pay a living wage, an end to sterilization abuse, health care, and other necessities that allow women to make an informed and uncoerced decision about whether or not to have a child and raise them.

We can no longer wait for organizations such as Planned Parenthood to acknowledge the impact of white supremacy in their organizations, the importance of private clinics, and the faults of the nonprofit-industrial complex and to embrace a larger vision of what reproductive rights and justice entail. Instead, we must continue building our own radical movements and radical organizations armed with the correct analysis of what went wrong.

Source *New Politics* "The Fight to Defend Abortion Rights: A Roundtable".

# A Ukrainian Sociologist Explains Why Everything You Know About Ukraine Is Probably Wrong

14 February 2022, by **Volodymyr Ishchenko**

**BM: Why are Ukrainian officials and European governments taking such different stances on the question of the prospects for a**

**Russian invasion than the United States and the UK?**

**VI: Russian coercive diplomacy and the military buildups are just one part**

of this, because there are also parallel diplomatic actions. Another part is this media campaign about the imminent invasion, which has its own autonomous logic, is driven by

different interests, and should not be taken as an objective reflection of Russian actions. It also has this reinforcing, escalating character. The primary target of this campaign is probably not even Russia or Ukraine, but Germany, which is supposed to be closer to its NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] allies.

Ukraine at first didn't even notice this campaign in the Western media. It then tried to exploit the campaign by requesting more weapons and calling for preventive sanctions against Russia. It was only about two or three weeks ago that the Ukrainian government started to make very explicit statements that invasion is not really imminent, that we have been under Russian threat since 2014 and we're used to this, and that according to their intelligence, this threat isn't greater than it was in spring last year (during the earlier stage of the Russian buildup, which was done very publicly with very clear intentions).

This Western media campaign has had very material and negative consequences for the Ukrainian economy. The Ukrainian currency has started to be devalued, investors have started to leave — particularly in the Ukrainian real estate market — and the government has been quite scared that even without an actual invasion, the Ukrainian economy may get into quite serious trouble from this. But I wouldn't take it as simply strategic deception.

**BM: Why is Ukraine such an important country, both to Russia, and to the West and the United States?**

**VI:** Economically, Ukraine is actually a big failure. If you look at the economic indicators, Ukraine is probably one of the very, very few countries in the world that has not reached its 1990 level of GDP per capita. There was a huge economic decline in the '90s, and then Ukraine failed to grow like its Eastern European neighbors. We don't live better than at the end of the Soviet Union, unlike Poland, for example, or even Russia or Belarus.

For Russia and for the United States, it's a place through which natural gas is transported. There were some

initiatives to have a three-party consortium: Russia as a supplier of gas, the European Union as consumer, and Ukraine as a transitory territory. These were torpedoed in the '90s and 2000s, particularly by the Ukrainian side, and the result was that Russia just built several pipelines around Ukraine. The Nord Stream 2 is perhaps the most dangerous for Ukraine now, because it may make Ukrainian pipelines obsolete.

From a military point of view, Russia says that Ukraine may be important because if NATO starts to deploy offensive weapons, there are rockets that can reach Moscow in five minutes from Ukrainian territory. The Russian defensive strategy for centuries was expansion, in order to push its border as far west as possible, creating strategic depth, which led Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolf Hitler's invasions to fail — though contemporary wars are not waged in the same way as they were a half-century or two centuries ago.

For the United States, Ukraine is a potential hot spot against Russia. If Ukraine is creating tensions with Russia, it might weaken Russia and may deflect its resources, for example, in case of a Chinese escalation. Some people comment now quite cynically, "Why not let the Russians invade Ukraine, and let's make Ukraine another Afghanistan for Russia?" Russia would spend a lot of resources, it would be hit with sanctions — probably Nord Stream would also be under sanctions — and it's not that clear for how long Russia would survive a major escalation in Ukraine. That might be a reason why this war [in the Donbass region] has been going on for such a long time: there's no actual interest in stopping it. There were several opportunities to do so in 2019 and 2015, and the US government didn't do as much as they could.

**BM: What is the relationship between Ukraine and Russia, since the countries' long and complicated history shapes so many of the political and cultural divisions of modern Ukraine?**

**VI:** There's nothing close to a consensus on this issue. Some people

on the Left, such as some Ukrainian Marxists in the twentieth century, made the case that Ukraine was a Russian colony, and at least in the Russian Empire, it was exploited economically. That was a different story under the Soviet Union, when Ukraine was actually developed very quickly and ended up being one of the most developed parts of the country — one of the reasons why the post-Soviet crisis was so severe. Others would say that Ukraine was more like Scotland to England, and not even close to relations between Western metropolises and their colonies in Africa or Asia, or even between Russia and Central Asia, or Russia and Siberia.

For many Russians, Ukraine is part of their perception of the Russian nation. They simply could not imagine Russia without Ukraine. In the Russian Empire, there was this idea that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians were three parts of the same people. And this narrative was recently reiterated by Vladimir Putin, in his article where he claimed Ukrainians and Russians are just one people, artificially divided.

This narrative has a long history in Russian imperial thought. From this perspective, you'd see relations between Ukraine and Russia as a competition of at least two nation-building projects. One would say Ukraine is not a part of Russia; Ukrainians are a separate people. This narrative is the most dominant in Ukraine right now. However, this nation-building project has not succeeded fully — despite three revolutions that had very strong nation-building content, which happened in 1990, 2004, and 2014. Another narrative would claim that Ukrainians are actually part of some bigger Eastern Slavic unity and this nation-building project wasn't realized because of the weakness of modernization in the Russian Empire.

However, this discussion occupies just a small part of Ukrainian society, intellectuals especially. For regular Ukrainians, it's not the salient question. According to polls conducted for the thirty years since Soviet independence, the questions of jobs, wages, and prices have been at the top, while identity, language,

geopolitical relations, the EU, Russia, and NATO were always down the list of Ukrainian priorities.

**BM: Some commentators say that because the far right hasn't been very successful in post-Maidan elections, its role in the country is negligible. How true is this?**

**VI:** The role of radical nationalists in Ukrainian politics is significant, via direct pressure on the government and dissemination of narratives. If you look at the actual policies that were taken by the post-Maidan government, you'll see the program of radical nationalist parties, particularly decommunization, banning the Communist Party of Ukraine, and Ukrainianization, which means pushing the Russian language out of the Ukrainian public sphere. Many things that the far right campaigned on before Maidan were implemented by nominally non-far-right politicians.

Nationalist radicalization is very good compensation for the lack of any revolutionary changes after the revolution. If you start, for example, to change something in the ideological sphere — renaming streets, taking away any Soviet symbols from the country, removing Vladimir Lenin's statues that were standing in many Ukrainian cities — you create an illusion of change without actually changing in the direction of the people's aspirations.

Most of the relevant parties are actually electoral machines for specific patron-clientelistic networks. Ideologies are usually totally irrelevant. It's not difficult to find politicians who have switched between completely opposite camps in Ukrainian politics several times during their careers.

The radical nationalist parties, by contrast, have ideology, they have motivated activists, and at this moment, they are probably the only parties in the real sense of the word "party." They are the most organized, the most mobilized parts of the civil society, with the strongest street mobilization. After 2014, they also got the resources for violence: they got the opportunities to create affiliated

armed units and a broad network of training centers, summer camps, sympathetic cafés, and magazines. This infrastructure perhaps doesn't exist in any other European country. It looks more like 1930s far-right politics in Europe than contemporary European far-right politics — which doesn't rely so much on paramilitary violence but is instead capable of winning quite a broad part of the electorate.

**BM: What are some of the misunderstood or unknown aspects of the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution that Western audiences may not be aware of?**

**VI:** In the West, what has become dominant is the narrative of professional NGOs, which were an important part of the uprising in 2014. But they definitely did not represent the whole diversity of this uprising and represented even less the diversity of this big country. In their narratives, this was a democratic, peaceful revolution against an authoritarian government led by Viktor Yanukovich, who is probably one of the very few rulers in the world to have been toppled by two revolutions.

This narrative of the professional NGOs and national-liberal intellectuals was taken up by the Western media and Western officials, partially because it's what they wanted to hear. And Western officials supported the Maidan Revolution quite openly. For the EU at that moment, it was quite inspiring, because while the people in Greece were burning EU flags, people in Ukraine were waving them.

Fear of radical nationalists inspired the anti-Maidan protests in the southeastern parts of Ukraine. Russia decided to supply and, in a crucial moment, intervene and prevent the defeat of separatist rebels in the region. The result is that a part of Donbass, an eastern Ukrainian, heavily industrialized and urbanized region, is now under the control of so-called people's republics that should be seen more or less as Russian puppet states.

**BM: What are your hopes for how**

**this crisis might be resolved?**

**VI:** My hope is there will be a peaceful resolution to the crisis. We all need to hope that the Russians will not start a stupid invasion and they will not start to escalate, not only in Donbass but even further.

Any progress in the implementation of the Minsk accords — which are about how to integrate the pro-Russian separatist territories back into Ukraine — would certainly be helpful for de-escalation. Even though most Ukrainians are not happy about the Minsk accords — mostly because they have proven ineffective since 2015 and haven't brought peace to Donbass, not that most Ukrainians find them inherently unacceptable — the actual protests against the Minsk accords were quite small and not really supported by the majority of Ukrainians.

But so far, Ukraine doesn't want to accept Minsk. It finds different excuses not to do what it agreed to do together with France, Germany, and Russia. One of the reasons is the very explicit violent threats from nationalist civil society in Ukraine, which perceive Minsk as a capitulation for Ukraine. For the nationalists, Minsk means recognizing Ukraine's political diversity — that dissenting Ukrainians are not simply zombified by Russian propaganda, and they are not national traitors; that they have very rational reasons not to agree with the nationalist narrative and have an alternative perception of Ukraine.

If the Ukrainian government were serious about implementing the accords, and not finding excuses by pointing to threats from the nationalists, they might ask for help from the West — for a very consolidated position from the United States and the EU in the accords' quick implementation. It would certainly be helpful for the Ukrainian government and demotivate the nationalist part of civil society, especially those parts that are directly dependent on financial aid from the West.

*10 February 2022*

Source [Jacobin](#).

# Canadian Truckers Protests Show Strength of Trumpism North of Border

13 February 2022, by **Dan La Botz**

The convoy represents a significant movement by the country's growing far right, one that parallels and is influenced by right-wingers South of their border led by Donald Trump.

## Trudeau "far left lunatic"

In fact, Donald Trump issued a statement calling Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of the Liberal Party a "far left lunatic" who had "destroyed Canada with insane COVID mandates." Trump supported the Canadian Freedom Convoy and suggested that truckers in the United States emulate it and bring the protest to Washington, D.C.

The Freedom Convoy criticizes Trudeau as responsible for the health policies they oppose. In a press conference Trudeau pointed out that 90 percent of truckers, like all Canadians, are vaccinated and that the Freedom Convoy represents a "small, fringe minority." Two Canadian left-wing authors and activists, Judy Rebick and Corvin Russell, while denouncing the inadequacies and misdirection of Canadian policy on the pandemic, pointed out in an article published on 4 February that "the absence of any coherent and organized left response has been glaring, particularly from labour unions, which have done little more than release tardy, lukewarm statements." [24]

## Don't Tread On Me

At the center of the protest is a Canadian law that requires truckers returning from the United States, where the COVID runs rampant, to

isolate for fourteen days. As in the United States, amongst those protesting the mandates one finds racist opponents of foreign immigrants. Some carried the Canadian flag but others the American Gadsden "Don't Tread On Me" flag [showing a coiled rattlesnake ready to strike] commonly carried in rightwing protests in the United States, and some swastikas.

The Conservative Party has supported the protest. As a result Senator David Patterson resigned from the Conservative Caucus because of its support for the protests saying: "I wholeheartedly and unreservedly deplore and denounce what is happening in Ottawa with the so-called Freedom Convoy right now. Let me be clear- if you wrap yourself in or go about waving a Nazi or Confederate flag, you are declaring yourself a person who embraces hate, bigotry, and racism." [25]

Protests have involved hundreds of trucks, even earth moving equipment, and protestors also encampments, blocking major city thoroughfares in Ottawa, the capital of Canada.

"It's not a protest anymore. It's become an occupation," Ontario Premier Doug Ford of the Progressive Conservative Party said, "It's time for this to come to an end."

Freedom Convoy also protested in cities in Quebec, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and British Columbia. Through GoFundMe the Convoy raised 10 million in Canadian dollars, but GoFundMe has seized the funds because of the group's violent protests. [26]

## "Health not Hate"

Truckers, who usually own their own trucks, represent the classic lower-middle class base of many rightwing movements. They are and consider themselves to be small businesspeople, though their earning and working conditions are often not much different than wage earners. In times like these, facing an unstable economy, higher fuel costs, and government restrictions, some have taken to the streets.

Six years ago, when I went to speak to a U.S.-Canada transportation workers convention, I was surprised to find a few Trump followers among them. Today in Canada, rightwing sentiment has grown. When Trump banned Syrian refugees in 2017, 25 percent of Canadians said that their country should have done the same. In 2018-19, a Yellow Vests movement in Canada attracted tens of thousands of followers on Facebook and organized small protests against a carbon tax, opposed oil pipelines, and stood against United Nations "globalists." Their ranks were riddled with white supremacists, anti-Semites and anti-immigrant racists.

While Canada has a growing rightwing movement, it still represents a small portion of the population. Canada has strong labor and left traditions, and the left has criticized and organized to resist the Freedom Convoy. In Toronto hundreds of masked health workers protested against the convoy carrying signs reading "Health Not Hate". In Vancouver, British Columbia, protestors actually blocked the Freedom Convoy. As Rebick and Cofvin write "If organized labour is to have any relevance in the era of COVID, it must mobilize to counter and even stop far right protests

around the country, and make aggressive demands that speak to the basic needs of working class people.”

6 February 2022

This article was written for the NPA newspaper *[l'Anticapitaliste](#)*.

# Canadian Tie Up

13 February 2022, by **Tony Leah**

## Not workers

The big rigs that have played such a disruptive part in the protests were brought there by owner-operators or by owners of trucking companies. No working class truck driver has the wherewithal to take a 6-figure vehicle to a protest and park it for days and weeks on end. Working class truck drivers have bosses (who own the trucks) and have to be on the road to earn money. 90% of Canadian long-haul truckers are vaccinated. They don't support the protests at all — see the statement from [Teamsters Canada](#). Some of the leading owner operators and trucking company owners in the protests have threatened workers on picket lines in the past.

## Not fighting for working class demands

The protests have not demanded higher wages or safer working conditions for truck drivers. There is a huge issue in Canada (maybe the US as well?) of trucking companies putting pressure on drivers, especially immigrant workers, to sign contracts that they are “independent contractors” so that the company doesn't have to pay them minimum wage or overtime. The mis-classified drivers are also disintitiled from workers comp and unemployment insurance. They are subject to massive wage theft. The protestors don't mention these issues either. Instead, they are fighting for an end to public health measures — which only benefits companies that want workers

to get back to making profits for the owners, without protection.

## Racism, right-wing populism

The protests have included people with Confederate flags and swastikas, they have vandalized homes and businesses with pride flags or signs supporting vaccinations, they include signs promoting loony right-wing conspiracy theories, they have bullied and harassed Ottawa citizens who are wearing masks - following them and demanding they take their masks off. They have threatened health care workers. Supporters of the protesters say that most are peaceful — but the racist, bullying element has been tolerated. In fact, the instigators and leaders of the protest include people with a long history of attachment to neo-nazi and white supremacist movements. It is so bad that when people have complained to the Ottawa police, the police have told them they should avoid wearing masks outside, and not to wear clothing identifying themselves as health care workers, in order to not provoke the protesters. There is significant support for the protests from some police and military.

## Who leads and supports the protestors?

The leaders of the protest convoy are not from the trucking industry for the most part, but from the right wing of the Conservative Party, the even further right-wing Peoples Party

(Maxime Bernier, Brian Peckford), white supremacists, Western Canadian separatists (Maverick Party). They are anti-worker and anti-immigrant. They have attracted the support of Elon Musk, Rick DiSantis, Donald Trump, Ted Cruz. Is this who you want to stand with?

## Canadian unions, progressive groups indigenous organizations have denounced the protests

The Canadian Labour Congress, the central labour body in Canada, the Teamsters Union, and many other unions have pointed out the anti-worker, racist, right-wing politics behind the protests. Many Indigenous groups in Canada have done the same. I think that is who we should be standing with, not the right-wing protesters.

[The Canadian Labour Congress](#) (3.3 million workers, 52 affiliated unions)

[Teamsters Canada](#)

[CUPE Local 4600](#)

[CUPE National](#) (Canada's largest union - 700,000 members)

[Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs](#)  
[Manitoba Metis Federation](#),

[Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations](#) (Saskatchewan)

[Vancouver counter protest stops](#)

convoy

Ontario Health Coalition

“This weekend, we stood together in solidarity with the incredible health professionals who organized the event to support public health, science, democracy, equity and our public hospital staff and patients as the anti-

public health convoy came to Toronto.”

Statement from the Public Service Alliance of Canada (215,000 members across Canada)

Saturday, February 12 at 1PM, there will be a rally of unionists and community activists in solidarity with

frontline workers and Ottawa residents affected by the occupation. It is co-sponsored by the PSAC and Free Transit Ottawa and will be held in Lansdowne Park, behind Aberdeen Pavilion in Ottawa.

10 February 2022

Source *Against the Current*.

# Why the Left Should Oppose the Beijing Winter Olympics

12 February 2022, by **Shi Jin**

However, the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics is quite a topic globally: on one hand, the host country has put a lot of efforts to create an epic event; on the other hand, its rivalries - chief among them the United States - are trying to spoil the party by calling for a boycott.

No doubt that the so-called ‘diplomatic boycott’ is just another manoeuvre of the current imperialist soap opera. And certainly, the left must not support either side. But we have to say something - when the right-wingers are denouncing the Games enthusiastically and uprightly, ignoring the event and the debates will just make us irrelevant or seem to be tacitly acquiescing in the CCP’s discourse.

Thus the left should oppose it with its own reasons.

## Traditional left-wing stand

The organized protests of the left against the Olympics date back as least to 1936: in order to counter the Nazi Games in Berlin, trade unions, workers’ organizations, Jewish groups and leftist parties organized the Barcelona People’s Olympiad (unfortunately, it was called off due to Franco’s coup, just two days before the planned opening

ceremonies). [27].

In the 21st century, the Games have become mega-commercial events and present the myriad stains of capitalism: white elephant projects, corruption, budget overrun, waste of resources, labor rights violation, forced relocation of the poor, environmental devastation, undemocratic decision-making, nationalist hatred and frenzy, drug abuse, disrupting the lives of ordinary people...

As a result, from Athens to London, from Rio to Tokyo, people had protested in every city where they hosted the Games. The only exception was Beijing 2008 - the Chinese people had enough reasons to hit the streets but there was no sizable demonstration. This was because the Chinese state neither tolerated any dissents, nor hesitated to use its power to repress.

The Chinese people are much more dissatisfied and angry in 2022. And the Beijing Winter Olympics constructs a huge irony. Billions have been spent on the Games, while China has over 600 million people whose monthly income is barely 1,000 yuan (USD 140). [28] Robot Chefs [29] are serving inside Beijing’s Olympic bubble to prevent the spread of COVID-19, while a woman in a village thousands of kilometers away is

chained around the neck to serve as a birth machine [30]. President Xi was worshipped like an emperor at the opening ceremony (see the photo of banquet above [not reproduced here]), while ordinary people got censored on social media for talking about the Games (yes, literally cannot post the Chinese word of ‘Winter Olympics’).

Therefore, a left-wing stand that follows its tradition should go beyond boycott (ordinary people are not allowed to attend anyway) - we should oppose the holding of the Beijing Games entirely and call for the abolishment of the current Olympic empire once for all. The world needs new forms of sports events which are democratically organized, harmless to the environment, genuinely beneficial to the general public, and not about making the rich richer.

## Politicized Games

CCP condemns the West’s ‘diplomatic boycott’ as politicizing sports. However, the Beijing Games have long been politicized internally by CCP.

Some sports of the Games are held in Zhangjiakou, which is a city of Hebei Province. An article of *Hebei Daily* says:

The preparation and holding of the



Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics and Winter Paralympics is a national event personally planned and promoted by General Secretary Xi Jinping, and is a major political mission given to Hebei by the Party Central Committee.

preparatory work for the Winter Olympic Games; and central government owned enterprises have always taken the construction and service works of the Winter Olympic Games as a major political mission... and has achieved important milestones.

the discontents overshadowed by the festive atmosphere, to uncover the censored issues during the time, to make fun of the nationalistic fever...

The point of opposing the Games loudly is to let those whose attention has been drawn to the Games be aware of the ongoing tragedies in China which CCP wants people to neglect - ethnic minorities' sufferings, Peng Shuai, Hong Kong, women's oppression, hunger and hardships caused by extreme epidemic prevention and control measures, human trafficking, long working hours, layoffs, pay cuts, rising cost of living...

## Is this joining the chorus of other imperialist powers?

Well, CCP actually publishes annual reports on US human rights violations, and its state media broadcast the news of BLM protests in a timely manner. Will we stop condemn the US government because we don't want to go along with the totalitarian regime of CCP?

No matter what the intended purposes are, the West's 'diplomatic boycott' does make more people pay attention to what is happening in China, so does the Olympics itself. We should use this opportunity to promote our viewpoints on China and expand our audience.

8 February 2022

Indeed, the entire bureaucracy has been indoctrinated with the political significance of the Games. Back in 2020, in the first plenary meeting of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics and Winter Paralympics Airport Service Coordination Task Group, the administrator of the Civil Aviation Administration of China [stressed](#):

If politicizing sports is a bad thing, then what you say about the statements above? Let's admit it: the Beijing Olympics is a political game right from the beginning. So people have the right to judge and protest against it politically.

Besides, since CCP insists on using the language of the left in its propaganda, naturally these materials would be used for left-bashing. Then speaking out against the Games is also to draw a line between China's deceitful socialism and genuine left-wing prospects.

## The world is watching

To be realistic, the left generally does not have the influence to convince anyone (enterprises, officials, athletes, audience, volunteers, etc.) not to go to the Beijing Games. The only 'boycott' actions we can take are probably not watching it on TV or not clicking 'like' on social media (won't hurt CCP at all).

Nevertheless, we can take the initiative to reveal the event's hypocrisy and contradiction, to spread

Civil aviation system... must deeply understand the political attributes of the airport service work during the Beijing Winter Olympic Games. This work is not only a professional work, but also a major political mission given to the civil aviation system by the Party Central Committee, which is one of the most important political missions in the next two years.

On another occasion, the secretary of the Party Committee of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council [stated](#):

The Party Central Committee, with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core, attaches great importance to the

# On the ground in Kazakhstan's protests: what really happened?

11 February 2022, by **Almas Kaisar**, **Dmitriy Mazorenko**

These whirlwind events have left many confused as to what actually happened in Kazakhstan - and what the relationship is between the original protests and the violence.

As journalists based in the city, we were present during events on 4 and 5 January and have attempted to provide an initial, confirmed picture of events.

## Disaffected community

While on 4 January, the narrative of civic protest was positive and exultant in Almaty, overnight it changed, after law enforcement used force against protesters. By 5 January, the mood appeared to be more decisive. By the end of the day, it was apocalyptic. A communications and internet shutdown at the peak of the chaos meant that few details could emerge at the time, leaving state agencies and media to guide the narrative. A more detailed account of how events emerged in Almaty, the epicentre of the violence, can therefore shed light on what protesters may have wanted. It remains unclear who was behind these episodes of violence, and who exactly participated in them.

On the evening of 4 January, a group of young people from a relatively new liberal political movement, 'Oyan, Qazaqstan' ('Wake up, Kazakhstan' in English), began to gather in Almaty near a park dedicated to Nursultan Nazarbayev, which is one of the many 'sacred places' devoted to the former president created by Kazakhstan's authoritarian regime over the past 30 years. As the activists stood in heavy rain, they hoped Almaty residents would respond to their call to support protesters in the western Mangistau region. Initially, their sole 'supporter' was a man who came to photograph them, who was most likely from Kazakhstan's National Security Committee. Even then, demonstrators felt that law enforcement did not intend to protect them.

After some time, a large group of men joined the activists, some of whom were known nationalists, who had previously been in conflict with the

Oyan movement. That evening, it appears ideological differences lost their meaning.

Together, the two groups marched down a small street and were soon stopped by the police. In the struggle, part of the crowd managed to run away, another group was released by the police, and then the remaining people were detained, beaten or dragged along the asphalt.

Activists who managed to escape the police later joined another group of protesters on the city's outskirts, after the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan, an unregistered opposition initiative, called a rally near the Almaty Arena sports complex.

As we observed, some of the people who gathered at Almaty Arena did not belong to any political organisation or movement, and the crowd treated the leader of the Democratic Party, former journalist Zhanbolat Mamay, with caution. Some explained their scepticism over what they saw as Mamay's possible affiliation with the Kazakhstani authorities. Mamay himself, who recently lost a defamation claim to the former mayor of Almaty over corruption allegations, has repeatedly denied these accusations.

The rally went on for several hours, before demonstrators set out on an 18-kilometre journey to Almaty's city administration building in the centre. Their procession seemed endless - you couldn't see its start or finish. People walked alongside traffic. Flags were hung from many cars, and demonstrators sat on the back of them. On occasion, people sang Kazakhstan's national anthem and chanted "Alga, Kazakhstan!" (Forward, Kazakhstan!). Residents of nearby buildings greeted them from their balconies, giving out water and medical masks.

## A night of clashes

Throughout the march to the city centre on 4 January, protesters spoke to one another enthusiastically. They shared their experiences and found solidarity in their main demand - not just in reducing gas prices, but in

changing Kazakhstan's entire political system.

For many years, the country's power elite, busy enriching themselves, was able to offer citizens only lawlessness, a lack of social protection and poverty. "The Nazarbayev family steals from us all the time! We feel as if we live only to feed them. Are you also unhappy with this?" one of the protesters said.

Now, several thousand people were preparing to voice their discontent in the square next to the city administration. Among them were members of political movements, service sector workers, unemployed youth from the periphery of the city, internal migrants, and a few representatives of the urban middle class. The majority of the protesters, according to sociologist Serik Beisembayev, who studied photos and videos from the protests, were men aged between 20 and 40.

When the march reached Republic Square, the crowd filled it. The police immediately fought back with shields and batons. Security forces also began throwing stun grenades and spraying tear gas, which could be felt even a few blocks from the square.

Some of the protesters began to rip out of the ground flags installed in honour of the 30th anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence - and use them against the police. Then, sticks were used as weapons, as well as shields taken from the security forces and paving stones that had been abundantly laid out by two previous mayors in the old centre of the city.

Soon a rumour began to spread that Kazakhstani military personnel were headed towards the protesters. "Don't run away! Why did you come?" people shouted after those who retreated. Someone gave a command, and the crowd stormed the police cordons. Others began to move towards Astana Square, where the government of the Kazakh Soviet Republic was located during the Soviet era. For several hours, they gathered forces, then began to re-engage with the police.

After midnight, a group of several young men secured a truck and used it to lead the vanguard of the protest,

which was concentrated near the city administration. People climbed onto the building's roof holding Kazakhstani flags. Almost immediately, a group of protesters swept past with placards: 'The people are awake!', 'The government should resign!', 'The banks are sucking the people dry!' The mood was jubilant.

Throughout the night, protesters resisted security forces. They were constantly crowded out of the square, and dispersed to different parts of the city. As the explosions of stun grenades increased, so did the force from the crowd - groups of young men began to smash police cars. They were injured, some were taken away in approaching cars. But people did not think to disperse and remained in the square.

Overnight, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev introduced a state of emergency in Almaty, which would remain in effect until midnight on 19 January. Tokayev also ordered reductions in gas prices, and began to regulate the cost of fuels and lubricants and essential goods. At the same time, he introduced a six-month moratorium on a rise in utility tariffs. By the morning of 6 January, it was announced that Kazakhstan's government had resigned.

## The square is on fire

It appears Tokayev's measures did not satisfy some of the protesters, and on the morning of 5 January they decided to continue the offensive. Most shops, cafes and bank branches did not open in the centre of Almaty. Public transport did not operate and taxis continued to be unavailable due to internet blockages. Republic Square was cordoned off by Kazakhstani military in armoured personnel carriers. Traces of blood were visible on the ground.

Closer to lunchtime, another large procession was formed, but on another thoroughfare, Tole bi. This march developed spontaneously, in part started by random residents of nearby houses and districts. Those who had participated in the clashes

near the city administration the previous evening also joined. The protesters' demands varied: some took to the streets because of problems with [housing](#) and [unpayable loans](#), others to call for wage increases.

People in military or police uniforms appeared in the crowd. On social media, eyewitnesses reported rumours that individual police and military officers had gone over to the side of the protesters. They shared their equipment with other demonstrators to make them stand out less in the crowd, observers believed. We could not confirm how reliable this information is.

Some demonstrators aroused indignation and fear among other protesters by their appearance: it was easy to mistake them for adherents of radical religious movements. A bearded man with a travel bag was surrounded and asked to show the contents of his bag. "Is he not a Wahhabite [a follower of a fundamentalist movement within Sunni Islam] ? What is he carrying?" people asked. There was nothing serious in the bag, however. In total, about ten men with beards were found in the march.

On the way, a small group of demonstrators separated from the general protest and rushed to break glass in an office belonging to the ruling Nur-Otan party. Soon after, this office caught fire. Later, the participants of the march decided to block the road in order to impede the movement of law enforcement. They blocked some ambulances, which they thought could be secretly carrying security forces. When they failed to find police in them, they let them go.

Then the demonstrators began to build barricades of slabs, paving stones and other improvised means on the Tole bi. 'This kind of thing has not happened since 1986!' said eyewitnesses, who were surprised by the events unfolding. (That year, protesters had fiercely contested the decision of the central Soviet authorities to appoint Gennady Kolbin, an ethnic Russian who had never lived in Kazakhstan, to the head of the Kazakh Soviet Republic. Protesters were fiercely repressed as a result.)

Meanwhile, protesters exclaimed "Oyan, Kazakhstan!", borrowing the slogan from the political movement of the same name. Different groups separated from them, which stormed various buildings, smashed windows and disabled surveillance cameras. Peaceful protesters tried to contain their fervour, but it did not always work. Tear gas was in the vicinity and a rumour spread among the crowd that it was being sprayed from the roofs of the surrounding buildings.

Gradually, the procession reached Republic Square, which was already occupied by other protesters. Firecrackers, flash-noise grenades and tear gas flew from the city administration. Several groups of men broke the windows and doors and went inside.

At this point, wounded demonstrators began to emerge and were carried away from the firing. Someone spoke about the death of several people. Some of those in the square were sure that when you got close to the security forces, they would shoot live ammunition. Others claimed they were shooting rubber bullets. A thick fog covered the neighbouring streets more and more.

In the evening, barricades began to appear near the city administration. This was probably the moment when the protest turned into an armed riot. Eyewitnesses began to report that gun shops had been looted and police stations had been attacked. People with firearms began to [dominate over peaceful protesters](#) on the streets. The first reports of those killed were received at this time, but it was impossible to verify them: no one answered calls at the city police department.

The approaches to the presidential residence in Almaty, meanwhile, were overflowing with young men. The fire in the city administration was growing. Soon, more fires were blazing in the buildings of state TV channels located opposite the city administration. It seemed as if the whole area was drowning in flames.

## From protests to armed riots

A little later, it was reported that the city prosecutor's office had been [set on fire](#). At night, unidentified persons tried to seize various important buildings, including hospitals and Almaty city airport. An attack also took place at the city police station. The number of armed people near government administrative buildings began to grow.

It is not known exactly who made up these armed groups. But in Almaty, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, extremists, criminal groups and looters were operating. It is also unknown who coordinated them - and on what conditions - or whether they were connected with one another. The ministry is now conducting an investigation to establish these facts.

Photos and videos of people ransacking shopping boutiques, restaurants and banks flooded Kazakhstani social media. There were fewer and fewer police and military personnel visible. Eyewitnesses noticed that almost no one opposed the looters.

On 10 January, president Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev said that the armed riots had caused \$2-3bn in damage to Kazakhstan's economy. Similar riots swept through many other parts of Kazakhstan. Active opposition to the violence emerged in several other regions: Zhambyl, Kyzylorda and Almaty.

In Taraz, a city in southern Kazakhstan, a branch of the Nur Otan party burned down completely. Three police buildings and the regional administration were also burned down. In the city of Aktobe in western Kazakhstan, three floors of the regional administration building were destroyed. In Taldykorgan, not far from Almaty, an unidentified armed group tried to seize the town's prison, but failed.

## Against

## intervention

On the night of 6 January, the state of emergency was extended to the whole of Kazakhstan. In parallel, Tokayev appealed to the heads of state of the Russian-backed Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) with a request to send troops to Kazakhstan. The presidents of Russia and Belarus were the first to respond. Soon they were joined by troops from Armenia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Foreign military forces were sent for a limited period of time to protect Kazakhstani government facilities. Many citizens perceived this as a threat to Kazakhstan's sovereignty and a possible reason for conflict between the country's two large ethnic groups - Kazakhs and Russians.

This fear was justified. Despite an upsurge in violence in Almaty and several other regions, rallies in other parts of Kazakhstan continued to be peaceful until 8 January. On 6 and 7 January, thousands of people - men and women of all different ages - remained in the central squares of towns and cities. They feared that the CSTO units would begin to use unreasonable force against them. This could be due to the recent, [unfounded scandal](#) over the alleged oppression of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan.

In contrast, overnight on 7 January, President Tokayev categorically stated that Kazakhstan had been attacked by 'terrorists', and pro-government experts began to echo him. Allegedly, without the CSTO troops, Almaty would have turned into an Islamic caliphate, they claimed. Mass executions and rape of women would have begun in the city. At the same time, no one tried to give an answer as to why Kazakhstan, which has more than 70,000 people in its armed forces, was not capable of repelling 20,000 so-called 'terrorists and bandits'.

Neither the experts, nor the president, nor the security forces explained what exactly made the armed groups 'terrorists'. After security forces began to detain people, religious literature was found in some of their personal belongings - so far, this is all

that has been presented as evidence. Why this literature was called 'extremist' before a forensic examination, no one could say.

This deliberately vague use of the term 'extremist' creates a dangerous interpretation. Peaceful demonstrators, journalists and human rights activists can easily be classed as 'terrorists'. After Tokayev's speech, many of these people expressed concern on social media that the 'anti-terrorist operation' would end in repression against them.

In the afternoon of 6 January, activists began to flock to Almaty's city administration building. Somewhere cleaning up the mess, and others joined them, holding banners reading 'Tokayev, withdraw troops (CSTO), we are a peaceful people' and 'We are residents of Almaty, we are not terrorists'. Hours later, at least one of these protesters was [shot](#).

On 7 January, President Tokayev and his subordinates proposed a more detailed categorisation of protest participants. In addition to peaceful protesters, supporters of radical religious movements, criminal groups and looters were singled out.

The official charges of armed riots were brought against radical religious movements and criminals. Viewers of state TV channels were broadcast videos in which detainees admitted that they were foreigners and had come to Kazakhstan to organise riots for money.

One of the detainees was a citizen of Kyrgyzstan, jazz musician Vikram Ruzakhunov. In a video taken in custody, Ruzakhunov said that he was allegedly paid a little more than \$200 for participating in the violence. After being released from custody, he explained that he had given the testimony only to ensure he was deported to Kyrgyzstan. If not for the efforts of civil society and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kyrgyzstan, Ruzakhunov could have faced a prison term. Another 38 citizens of Kyrgyzstan were detained as part of investigations, but were soon released.

At the same time, experts argued that

Kazakhstan was not under attack from terrorists, but rather a clash between two political clans. Arguments appeared in the press that Samat Abish, the first deputy chairman of the National Security Committee (KNB), and businessman Kairat Satybaldy were behind the riots. Both are relatives of former President Nazarbayev.

But on 6 January, the head of the KNB, Karim Massimov, was detained on suspicion of high treason, instead of Abish and Satybaldy. Several of Massimov's deputies were also removed from their posts. On 10 January, several senior KNB employees and local police officers were found dead at their homes and workplaces.

On 11 January, Tokayev accused the KNB of 'ignoring the terrorist threat'. As will be established by law enforcement agencies, some regional KNB leaders voluntarily surrendered their offices to attackers. At least one police chief, in the city of Taraz, was suspected of the same offence. According to so far unconfirmed information, he took his own life while awaiting charges of treason.

## Forget about people

From 6-10 January, firefights between security forces and unidentified armed units - whom the state called 'organised terrorist forces' - continued in Almaty. At first, the battle covered five or six districts of the city, though it was later pushed to the periphery. Throughout Almaty, there was no access to the internet. There were problems accessing food and utilities. ATMs were disabled or destroyed. Residents were horrified by the lack of information and the incessant shooting.

Most people did not leave their homes, though some ventured to join the

squads collecting rubbish and rebuilding the city's infrastructure. Others, mainly in villages near Almaty, created patrols of local residents to stop looting by strangers who flooded the streets.

People who needed to move from one area of the city to another were in danger all the time. Armed groups also attacked them. The son of Eldar Tuimebayev, the rector of the Kazakhstan National University, **died** as a result of gunshot wounds, as did **two children**. It is unclear who committed the shootings.

According to official information, 227 people died during the clashes, including 19 law enforcement personnel. More than 4,500 people were injured, the prosecutor's office claimed.

By the morning of 11 January, nearly 10,000 people had been detained. But since the Ministry of Internal Affairs does not always specify whether people had weapons or valuables at the time of their arrest, it is unknown how many of those people were detained without good reason. On 17 January, it was reported that 8,354 administrative cases were under investigation, and 819 criminal investigations were active. Of these, 45 cases concerned acts of terrorism, 36 - mass unrest and 15 - murder.

With the restoration of internet access on 10 January, arrests of activists and journalists came to light. The majority were released or sent to administrative detention for a number of days. At least four journalists in the Aktobe region were summoned for interrogation. Human rights activists do not exclude that there may be more arrests and interrogations.

Despite the numerous civilian casualties, the government has paid most attention to the deaths of 19 law enforcement officers. The president has delivered eulogies to the brave police officers and their families are promised free apartments and financial assistance. Ordinary people,

meanwhile, receive more pro-forma condolences.

The president's promises to prevent future outbreaks of protests look no less pro forma, so far. Tokayev vowed to revise the country's social policy, create a new public fund that will sponsor social protection initiatives, and strengthen the law enforcement system. It looks as if the elites have been told to pay some costs towards the country's disenfranchised population. In turn, the people are meant to obey the authorities in exchange for a higher salary.

The political order built by Nazarbayev looks so far unscathed. The demands and values of the people have always seemed insignificant compared to the interests of Kazakhstan's elites. When Tokayev requested troops from the CSTO, he intended to protect the authorities. As he said: "the state will not fall" - and as the Nazarbayev side added: "it is monolithic".

Despite the destruction of the monument to Nazarbayev in Taldykorgan and broken signs on streets named after him, Tokayev continues to echo the former president. Unpopular initiatives come not from him, but from third parties - Nazarbayev's favourite trick. Parliamentarians are far from stopping the ritual display of loyalty. And pro-government experts, speaking of the need to abandon the cult of the boss, still praise Nazarbayev's 'strong hand'.

Experts predict that next time the cost of not meeting Kazakhstani society's needs may be too high for the country if the right lessons are not drawn. If we rely too much on one person - Tokayev, who repeats many of Nazarbayev's actions - and not on our own political participation, then society will be quite capable of making another mistake.

Source [Open Democracy](#).

# Resistance committees, a revolution from below in Sudan

10 February 2022, by **Hamad Gamal, Sarah Bachellerie**

The resistance committees - also known as neighbourhood committees - emerged as a central actor in the Sudanese•e•s struggle against the previous Islamist regime. They were pivotal to the success of the December 2018 revolution, which uprooted the regime of dictator Omar al-Bashir. Many political actors are betting that the resistance committees will play a central role in the democratic transition process the country is engaged in. They also offer real prospects for direct, 'grassroots' democracy, thanks to their experience of self-management and their local presence.

## Neighbourhood committees: a convergence between local solidarity and political resistance

Originally, resistance committees were simple groups of citizens who formed in neighbourhoods in different cities in Sudan, in order to establish by themselves basic services that were lacking in the neighbourhoods, such as electricity and water, and to improve conditions and services in schools and hospitals (by buying school or medical equipment, renovating buildings). For example, in September 2019, in the village of Zuhai (Gezira State), the resistance committees launched a campaign to rebuild the village well; in the Klakla neighbourhood of Khartoum, in January 2020, they organised a major collective clean-up of public spaces as rubbish accumulated in the street with indifference from the authorities. In the city of Al Obeid, in April 2021,

they planted trees to support the production of gum arabic, which is the city's economic wealth. These local self-management movements bring together local residents•e•s from all different age and social classes, although young men and women are particularly active.

In September 2013, after the separation of South Sudan and the loss of its oil resources, a major economic crisis hit North Sudan, triggering a popular revolt. The resistance committees were at the forefront of this revolt, demanding the fall of the regime. From then on, the 'resistance committees' became an important political actor in the Sudanese political arena, on a par with political organisations and trade unions.

Their emergence prompted the former regime, led by Omar al-Bashir, to focus repression mainly on these resistance committees. The regime sought to dismantle them so that they would not extend their influence into the neighbourhoods where they were active, sometimes as political organisations and sometimes as social and humanitarian service associations. The important fieldwork carried out by the resistance committees earned them the trust of the inhabitant•e•s of the neighbourhoods.

The dream of the citizens•ne•s and activists•e•s of the resistance committees was to rebuild the country from the bottom up, starting at the local neighbourhood level. Gradually, the trust and support they received from the inhabitant•e•s gave them the enthusiasm to extend this dream to the whole nation. They launched the hashtag 'Hanabniho', which means 'we will rebuild it', implying the country.

## Constant political and social activity since the 2019 revolution

After the fall of the regime in April 2019, the resistance committees remained constantly active, trying to protect the gains of the revolution. At the same time, they tried to rebuild what the previous regime had destroyed, disintegrating the social fabric and cultural life in the neighbourhoods (notably by closing cinemas and cultural centres, and putting their premises up for sale). The neighbourhood committees also organised many political events to support the interests of the revolution, with the aim of building a country for everyone, such as martyrdom commemoration ceremonies in each neighbourhood, and the celebration of the International Day of the Rights of Women and the Disabled. For example, on the occasion of International Women's Rights Day on 8 March 2020, the resistance committees in the Arkawit neighbourhood of Khartoum set up an open clinic where all women could come for free medical treatment and tests, as well as distributing sanitary towels and holding training workshops on breast cancer.

The resistance committees also organised conferences on the future of democracy in Sudan, as well as political self-training workshops. They have been involved in establishing women's and students•e•s unions, taking advantage of the space for freedom granted by the revolution.

Over the past two years, as the country in transition was hit by destructive inflation, and plagued by

wild fluctuations in the value of the currency (the Sudanese pound), Neighbourhood committees have taken up the fight against petty corruption at their level by forming teams of 'market watchers' to ensure that traders do not raise their prices by taking advantage of the scarcity of certain resources and thus profiting from the misery of the inhabitants. On social networks, for example, one can see from several cities pictures of young people camping in bakeries to check that bakers are not hogging stocks of flour in the hope of selling their bread for much higher prices on days of shortage. In the village of Al-Hilalia (Gezira State), in October 2019, resistance committees filed a complaint against a baker who was selling expired flour to the entire neighbourhood.

Under Omar al-Bashir's regime, local authorities were grouped into "people's committees" that pursued authoritarian and corrupt policies, seeking to destroy any form of local democracy. After the revolution, the resistance committees tried to prevent this system from being repeated by simply transferring power from one authority to another: some tried to destroy administrative papers necessary for the new authorities to take office to protest against this old system and demand new forms of local democracy.

In some cases, the resistance committees managed to recover common property taken away by the previous regime, such as public squares that had been sold to bosses and investors close to the government.

While the regime pursued a policy of division on racist grounds, the activists of the resistance committees work daily to create links between the inhabitants of the neighbourhood to rebuild a peaceful social climate.

Spearheading the current mobilisations

In recent weeks, during the mass mobilisations that erupted following the coup of 25 October 2021, the resistance committees have emerged as the main actors in the organisation and coordination of the various processions. They replaced the Sudanese Professional Association, which had played the same role during the 2018 mobilisation. Following the revolution, it was the Association of Professionals that played the role of civil society representative in the transitional government, formed by a coalition between civilians and the military. The very disappointing experience of the transitional government, which led to the current coup d'état, has largely contributed to the discrediting of the Association of Professionals in Sudanese public opinion. However, today, if the resistance committees have been able to take the place of the Association of Professionals, it is because they have been able to gain the trust of the revolutionaries, a trust that the Association of Professionals as well as the political parties had lost in recent years.

Thus, as soon as the coup was announced, the resistance committees launched a call for demonstrations to oppose it. They mobilised in the neighbourhoods and informed the inhabitants of the importance of participating in the demonstration, distributing leaflets in their neighbourhoods, drawing graffiti on the walls with slogans and timetables and demonstrations. They also used the loudspeakers in the mosques to broadcast political speeches. On the eve of demonstrations, they build barricades during the night with bricks and salvaged objects in order to obstruct the traffic of the forces of law and order and to protect the

inhabitants of the neighbourhood from the attacks of the military and militias. This ingenious strategy has largely proven its effectiveness in protecting the demonstrators.

### A future for democracy in Sudan?

In conclusion, although the resistance committees are composed of citizens who do not all have experience in the political world, they organise themselves with great professionalism, trying to implement democracy in the way they make decisions. They organise themselves without having recourse to leaders, only to delegates who then coordinate themselves at the level of the borough, and then again above, at the level of the city. It is this internal democracy that has kept them united and strong, and not divided as political parties are in Sudan. This is also what makes some observers hope that the resistance committees are a way to break the monopoly of traditional political party elites in the field of politics in Sudan.

Sudanese now see that resistance committees can be an alternative to political parties that have failed to create a common climate of collective action to find solutions to Sudan's problems. Now, the resistance committees, thanks to their self-managed structure, are based on local action led by the inhabitants of neighbourhoods or villages, in which everyone participates regardless of their level of political experience: their method therefore initiates a real participatory democracy in Sudan in which everyone has the right to decide.

*This article first appeared on 4 november 2021 the blog SUDFA-><https://www.sudfa-media.com/>, containing articles about Sudan written and co-written by Sudanese and French activists.*

## Biden and the Democrats Face Potential

# Disaster; Sanders Calls for a New Course

9 February 2022, by **Dan La Botz**

Those who voted for him expected him to end the COVID pandemic, to revive the economy so damaged by COVID, and to defend American democracy from the increasing authoritarianism of Trump and the Republican Party. His platform called for major economic, social, and political programs to make the country a better place for all.

Today, despite a strong start in his first few months, Biden finds himself and his party failing on every front, opening up the prospect of a Republican victory in the mid-term elections for House and Senate on November 8 this year. Biden's failure limits the possibilities of the progressives and socialists in the Democratic Party's leftwing and means that the labor and social movements will face more difficulties in the future.

Biden's presidency began auspiciously. He and the Democrats with Republican support passed the \$1.9 trillion Covid-19 relief bill and the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill. He has been able to bring joblessness down from 18 million to 2 million receiving unemployment benefits, that is, down from 9 percent on Inauguration Day to 3.9 percent now. With a massive national vaccine distribution program, COVID cases and deaths began to fall—but then came Delta and Omicron, and once again the

pandemic swept the nation, filling hospitals, taking thousands of lives, and disrupting the economy.

In foreign policy, Biden began by reasserting America's role as an imperial power, repairing relations with the European allies that Trump had scorned and calling for resistance to the rising power of China. But his abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan undermined his allies' confidence in the United States, while his handling of the Russian threats to the Ukraine have created greater friction with the European powers.

Biden's frustrations come in large part from the highly disciplined Republican Party whose members now vote en bloc against him in the Senate and the House. But they also arise from divisions within his own Democratic Party whose conservative Senators Joe Manchin and Krysten Sinema vote with the Republicans, making it impossible to pass his social legislation, tax proposals, and voting rights legislation. Biden has been unable to pass Bill Back Better Bill containing many social programs like childcare, education, and health or to defend the voting rights legislation protecting black, Latino, young, and elderly voters. With COVID continuing, the economic recovery proceeding but unevenly, and with inflation growing at 7% a year, a forty

year high, people have lost confidence in Biden. Today according to polls only 37% approve of the job he is doing while 52% disapprove.

On the left, Senator Bernie Sanders, has called for "a major course correction. "It is no great secret that the Republican party is winning more and more support from working people," said Sanders. "It's not because the Republican party has anything to say to them. It's because in too many ways the Democratic party has turned its back on the working class....It's important that we have the guts to take on the very powerful corporate interests that have an unbelievably powerful hold on the economy of this country."

Moderate Democrats, however, criticize Biden for having leaned too far left. They want a course correction too, but to the right.

What might change the country's direction, perhaps in the spring, if the pandemic ends, is a resurgence of mass labor and social movements. Progressives, socialists, and others on the left should be involved in organizing such movement when they arise in order to create an independent political force.

1 February 2022

Source *New Politics*.

# How the Assad regime feigns 'secularism' while strengthening conservatism

8 February 2022, by **Joseph Daher**



I also want to return to the issue of secularism, because some people believe that one of the requirements of secularism, or the essence of secularism, is separating religion from the state. This is wrong: there is no relationship between secularism and separation of religion from state...

- Bashar al-Assad,  
December 7, 2020

During the speech, Assad also accused "modern liberalism" of having waged a decades-long war against "Islamic societies" and "Arabism." Modern liberalism, he said, encouraged "same-sex marriage," "gender dysphoria," and the consumption of drugs. These last positions are shared by numerous far-right and fascistic movements throughout the world.

The speech came as a surprise for some Syrians and for Western commentators and analysts. Indeed, for several decades now, the Assad regime has often been portrayed as "secular" and "modern." Supporters and opponents of Assad have both, at times, supported this view. But what is the reality of such "secularism"?

The Syrian regime has historically used secularism as a tool to repress opponents and to gain legitimacy among international actors, while rejecting its implementation within its own country, in effect strengthening conservatism and official religious institutions.

## The Syrian regime:

## Secular protector of cultural and ethnic pluralism?

The Syrian regime under the Assads has long presented itself as bulwark against "extremism" both within Syrian society and internationally, especially from 2003 in an attempt to collaborate in the so-called "war on terror" led by Western states and authoritarian regimes. Damascus has similarly promoted an image of the state as a protector of minorities, be they Christian, Alawi, Shia or Druze, in a country of multiple religious and ethnic populations, emphasizing its supposed role in ensuring the peaceful coexistence of Syrian society.

At the same time, Bashar al-Assad and Syrian officials have described Syria as a secular state to foreign media. In 2010, during an **interview** with US television journalist Charlie Rose, Assad said that the greatest challenge facing his country is the need to "preserve Syria's secular identity from the threat of extremism." Two years later, after the uprising had begun, Assad **declared** to a Russian television network that Syria was "the last stronghold of secularism and stability in the region." He reiterated this type of discourse in the following years in various interviews with foreign media.

The diversity of Syrian society and rise of Islamic fundamentalist forces alongside the progressive militarization of the uprising do not mean, however, that the regime is a secular guarantee for social cohesion. In reality, secularism has mostly been the topic of foreign-facing discourse by Assad and Syrian officials. But within the country, regime officials have always insisted instead that they are "faithful Muslims" promoting the "correct understanding of Islam," in opposition to the "fanaticism" of other groups.

This was already the case under Hafez Al-Assad's rule. In 1979, one week after the so-called "Fighting Vanguard of the Muslim Brotherhood" massacred Alawite cadets at the Aleppo Artillery School, the elder Assad gave a speech

emphasizing the importance of "the essence of Islam" in social progress. He also described the Islamic religion as espousing "love, work and ethics" and **presented himself** as a "faithful Muslim" encouraging "everyone to have faith and to fight rigidity and fanaticism."

Throughout his 30 years of rule, Hafez al-Assad continued promoting an image of himself as a pious Muslim and reintroduced previously abolished religious formulas into public ceremonies. Moreover, the regime **sponsored** and institutionalized alternative Islamic groups that were willing to play along with its political game, such as the Naqshbandi Kuftariya Sufi order under Sheikh Ahmad Kufitaro and groups affiliated with Sheikh Said al-Buti or the Qubaysiyat women's Islamic movement. A surge in mosque construction occurred under Hafez al-Assad's rule, while al-Assad Institutes for the Memorization of the Quran were established across Syria. This was linked to Assad's policies of progressive economic liberalization, especially from the mid-1980s onward, as he sought collaboration with certain sections of the bourgeoisie, particularly in Damascus, as well as Sunni religious leaders in order to consolidate his power and break with the more radical Baathist policies of the 1960s.

Following Bashar al-Assad's ascent to power in 2000, he pursued a path similar to his father's, using Islamic symbolism in an attempt to build up legitimacy and popularity among conservative Sunni Muslims. The aim was to mobilize the support of large sectors of Syrian society against a hostile international political scene and threats against Damascus after the U.S.- and U.K.-led military invasion of Iraq in 2003. Syria also faced political isolation following the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri, in which it was accused of involvement.

As explained by researcher Lina Khatib, Assad promoted the idea of "takrees al-akhlak wa nashr thaqafat al-tasamuh, wa isal al risala al-haqiqiya lil-islam" ("diffusing morality, spreading the culture of tolerance and

communicating the true message of Islam”) in many of his speeches, interviews and conference presentations. He increasingly presented himself and the Syrian regime as patrons of “moderate Islam” against “Islamic extremism.” He also projected the image of a leader faithful to Islam and a guardian of the Islamic religion in Syria. State media commonly reported Assad’s participation in holiday prayers in mosques across the country, while images abounded portraying him as a pious Muslim. Meanwhile, the regime followed a continued policy of détente, started by Hafez al-Assad at the beginning of the 1990s, toward opposition Islamic fundamentalist groups through the release of political prisoners, and the tolerance of Islamic publications and movements so long as they refrained from political involvement.

Neoliberal policies only accelerated and deepened during the younger Assad’s rule through the adoption of the “social market economy” as a new economic strategy. In other words, the private sector would become a partner and leader in the process of economic development and in providing employment instead of the state. The aim was to encourage private accumulation principally through the marketization of the economy while the state withdrew in key areas of social welfare provision.

These neoliberal policies strengthened religious associations in Syria, both Islamic and Christian, as well as their networks for service and humanitarian assistance, increasing their role in society at the expense of the state. In 2009, out of 1,485 associations, 60 percent were charities, the **vast majority** of which were religious. On the eve of the uprising, the Qubaysiyat, for example, owned around 200 schools, according to an article published on a pro-opposition news site by religious personality and former MP Muhammad Habash. The support for the Qubaysiyat reached a peak when one of their members was appointed as an official religious advisor of the Minister of Religious Endowment in early 2008, after the government established an “Office of Women’s Religious Instruction.”

The Syrian regime under the Assads has alternated policies of confrontation and harsh repression alongside collaboration with various Islamic movements. For instance, in the late 2000s, the regime repressed some Islamic groups and tried to limit their autonomy and influence, which had attained increasing importance in the preceding years.

There was, however, a general policy and rapprochement with religious conservative layers of society, coinciding with censorship of literary and artistic works and promotion of religious literature that filled the shelves of libraries. The effect was an Islamization in the field of higher education. At the same time, feminist activists and groups were publicly accused by religious conservative movements close to the regime of heresy and of seeking to destroy society’s morality. Such movements accused activists of propagating Western values, such as the notion of civil marriage, **LGBTIQ rights** and sexual freedom. For example, on April 11, 2005, the pro-regime Sheikh al-Buti waged a virulent attack on women’s rights and feminist activists, describing them in a public speech as “dirty agents,” “traitors,” “dwarfs” and “slaves whose masters seek to eradicate the Islamic civilization from its roots.” In 2010, several Islamic clerics, such as Sheikh Osama Rifai, who is now in exile for his opposition to the regime and serves as head of the Turkish-backed Syrian Islamic Council, and Sheikh Ratib al-Nabulsi, who has not taken a stance against the regime, portrayed the UN’s Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (**CEDAW**) “as a grave threat to the lives, morals, and religious values of Syrians.” These same men supported several of the Syrian regime’s arguments against key provisions of CEDAW. For example, they opposed Article 2 of the covenant, which **mandates** notably the states enshrine the principle of equality between men and women in their national constitutions and other appropriate legislation. In 2012, in one of its periodic reports to CEDAW, the Syrian government said it faced difficulties in amending the personal status law, **arguing** that while “international conventions supersede national laws,

they do not supersede divine law.”

With the outbreak of the uprising in 2011, the use of Islamic ideology remained a key element in the regime’s propaganda, which portrayed the Syrian state as promoting “moderate” and “correct” Islam in opposition to more “extremist” and “fanatic” practices. In September 2011, Assad argued in a speech that the underlying causes for the “events” in Syria were based on religious beliefs. He **referred** to the situation as a “crisis of morality” (“azmat ‘akhlaq”). In his December 7th, 2020 speech, Bashar al-Assad repeated that the violence was the result of a misunderstanding of religious beliefs. At the same time, he accused the first demonstrators in 2011, who streamed out of mosques after prayer time chanting the common protest chant “God is great!” of being atheists, in an attempt to discredit them.

## Conservatism as a tool for control

But religion is the law that controls society...The law controls relationships between people in the institutional sense, while religion controls them in the subjective and ideological sense.

- Bashar al-Assad, December 7, 2020

This sentiment is indeed reflected in the Syrian constitution and in legislation, which is filled with various religious dimensions. Certain rights and duties have long been assigned according to one’s religious identity and ethnicity, with the result being that there is no equality between sects and ethnic groups. The same remains true after years of war.

The 2012 constitution, for example, stipulates that the president must be a

Muslim man and that “the main source of law is the Sharia,” a clause that is discriminatory toward other religious sects and toward women. The constitution includes no provisions to abolish discrimination or violence against women and does not secure equality for women as full citizens of the state, while it confirms the power of religious authorities to preside over the lives of Syrians through the following clause: “Personal status is protected by and subject to each religious sect.” This clause divides citizens into sectarian communities and subjects them to different religious, sectarian and legal systems.

Syria has eight different sets of personal status laws, each of which is applied according to the religious sect of an individual. Christian and Druze communities follow their own laws, while the personal status laws for the remaining Muslim population in Syria are based on a particular Sunni interpretation of Islamic sharia, Hanafi jurisprudence and other Islamic sources. These laws also include major discriminatory measures against women. More generally, Syrian personal status laws are, as Syrian lawyer Daad Mousa argues, “based on the principle that the man is the head of the family, which undermines women’s rights as human beings.” For example, Article 548 of the Criminal Code withholds full penalties for so-called “honor crimes.” Another example is the so-called “legalized rape” enshrined in Article 489, which allows a husband to sexually assault his wife. [31] Marriage is also a religious, rather a civil, institution under the law and therefore imposes a number of restrictions. Syrian mothers are not entitled to grant nationality to their children.

In a similar vein, the Arab ethnic identity is the supreme one recognized in Syrian law, according to the constitution, while others are tolerated as subordinate or nearly forbidden, such as the Kurdish identity. Kurdish populations in Syria have suffered discriminatory and repressive policies on the political, social and cultural levels since the independence of Syria in 1946. In his December 2020 speech, Bashar al-Assad reiterated this position,

explaining that Islam and Arabness are at the foundations of Syria’s national identity.

This position is in contradiction with the concept of a secular state. At a minimum, the concept of secularism encompasses the separation of the state and religion as well as neutrality towards different religious beliefs and ethnicities, including in the distribution of resources or opportunities. Religion and religious institutions do not impose their laws on society, and no religious creed is privileged over any other. At the same time, freedom of conscience guarantees the right of believers to practice their religions and of non-believers to not believe or practice any religious dogma.

This system of laws and this political framework, which are regulated along religious, ethnic, and patriarchal lines, are critical to the maintenance of divisions within society. Thus, despite the regime’s supposed “modern” appeal, it in fact has an interest in maintaining such laws as an instrument of division and domination.

Since Hafez al-Assad’s ascent to power in 1970, the Syrian regime has used policies that instrumentalize religious sectarianism and ethnic identity to divide Syrians, while developing a double policy of repressing independent popular civic and secular organizations and political parties. The regime only allowed alternative organizations to develop under its own control, while reinforcing sectarian and primary—including tribal—identities. Moreover, there is a long history of relations between the Assad regime and Islamic fundamentalists groups both in Syria and abroad, as well as instrumentalization of jihadist groups—including during the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq.

## Strengthening religious institutions

The religious establishment was the auxiliary of the

army...If the army had failed, terrorism would have triumphed, and if the religious establishment had failed, sedition would have triumphed.

- Bashar al-Assad,  
December 7, 2020

In his speech, Assad praised the role of the Ministry of Religious Endowment over the course of the war, saying that it had purified the “liberated” Syrian cities from backwardness, fanaticism and blasphemy by promoting the “correct” Islamic message.

The government has long used these religious power networks—the Minister of Religious Endowment and other pro-regime Islamic religious associations, as well as clerics from other Islamic and Christian denominations—as tools to control society. Symbolic of the importance of this network, clerics of different religions participated in the rallies and public demonstrations to support Assad’s “re-election” in May 2021. The Ministry of Religious Endowment played a leading role in mobilizing Sunni clerics for these rallies. It asked mosque preachers to encourage participation in the election as “one of the complements of faith” and organized public meetings for Sunni clerics and their members in several cities across the country, including Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo.

The regime has also used Sunni clerics as part of the so-called reconciliation agreements with opposition armed groups while expanding loyalist local religious networks in the areas it has recaptured. One of these pro-regime religious networks, al-Fariq al-Dini al-Shababi (the Youth Religious Team) is helmed by Abdullah Sayyed, the son of the Minister of Religious Endowment. The ministry established the group as a volunteer organization in 2016 to mobilize young religious scholars in the fight against “extremism” and to promote a “moderate” religious

discourse. Since then the Youth Religious Team has organized training sessions and conferences throughout the country while enjoying extensive access (including its own weekly program) to the ministry's Nour al-Sham television channel. Members enjoy political and security privileges, including appointments and permission for religious activities. This strategy **allows the regime** to build a new generation of loyal clerics.

The role of the Ministry of Religious Endowment, and especially its minister since 2007, the Mufti of Tartous Muhammad Abdul Sattar Sayyed, was further strengthened in September 2018 through Decree No. 16. The decree revised and expanded the ministry's responsibilities and internal structures to reward religious groups that provided support to the regime during the uprising. It also expanded the ministry's powers at various levels, turning it into a tool to prevent uncontrolled religious mobilization. First, Decree No. 16 allows the Ministry of Religious Endowment to establish its own commercial establishments, the income from which may flow directly to its treasury without going through the Central Bank or the Ministry of Finance, thus giving it complete financial independence. The Ministry of Religious Endowment can now outsource its property, set up tourism projects such as restaurants, hotels and cafes, and lease its land to investors. Decree No. 16 also granted a full tax exemption for workers in the ministry's religious domain and endowment properties. Even before the decree was passed in 2018, the Ministry of Religious Endowment was the richest institution in Syria due to a steady flow of charity funds and its large tracts of property that had been registered as religious endowments since the Ottoman era.

Decree No. 16 also allowed the ministry to manage financial and educational institutions, in addition to regulating artistic and cultural production and authorizing a group called the Religious Youth to train and supervise preachers, oppose measures contrary to certain morals and collect zakat taxes. It established pre-university Sharia schools and religious councils in mosques, independent of

the ministries of education and higher education. All this led to the strengthening of the role of the Ministry of Religious Endowment at the expense of the Grand Mufti (formerly officially considered the country's highest Sunni Muslim religious authority) in a struggle for influence and material advantage between the two Sunni religious institutions. The decree authorized the Minister of Religious Endowment to appoint the Grand Mufti, a right previously vested in the presidency, and limits his term to three years, renewable only with the minister's approval, while removing the mufti's right to chair the Supreme Awqaf Council. That post was handed instead to the Minister of Endowment. Decree No. 16 **drew significant opposition** from both loyalist and democratic opposition circles, denouncing a deepening of the Islamization process of Syrian society. The decree was subject to numerous amendments by deputies that limited some of the ministry's powers (including tax exemption for religious affairs workers or the possibility of recruiting foreigners as civil servants in the ministry) but confirmed the expansion of the ministry's reach in society.

Finally, in November 2021, the position of Grand Mufti was abolished altogether by a presidential decree and his responsibilities were handed over to the Islamic Council of Jurisprudence Scholars, an institution affiliated with the Ministry of Religious Endowment. The move confirmed the ministry's domination on the religious institutional level.

This trend of further Islamization of society can be seen in other networks affiliated with the state, while the Baath Party and its cadres have increasingly used religious discourse in their activities. For instance, the National Union of Syrian Students, a historically Baathist-connected institution, now **sponsors** religious workshops.

## **No secularism without democracy**

## **and equality for all**

The establishment of the modern Syrian patrimonial state occurred under the leadership of Hafez al-Assad following his arrival to power in 1970 and was considerably strengthened by Bashar al-Assad since 2000. The Assads have above all else imposed the state's domination over society through brutal repression and other tools such as corporatism, sectarianism, racism, corruption, nepotism and others, managed on informal networks of power and patronage. These tools allowed the regime to integrate, boost or undermine groups belonging to various ethnicities and religious sects. At the local level, various actors collaborated with the regime, including state or Baath officials, intelligence officers, clerics, tribal leaders, businessmen and others, who managed specific localities.

In this sense, the regime lacked any real ideological hegemony, instead adapting its discourses and practices according to the context and actors. Both Assads often resorted to religious eclecticism in an attempt to appeal to as many symbols and groups as possible. Evidence of this lack of hegemony lies in the Syrian regime's gradual adoption and promotion of conservative religious discourse, alongside the adoption of economic neoliberal policies that stand in contradiction with the original Baathist discourse regarding "socialism" and "secularism."

The Assad regime is far from a secular defender of pluralism in Syrian society. Moreover, any secular project in Syria or elsewhere should not be separated from the broader collective struggle for democracy, social justice and equality. Secularism cannot exist without democracy and vice versa. Secularism should not differentiate between different sects and ethnicities, between believers and non-believers, women and men. From this perspective, promoting a secular state is key to challenging sectarianism, racism, sexism and homophobia.

Secularism is a first step towards challenging these various forms of

discrimination and is therefore a major part of demanding democracy. The struggle for secularism, alongside the other components mentioned

above, is a struggle against the dominant ideas of authoritarian regimes and religious fundamentalist movements.

Source *Syria Untold*, published in collaboration with *DER*, an online magazine for Arabic speakers in Norway.

# Outgunned and Unsupported, Myanmar's Resistance Isn't Giving Up

7 February 2022, by Ben Dunant, Zar Ni

The 53-year-old schoolteacher was emboldened by seeing so many of her colleagues [take to the streets in Mandalay](#), Myanmar's second city, following the military's seizure of power on 1 February from the elected administration of Aung San Suu Kyi.

"The parents of our students cheered us on," she said. "I joined the protests every day until I was chased down by soldiers."

If she had been caught, she could have faced torture, sexual violence and death in military detention, cases of which have been [amply documented](#) as the junta has striven to crush the mass uprising against its rule.

Thida Htwe, whose real name is being withheld to protect her identity, remains on the run. A warrant was issued for her arrest, on a charge of criminal incitement, in April last year. Shortly afterwards, soldiers broke into, searched and padlocked the empty home she once shared with her husband and three children.

Speaking to Novara Media from hiding, Thida Htwe said she had placed her faith in a peaceful, nationwide [campaign of civil disobedience](#). At the campaign's core was a [strike by civil servants](#) like Thida Htwe, who had taught at government schools for almost 30 years. The aim, she said, was to "stop the [junta's] administrative machinery" in its tracks and make it impossible for the military to govern.

Thida Htwe wanted to set a good example for her students. "I don't

want them to think that anyone can do whatever they want, so long as they're armed," she said. Yet despite her initial commitment to non-violence, the military's brutality soon convinced her that the people had a right to defend themselves.

Thida Htwe said she supports the colleagues that have switched from civil disobedience to an armed fightback against the junta. "They don't like armed struggle, but the dictator [senior general Min Aung Hlaing] pushed them to join armed groups by killing innocent people," she said, referring to the [massacres of protesters](#) that began in March last year.

Far from crushing the resistance, this violence has simply made it change course. Since April, there have been regular [guerrilla bombings](#) and [assassinations](#) in major cities like Yangon and Mandalay and full-scale [revolts in rural areas](#), particularly Sagaing region and Chin state in the west and Kayah state in the east.

Myanmar's youth have been on the frontlines of this fight. They include teenagers like Nan Htwe, who left her home in the countryside south of Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, in September to join a newly-formed armed group near the country's eastern border with Thailand in Kayin state.

The 19-year-old, who spoke to Novara Media by telephone from her base, said she left without telling her parents, whom she had helped most days on the family farm since her

three older brothers moved away. Her mother later phoned her, begging her to come home. "You're the only one for us," her mother said, crying, but Nan Htwe told her she had "no plan to return home before the revolution succeeds".

The armed resistance's largely grassroots nature has been both a strength and a weakness. What it has in popular support and energy, it lacks in overall coordination.

The National Unity Government (NUG), a parallel administration formed by deposed MPs and ethnic minority leaders to lead the anti-coup struggle, has attempted to provide cohesion and top-down support through the creation of a defence ministry and the declaration in September of a "defensive war" against the junta. However, the dozens of anti-coup armed groups that have formed over the last year largely operate on their own initiative, or in small local alliances. Many also fight with homemade guns and explosives, or whatever weapons they're able to loot in raids on army or police posts.

"We haven't received any weapons from the NUG," said Nan Htwe. Despite completing a gruelling training, her company of 50 soldiers has only three guns to share between them, leaving them largely unable to take the fight to the junta. "All members want to go to the front line," she said, but the lack of weapons means they can only "run and hide".

Because of the military's superior firepower, resistance has come at a

steep human cost, with more than 300,000 people displaced by fighting, according to the UN. Consistent with its approach over decades of war with ethnic minorities in the country's mountainous borderlands, the military has inflicted collective punishment on communities, reportedly **burning and looting** their villages or **targeting them in airstrikes**.

These atrocities, which include the reported **massacre and burning** of 35 people, including children, in Kayah state on Christmas Eve, have sparked international outrage but little action. Targeted sanctions by western nations have only limited impact on a military that is accustomed to being a pariah, and China and Russia are bound to protect the regime from more coordinated action through their veto

at the UN Security Council. And while placards at the early protests called for the US military to "save" Myanmar, western powers are unlikely to intervene militarily.

With little prospect of meaningful foreign help, Nan Htwe believes "we won't succeed any time soon". However, she remains optimistic in the long run, because while the junta's soldiers are "brutal and evil", they are just blindly following orders and don't have a strong will to fight. By contrast, "we can think for ourselves and use our intelligence," she said.

Thida Htwe agrees, believing the junta can't endure in the face of such overwhelming public hostility. The striking teacher said: "The military's strength is they have arms and no

shame, and can do cruel things to people without thinking much. Their weakness is that they have made the whole population resent them."

She maintained that, besides armed struggle, peaceful methods of civil disobedience also remain important. She quoted figures from the NUG's education ministry that out of an estimated 400,000 government schoolteachers, about 150,000 remain on strike. Despite the loss of salaries and staff housing, difficulties finding new work and the prospect of public donations drying up amid a bleak **economic outlook**, they remain resolute, she said.

"If we continue to do what we've done, the military can be beaten."

Source *Novara Media*.

# Teamster Election 2021: New Openings, Real Challenges

6 February 2022, by **Barry Eidlin**

Vairma, head of Denver Local 455, had received the endorsement of outgoing incumbent James P. Hoffa, who did not seek re-election after 23 years in office. O'Brien, head of Boston Local 25, had the backing of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), the rank-and-file reform movement in the Teamsters.

Although the election was not widely reported, even in a year when workers and their unions managed to make some headlines, it could be one of the most consequential events in recent years for shaping the future of the U.S. labor movement. With members located throughout the transportation and logistics sector, Teamsters can exert power all along the supply chain.

That leverage makes them an essential part of any strategy for rebuilding labor's power, including perhaps the biggest challenge of all: organizing Amazon.

But under Hoffa, that power has remained more potential than actual. His leadership has been characterized more by concessions and cutbacks than organizing and fightbacks. O'Brien and Teamsters United promised something different, a more militant approach to building union power. As they take the helm, can we expect them to deliver?

## A Mandate for Change

O'Brien's team takes office with a clear mandate for change. TU won across the board, sweeping the Eastern, Central, Southern, and Western regions by wide margins, from 75% in the East to 57% in the West (TU did not field candidates for the Teamsters Canada positions on the General Executive Board).

The margin of victory was much

higher for TU among members covered by national contracts like UPS, freight, and carhaul, often upwards of 80-85%.

TU candidates also did much better than TP candidates **in their home locals**, representing 171,000 members, while TP candidates got just 66% in their locals, representing 165,000 members. Three TP candidates actually lost the vote in their home local.

Overall turnout was low at 15%, continuing **trend of steady decline** in recent decades. By comparison, turnout was 23% in 2001, 18% in 2006 and 2011, and 15.5% in 2016.

Not surprisingly this varied by industry, with turnout among members working under nationally negotiated master contracts at over 20%, but well below average among members covered by so-called "white paper" or locally negotiated contracts.

Focusing on aggregate turnout, however, hides the fact that the 2021 election was a [tale of two turnouts](#). The decline from 2016 was entirely a result of the collapse of the Hoffa vote.

O'Brien actually got more votes than the reform challenger in 2016, Louisville Local 89 head Fred Zuckerman: 115,573 in 2021 vs. 96,377 in 2016, a gain of 19,196 votes or nearly 20%. Meanwhile the Hoffa/Vairma vote collapsed, from 102,401 in 2016 to 58,012 in 2021 — a fall of 44,389, or more than 43%.

Looking again at candidate home locals, average turnout among the 165,000 members in locals led by TP candidates was 13%, while the average turnout among the 171,000 members in locals led by TU candidates was 23%. While nobody should be cheering about less than one-quarter of members turning out to vote, TU was able to generate far more excitement and engagement from Teamster members.

## TU's Victory: What It Is, What It Isn't

Teamsters United's victory was a decisive rebuke of Hoffa's leadership. After 23 years in power, Hoffa's team had run out of gas. The leadership layer beneath him was thin, leaving bland labor statesmen like Vairma and number two candidate Ron Herrera to pick up the baton.

The Hoffa regime had [been in decline](#) for many years, but it was his handling of the 2018 UPS contract that galvanized support for TU and created the conditions for what is an all-too-rare event in the U.S. labor movement: a situation where a challenger defeated an incumbent regime in a membership election.

After UPS members voted down a contract that entrenched [two-tier driver positions](#) among other concessions, Hoffa and his parcel division director Denis Taylor [imposed the agreement](#) anyway, citing an arcane section of the Teamster constitution that required [two-thirds of voters](#) to reject the contract in cases where turnout was below 50%.

UPS members channeled their anger into campaigning for TU, leading to the slate's blowout margins at UPS.

But the results were not just a vote against Hoffa. They were a vote for a different, more militant model of unionism. While Vairma and Herrera touted their political connections and "smart strategies" that didn't involve a lot of tough talk and table-banging, O'Brien and his running-mate, 2016 reform standard-bearer Fred Zuckerman, openly called for more strikes and more confrontation with employers during the campaign.

"We're going to be a more dynamic, more militant organization," [O'Brien promised](#) during a September 2021 debate with Vairma in Las Vegas. "We're going to take on the fights."

More than anything, the results represent what former TDU National Organizer [Ken Paff](#) likened to "opening a door." It creates opportunities for organizing—but only if members take the initiative. So rather than stifling member initiative, as we have seen under Hoffa, an O'Brien administration is less likely to stand in the way.

Paff emphasized the importance of member initiative because the TU slate is not strictly speaking a "reform" slate. Rather, it's a coalition slate, including TDU-aligned reform elements and others that are less committed.

It's a different dynamic than previous elections, in that part of the opposition slate represents a split from the incumbent leadership. O'Brien himself was elected in 2011 and 2016 as an Eastern Region VP on Hoffa's slate, and three other TU slate members were previously Hoffa-aligned GEB members (three Teamsters Canada VPs will also continue in their positions. They were independent of both slates but endorsed Vairma).

O'Brien is not a TDU-style rank-and-file reformer. Indeed, he was a loyal Hoffa lieutenant for many years. In that capacity, he helped to impose contracts and threatened reform challengers to Hoffa-aligned local union officials, most notably in Rhode Island Local 251. There, [in a speech](#)

caught on tape in 2014, O'Brien said that anyone running against his ally, incumbent Joe Bairos, would have a "major problem" after the election and would "need to be punished."

The Independent Review Board (IRB), an entity charged with eliminating corruption in the Teamsters, levied a [14-day suspension](#) from all union positions on O'Brien for his actions.

O'Brien has since apologized for his actions, saying that he's "not that guy anymore." In the process, he has won over many of those he wronged in the past. This includes current Local 251 head Matt Taibi, the TDU-aligned reformer who defeated Bairos.

"He reached out to build unity to take on the employers — and we took the olive branch," [said Taibi](#). "Since then, we've stood shoulder to shoulder to win strikes, organizing drives, and contract campaigns."

In a vote of confidence, Taibi joined the TU slate, and will serve as Eastern Region Vice President when O'Brien takes over. Local 251 voted 91% for O'Brien in the 2021 election.

Unlike many other Hoffa loyalists, O'Brien can also point to a bonafide track record of militancy. In a report on the Teamster election in [a freight industry publication](#), an industry executive noted that "[O'Brien] is feared inside UPS for being a no-compromise hardliner. In any situation involving his local [Boston Local 25], [UPS] felt it had no good way to control him."

He tried to bring some of this fighting approach to national negotiations when Hoffa appointed him Parcel Division director after the 2016 election. But after his insistence on a unifying negotiating strategy that involved including Zuckerman, Hoffa's 2016 opponent, on the bargaining committee, Hoffa fired O'Brien, leading to his break with the incumbent administration.

Since then he's continued advocating a militant anti-concessions approach. He was a leading figure in the "vote no" campaign against the 2018 UPS contract. And tellingly, one of his first actions after winning the 2021

election was to fly out to Seattle to [walk the picket line](#) with striking Teamster ready-mix drivers.

## TDU and the Necessity of Coalitions

Still, it is fair to ask: why did TDU back such a coalition slate, which includes elements that are far from sympathetic to the aims it has pursued for almost fifty years? Simply put, it was the best available option.

Given the state of Teamster politics in general and the reform movement in particular, a “pure” reform slate was not in the cards — not just in the sense that such a slate would not have had a serious shot at winning, but that there wasn’t a large enough layer of reform leadership ready to vie for power.

While it punches well above its weight, as it has for decades, TDU is nowhere near big enough to go it alone. A coalition slate was the only realistic path forward.

Given that O’Brien and Zuckerman were going to run regardless of TDU’s position, there were two alternatives to backing TU. The first would have been to run a third “pure” reform slate with the forces available. The second would have been to abstain from the election. TDU leaders recognized that both alternatives were non-starters.

In terms of running on its own, the reform contingent was too small to field a viable slate. Also, such a slate would only have split the reform/anti-Hoffa vote, potentially paving the way for Hoffa’s chosen successor.

As for abstaining, the likely outcome would have been the marginalization if not outright liquidation of TDU as a movement. That’s because the layer of Teamster members who orient towards TDU would have simply joined up with TU and/or disengaged entirely. It is impossible to see how TDU would have been able to retain relevance in the union without getting involved in the leadership election.

This kind of calculation is nothing new

for TDU. Even with Ron Carey in the 1990s, the first and so far only reform Teamster General President, TDU was always a partner in a coalition.

When Carey was first elected in 1991, in the first direct election of top Teamster officials, TDU had a more prominent role. But this was more out of necessity than due to Carey’s political or ideological alignment with TDU.

When Carey first ran, he was a complete outsider, a militant leader of his Queens-based Local 804 who nonetheless voted Republican and had little union experience beyond his home local. With virtually no support among Teamster officials, he had few options for coalition partners, and went with what he could get.

Thanks to heroic grassroots organizing led by TDU, Carey managed to get on the ballot with [15.5 percent of convention delegates](#) backing him. He was able to win in 1991 because of TDU’s support, but also because the Teamster old guard [split between two competing slates](#), neither of which fully accepted that there was going to be an election where they would actually have to campaign to win votes from Teamster members.

In that specific context, Carey was able to prevail with a more reform-oriented slate that included several rank-and-file Teamsters. Once in office Carey remained wary of TDU, and indeed expected it to disband after his victory, having achieved the goal of getting him elected.

He continued to rely on TDU’s support, particularly as the old guard dug in and sought to undermine Carey’s every initiative. But it would be wrong to view this as a political alignment between the two. It was a coalition.

In 1996 when he ran as an incumbent, Carey found more support within the Teamster officialdom. As a result, his electoral coalition shifted, with TDU taking a lesser role.

Carey’s new coalition was reflected in his 1996 slate. It still included TDU reformers, but also featured several

candidates whose commitment to Teamster reform was questionable at best. Several later ended up getting expelled from the union, and some even went to jail—including one of O’Brien’s predecessors as head of Local 25, George Cashman.

Beyond the makeup of his slate, Carey also backed away from TDU-style grassroots campaigning in favor of more traditional big-dollar electioneering. This is what led him to hire the campaign consultants who engaged in the [illegal campaign fundraising schemes](#) that ultimately got Carey himself expelled from the Teamsters in 1997 (he was later [cleared of all wrongdoing](#), but [never reinstated](#)).

Despite its reduced role, and misgivings about the new slate, TDU endorsed Carey’s re-election bid in 1996. Then, unlike in 1991, he was up against an energized old guard that had unified around its standard-bearer, James P. Hoffa. In a pitched battle, TDU once again played a decisive role in Carey’s victory, although the win was overturned due to the abovementioned illegal fundraising schemes.

It was this coalition of TDU-style reformers, sympathetic militants, and old-guard power brokers that was leading the union when Carey orchestrated the 1997 UPS strike, widely recognized as one of the biggest U.S. labor wins in recent decades.

The point of recounting this history is not to besmirch Carey’s legacy, nor to second-guess TDU’s decisions in the 1990s. Rather, it is to emphasize that efforts to reform the Teamsters in a more militant direction have always involved coalitions with non-reformers.

Going much further back in Teamster history, well before TDU’s time, Teamster organizer and Trotskyist leader Farrell Dobbs spoke of the importance of coalition building in his efforts to build the [organizing campaign](#) that ultimately led to the National Master Freight Agreement (NMFA), the contract that transformed the Teamsters into one of the most powerful unions in the U.S.



While never forgetting the importance of the rank and file organizing that helped him [transform the Teamsters](#) in Minneapolis, Dobbs recognized that broadening his campaign to build an industrial union in transportation would require working with some experienced Teamster officials who did not share his vision of unionism, to put it mildly. As he recalled:

There was ample room for contributions from all committee members. Due to their standing within the IBT, older heads could win us allies elsewhere in the movement; they were also able to give practical assistance by drawing upon useful aspects of their past experience. The younger leaders, in turn, compensated for their inexperience in several ways: they contributed energy and militancy to the campaign; they knew the industry and the tricks used by the bosses; and they were close to the union rank and file. In addition, the committee was cemented together by common acceptance of mutually determined objectives, a factor serving to generate a spirit of good will. (Teamster Power, 267-68).

While recognizing the limits of drawing historical analogies, we can also recognize the enduring importance of coalition building in the decades-long effort to advance the Teamster reform project.

## What To Expect from Teamsters United?

O'Brien and Teamsters United take office having already [won some important gains](#) for Teamster members at the union's nominating convention last June. Most notably, these include constitutional reforms that:

- \* Mandate including rank-and-file members on all bargaining committees;

- \* Guarantee strike benefits starting on day one instead of making strikers wait a week;

- \* Close the two-thirds rule loophole that Hoffa used to impose the 2018 UPS contract; and

- \* Ban imposing contract supplements and riders that have been rejected by the membership (these are addenda to the master contract that cover workers in a particular job or geographic area).

Teamsters United [failed to pass](#) other constitutional reforms at the convention. These included proposals to safeguard the provision that candidates for international office need support from only five percent of convention delegates to be nominated (Hoffa tried to [raise the threshold](#), a move that would have prevented every previous opposition candidate since Ron Carey from getting on the ballot); require that top officers have at least two years' experience as rank and file Teamsters; and close a loophole on salary caps for IBT staff.

Nonetheless, the reforms that did pass mark a sea change from previous Teamster conventions, when reformers' goals consisted simply of getting their slate nominated, and getting out of the convention physically unscathed. Even in 1996, when Carey was the incumbent, Hoffa had a nearly equal number of delegates focused on [derailing the convention](#). This made any substantive discussion of union business or constitutional amendments virtually impossible.

Constitutional amendments aside, the real test of Teamsters United leadership will begin once they take office in March. An early indicator will be negotiations for the national carhaul contract, set to expire on May 31, 2022 after a [one-year extension](#). This is a contract covering 4,000 Teamsters who get cars and trucks from auto plants and rail yards to dealerships.

While it is a relatively small contract, carhaul is a core Teamster industry, and car haulers are known for their militancy. When Hoffa negotiated the last carhaul contract in 2015,

members rejected it by 87%. They then rejected a second deal a year later, and finally [ratified a third agreement](#) in March 2017 that eliminated the concessions in the previous deals.

With carhaul members frustrated by management's efforts to implement [two-tier wage rates](#) and other contract violations, this round of negotiations will be an opportunity for Teamsters United to make good on their promises of militant, no-concessions bargaining.

But the big test for Teamsters United will be the [UPS contract](#), which expires on July 31, 2023. Now covering roughly 310,000 workers in nearly every community across the country, this is not only the [biggest Teamster contract](#); it is the largest private sector union contract in North America. What happens at UPS will have ramifications for the entire U.S. labor movement.

O'Brien has already set out some key goals for the 2023 UPS negotiations: eliminating the two-tier driver classifications that Hoffa allowed; raising part-timers' starting pay from \$14 to \$20 an hour; and reining in subcontracting and so-called "personal vehicle drivers," UPS's attempt to "Uberize" its delivery service.

Members are already talking of the need to [prepare for a strike](#) at UPS. O'Brien has echoed this sentiment, referencing the \$300 million in the IBT strike fund waiting to be used, and promising that "[UPS will be the example.](#)" In line with the constitutional reforms he fought for, he has also emphasized rank and file involvement in negotiations.

A key early indicator of O'Brien's approach to UPS will be his pick for IBT Parcel Division Director — the position from which Hoffa fired him. Appointing someone with a track record of organizing and aggressive negotiating, perhaps more closely aligned with TDU, could signal that O'Brien intends to put his militant rhetoric into action.

O'Brien has also made clear that he sees the 2023 UPS contract as directly

tied to the IBT's ability to organize new workers. As he stated at one of the [candidate forums](#) in September, "if we're negotiating concessionary contracts and we're negotiating substandard agreements, why would any member, why would any person want to join the Teamsters Union?"

Nowhere is this question more urgent than at Amazon, the viciously anti-union global retailer that is fast encroaching on UPS's territory in shipping and logistics. The IBT [passed a resolution](#) to organize Amazon at its convention last year, and both slates emphasized this as a crucial task. But O'Brien promised a [more militant](#) approach. "I want Amazon to know that the Teamsters are coming for them. We're coming for them hard,"

[he said](#) in October.

Organizing Amazon will necessarily be a long-term project, but it will be impossible without a strong UPS contract. And while it is likely a task for multiple unions, the Teamsters' reach throughout the transportation, logistics, and warehouse industries means that it has a key role to play.

O'Brien now has an opportunity to scale up the campaign beyond the warehouse-by-warehouse approach we have seen so far. Along with the UPS contract, Amazon is likely the task that will define his presidency.

Regardless of what O'Brien does or does not do, the ability to continue

transforming the Teamsters depends on an active, organized rank and file. That's where TDU comes in. It has increased its credibility in recent years based on its leadership in organizing the vote-no campaign at UPS in 2018 and helping to deliver Teamsters United's landslide election victory.

Still, cynicism remaining from the 2018 contract imposition specifically, and decades of Hoffa deal-making and detachment more broadly, remain a major barrier to overcome. The opportunity for change in the Teamsters may be here, but the challenge Teamsters now face is how to make that change a reality.

*Source: [March-April 2022, ATC 217](#).*

## Roe Is Already Gone

### 5 February 2022, by Irene Hays

Even as we stare down the barrel of a Mississippi law that could effectively criminalize abortion in 26 states (see coverage of [Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization](#) at [scotusblog.com](#)), pro-choice liberals continue to insist that we really just need to elect the right people to be our champions. Democrats, they mean. But Nancy Pelosi already said that abortion is a "fading issue" in the Democratic Party. Bill Clinton said abortion should be "rare." Hillary Clinton called abortion "tragic." Obama invited voters to reach across the aisle to reduce the number of abortions. There are Democrats for Life at congressional and state levels—in fact, there are more than 100 anti-choice Democrats at the state level. The Democrats are not our champions.

Fearing the "Fall of Roe" is the siren song that lures activists onto the rocky coast of the Democratic Party, steering energy away from protest and speak-outs and into lobbying and electoral campaigns. But pouring money, time, and hope into support of

Democratic politicians has done nothing to stop the Fall of Roe.

In fact, the impending Fall of Roe is, at this point, more theoretical than actual for millions of people. For people on Medicaid who can't borrow the money, Roe is already gone. For people who live too far from a clinic in a state without public transit, Roe is gone. For people who will lose their jobs for taking too much time off to meet onerous compulsory counseling requirements, there is no Roe. For minors who fail to convince a judge that they are mature enough to get an abortion, the Supreme Court cannot change their fate. For the past few decades, targeted restrictions on abortion providers have shut down hundreds of clinics. Abortion has been inaccessible and unaffordable for millions of people, rendering Roe practically moot.

Yes, we need to rally and push to save the constitutional legalization of abortion. The Supreme Court might be inspired to stay in step with public opinion. The constitutional protection is worth fighting for. However, the

Supreme Court does not have to listen. This is why many people, reasonably, look to those who are elected. But electing the "right people" has not been enough, and it will never be enough. This liberal refrain has proven ineffective—as I said above, we've all but already lost Roe.

We have to change course, and there's no better time than right now. We have to get abortion out of single-issue politics. Instead, we must embrace the framework of reproductive justice that women of color created and strengthened over decades. Abortion is a critical component of a reproductive justice strategy, but it is only a single component. Reproductive justice is defined by SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective as "the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities."

Reproductive justice embraces abortion, adoption, socialized child care, sex worker protections, free

contraception, and comprehensive sex education. A “safe and sustainable community” has healthy food, clean water, police-free schools, and free and accessible health care for all kinds of people, including every gender-affirming procedure and treatment. A safe community never deports undocumented people. A sustainable community has no jails. We must set our sights on this future. In doing so, we reject the notion that any of these issues detract from the fight for abortion rights. Abortion rights are weakened by political siloing, just as clinics are more vulnerable siloed away from hospitals and medical centers.

Great, so we’ve determined that we need to fight for ... everything. Where do we start?

Most importantly, reproductive justice is an explicitly anti-racist and anti-oppressive framework. Reproductive justice activists center and uplift the voices, experiences, and leadership of people of color.

Given the impending criminalization of abortion, our strategy is two-pronged:

legislation and mutual aid.

We need unapologetically pro-abortion legislative campaigns in every state with restrictions and especially in states with pre-Roe bans. Hear me out. I still don’t trust the Democrats. If (when) Roe falls, the question will be left to the states. But the question has already been left to the states through targeted regulation of abortion providers and Medicaid exclusions. This is not about elections, lobbying, begging, or waiting. We need state-by-state grassroots campaigns to strike bans on abortions. Here in Wisconsin, we have an 1849 law making abortion a felony. We’re organizing a campaign called Strike the Ban. Our campaign focuses on movement-building, direct action, community participation, and clear pro-abortion messaging. Our most popular sticker (which we give to anyone who wants to put them up around town) says, “ABORTION FOREVER. Strike the Ban!”

We need to help each other now—organizing rides for people to clinics, providing child care (low-cost or crowd-funded) to patients during

their appointments, raising money to pay for abortions—especially for people in the states that will ban abortion. Where abortion will remain legal, we need to push for increased access to telemedicine. We must also learn to manage our own abortions. Terminating pregnancies is as old as pregnancy itself, and abortion is safer than ever. We must help each other in the months and years ahead.

The symbol of illegal abortion is no longer a coat hanger, but handcuffs. So, while abortion itself is safer than ever, people who are disproportionately targeted and swept up into the mass incarceration complex (for instance, Black and Brown people, transgender people, undocumented people) are at greater risk of punishment from seeking and securing abortion. On this point we must be clear: The laws are the danger, not abortion itself.

Abortion is normal. Abortion is safe. Abortion forever!

Source *New Politics* “[The Fight to Defend Abortion Rights: A Roundtable](#)”.

## “Socialist” Party wins but defeat for left in Portuguese elections

4 February 2022, by [Dave Kellaway, Esquerda.net](#)

The Costa government had not achieved an absolute majority in 2015 but these two parties had agreed to let it form a government after an agreement on certain policies that defended living standards and some other progressive measures. [32] It was external support on a policy by policy basis, the left did not join the government and take ministerial positions. In this way they had a different approach to the Unidos Podemos left party in the Spanish state which is a full part of a PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party, similar to Costa’s PSP) led coalition. Unidos Podemos has moved away from

its original position of a radical break with the system.

Costa had always been constrained by the arrangement struck with the left parties so he was quite prepared to carry out the break with the left and try for an absolute majority. He needed 116 seats and at the time of writing has 117 so it is a political victory for him and his party. From the point of view of the working people of Portugal - who already are among the poorest in Europe - this is a real defeat. Here was an opportunity to strike a blow against the pro-capitalist moderation of the PS and to reinforce

the weight of the left to put forward policies to defend their living standards and progressive policies. Unfortunately, this did not happen. Costa will have no need of an arrangement with the left going forward even if he will make a great play of his openness to dialogue. Obviously, the left will be discussing this defeat in more detail in the coming days and months but we can already suggest a few reasons for the setback.

In a time of Covid there is probably a greater concern among people for stability and security. Costa played

this card very well, emphasizing how the deal with the left was preventing this moderate government from managing the country out of the crisis and using its share of the EU recovery funds. It was easy for the government and a supportive mass media to present the left parties as being the disruptors, the splitters who were sabotaging a 'national' recovery. We have seen elsewhere national leaders getting an electoral "bounce" from their leadership during the pandemic - even Boris Johnson benefited here [in Britain] for a while.

Costa's declaration after the vote said the Portuguese people had "showed a red card to the political crisis" and a "desire for stability and security". For his part, he promised a "dialogue with other parties" and to promote "the necessary consensus in Parliament and between employers and working people". He announced that in the next few days he will meet with all the parties, except Chega, and that he will form a "smaller, leaner" government with the mission of "reconciling the Portuguese with the idea of an absolute majority".

Incidentally, for opponents of proportional representation, including those on the left, this election shows you can get absolute majorities under a fairer electoral system. Also, despite the left's defeat, the more democratic proportional representation system in Portugal means the Bloco has kept a parliamentary group and therefore benefits even in defeat from a national presence in the media and guaranteed voice in parliament.

During the campaign there was a growing polarization between the two majority blocs - the PS and the right of centre PSD (Social Democratic Party but actually on the right). Indeed the polls suggested that the PSD was neck and neck with the PS. This may have impelled former Bloco or PCP voters to vote usefully for the PS to ensure that the PSD would not get into government.

In the absence of big mass struggles and campaigns - not helped by Covid conditions - it must have been difficult for the left to win support for its rejection of the Budget. A principled position does not always lead to

success electorally. The Bloco lost over half its votes and went down from nineteen MPs to five. The PCP won slightly fewer votes but kept six MPs. From being the third national political party the Bloco is now the fifth. It shows how anti-capitalist parties can develop a strong core vote of around 5% but can also get into double figures if they successfully relate to mass concerns and struggles. When working people are in retreat and right wing populist ideas are on the rise it is difficult to sustain the support of those less radical layers who will vote for you in certain periods. One of the difficult tasks of a radical left group is how to sustain the current through those difficult periods. It is easier if the political culture of the group does not become too electoralist and maintains a primary orientation to developing self-organization and in the workplaces and the communities. Resources available for the party and media presence will rise and fall with changes in electoral fortunes. So far the Bloco has managed these ups and downs relatively well compared to some other currents such as the Rifondazione Comunista experience in Italy for example.

The Bloco does not see itself as primarily an electoral party but rather as a useful instrument for building a socialist alternative on the ground. To give one example, one of its comrades, Alberto Matos is a leader of *Solidariedade Imigrante* which works with migrant communities. *The Guardian* recently ran a story about how British supermarkets were selling soft fruits picked by exploited migrant workers in Portugal and it referenced Alberto and his work. [33]

The rise of the far right Chega (literally, Enough!) was previously forecast by the 11% vote its leader, Andre Ventura, got in the 2021 presidential elections. Although he got around 7% and 12 MPs for his party this time, it consolidates a presence in parliament and guarantees regular airtime for its anti-migrant, nationalist poison. Until 2019 when he set up Chega there had been a minimal presence of neo-fascist or far right parties in Portugal where a fascist style regime had been swept away by the revolutionary upsurge of 1974. During the campaign Ventura made a

particular target of the 'communist' Bloco. Anti-racist and anti-fascist campaigning will be at the forefront of the Bloco's work in the coming period.

Alongside the rise of Chega we also saw an increase in support for the "modernizing" neo-liberal, pro-business party, Liberal Initiative which just pips the Bloco support at nearly 5%. The success of both these groups reflects the crisis of the right of centre parties. For the first time the historic CDS (People's Party) which was in government in 2015 has failed to win any seats in parliament. The absolute stalling of the PSD vote has resulted in its leader announcing he will go. Today the dominant sectors of the ruling class are quite happy to have a moderate Socialist party protect their interests and maintain stability.

To complete the whole picture the animal rights and ecological party, the PAN now has only one MP and halved its vote to 1.6%. Polarization towards the PS has affected all parties.

Last but not least, the abstention rate was less than in 2019 but there are still 42% who did not bother to vote. Costa is not leading some sort of mass upsurge for his version of social liberalism. This figure expresses a trend seen elsewhere in Europe and reflects a growing alienation from the political process. For the left it sets out an audience that we need to address and win to a radical alternative. At the same time it is a reservoir of potential support for the right wing populists and the neo-fascists.

31 January 2022

**"We will know how to carry out our commitments to this country and to working people"**

Catarina Martins (Coordinator of Bloco Esquerda)

On election night, Catarina Martins stated that the party will face up to "the current difficulties" and will

continue the struggle. The electoral result is also bad because of the growth of the extreme right and “each racist MP elected in the Portuguese parliament is one more racist deputy” that the Bloco promises to fight. The results “do not make us forget our mandate” and that the Bloco will know how to “live with” the consequences of the vote.

The Bloco’s coordinator considered that “the PS’s [Socialist Party, current government] strategy of creating an artificial crisis was successful”. At the time of this statement, the PS was “close, or had already won an absolute majority”. The bipolarization developed during the electoral campaign “was false” and that’s why the campaign was “very difficult”, since it created “enormous pressure to vote ‘usefully’ that penalized the parties to the left” [of the PS].

Besides the likely absolute majority being bad news for the country, the result is also poor, according to

Catarina Martins, “because of the extreme right” vote of the Chega party. Although its result falls “short” of the one André Ventura obtained in the presidential elections, “every racist deputy elected in the Portuguese parliament is one too many”. “We will be here to fight it,” she promised.

Given tonight’s results, causes like the defence of the National Health Service (SNS) or the fight for a decent salary and against precarious jobs “don’t get any easier”. But we also know that we will not be absent from these struggles” and “we will be side by side with the people in the struggles”.

Questioned once again about how the party voted on the Budget, Catarina Martins added: “we didn’t reject the Budget because of any electoral tactic.” “We knew that we ran an electoral risk”. We voted that way with the “deep conviction” that the Budget worsens the situation of the National Health Service and of those who live from their work and have had

“salaries frozen for so long. Pensioners have also been losing out as their pensions are worth less and less”. What happened this Sunday “doesn’t mean that we start believing that the Socialist Party Budget was good. It wasn’t.”

For the Bloco, “the reasons for opposing it are not invalidated by our result” and, in fact, “parties should not change their convictions for electoral reasons like the way you change their shirt”. Thus she concluded, “it is necessary to continue to fight for our demands. There are a million people without a family doctor. Hospital emergency rooms that are daily not able to respond to the needs of the country. So many people live in increasingly worse conditions because their salary is stuck at the minimum wage and has not progressed for more than a decade.”

30 January 2022

From [esquerda.net](https://esquerda.net).

## Fascist ideas on the rise in Italy

3 February 2022, by **Dave Kellaway**



Such open manifestations of fascism are illegal in Italy. The 1948 Italian Constitution bans any reconstitution of fascist parties, following the demise of Benito Mussolini’s fascist dictatorship. Of course, the fascist groups call themselves by other names to avoid prosecution.

### Forza Nuova attack trade union HQ

On 11 October 2021, the fascist group Forza Nuova led hundreds of people from an anti-vax demonstration to attack the Rome headquarters of the

largest trade union confederation in Italy. For older Italians or those who know their history, this evoked the way Mussolini’s gangs (squadristi) attacked left activists and trade union halls back in the twenties or thirties. It also reminded people of the fascist violence, including bombings and shootings, against the successful left-led struggles following the ‘Hot Autumn’ of 1969. After the attack in October, there was a national response with demonstrations in a number of cities. The government has since closed down their website and their leaders were questioned by the police.

Fascists attack CGIL trade union HQ

The historic leaders of this party are Roberto Fiore and Massimo Morsello. They had connections with the violent right-wing terror group NAR (Armed

Revolutionary Nuclei) and after the Bologna station massacre in 1980, they both fled to London. They stayed there for 20 years, gaining the status of political refugees by the Thatcher government. There are strong rumours that the British secret services maintained contact with them. On their return to Italy, they were welcomed at the airport by MPs from Berlusconi’s Forza Italia and the National Alliance (AN - the mainstream neo-fascist ‘continuity’ party) who were in a government coalition. Both received jail sentences but the party was launched and by 2001 it had forty branches and 2500 members. It got around 0.25% of votes in elections but Fiore took over from Alexandra Mussolini when she resigned as an MEP.

## CasaPound - punk neo-fascists

CasaPound is a fascist group that began to establish itself in 2003 by occupying empty buildings and using them as “community” cultural and political bases. Over the following 15 years, it opened another 106 centres and became established on a national scale with regular media coverage. Its key leader is Gianluca Iannone and he called these centres “territorial reconquests that would serve the people”. This was a new media-savvy fascist current that distinguished itself from the more traditional fascist parties like Forza Nuova. The new centres opened gyms, pubs, football clubs, bookshops - even barbershops and tattoo parlours. It tried to present itself as the fascist equivalent of the left and progressive *centri sociali* (social centres) set up often in occupied buildings.

The punk rock band ZetaZetaAlfa (a take on ZeeZeeTop) was a factor in its growing popularity. CasaPound took up housing, student issues, unemployment and welfare policies. When Beppe Grillo’s populist centrist Five Star Movement erupted onto a national level CasaPound managed to beguile some of its leaders and activists in engaging with it. CasaPound also collaborated with Salvini’s Lega Nord to set up Sovereignty groups in localities where asylum centres have been set up. Their function was to whip up local animosity to the migrants coming to live there. Despite putting up posters of Che Guevara its fascist core remained intact and its militants are as violent as other fascist groups. [34]

The [ECN antifascist group](#) publishes an [interactive map](#) showing all the hundreds of violent fascist attacks against the left, gays and migrants since 2014. It is updated regularly to show the violence taking place on a weekly basis. Certainly, these fascist currents are of a different scale to what exists in Britain.

## Fascism creeps into the mainstream

Italian fascism collapsed under the assault of the Allied forces and the partisans in 1943. Imperialist interests represented by the US and Britain were very concerned that there should be no dangerous vacuum that might facilitate a further radicalisation of a people that were partly armed and led by the left. Togliatti and the Communist Party leadership implemented Stalin’s line of national unity and reconstruction of the bourgeois state. Nevertheless, the Allies wanted to minimise the disruption to the state and its institutions so the purge of fascists was extremely limited. So most fascist sympathisers maintained key positions, including in the repressive apparatuses which continues right up to today. It is no surprise that fascist support is particularly strong in the Lazio region and the capital which is the administrative centre of the Italian state.

Berlusconi has played a central role in normalising the fascist past. He stated that Mussolini did not kill people and that Italians needed to overcome the outdated fascist/antifascist dichotomy. Unlike other prime ministers, he did not really participate in the traditional April celebrations of the Liberation from fascism. A lot of the mainstream mass media has echoed this rewriting of the past, for example, there has been an excessive focus on violence committed by partisans against fascists at the end of the war. His first government in 1994 included the neo-fascist MSI (Italian Social Movement), later renamed itself as the AN (National Alliance). The MSI and AN won around 9% of the votes.

Giorgia Meloni’s Fratelli D’Italia (Brothers of Italy) has come out of the MSI/AN current. As Marine Le Pen in France, she has worked hard to deepen this normalisation and modernisation of neo-fascism. Today her party is a point ahead of Salvini’s Lega (League) in the polls on 20% and her personal standings are higher than Salvini’s. She could even make a

claim to be prime minister if her party wins the most votes in the right-wing coalition. This score is double what the MSI was achieving 25 years ago. Unlike Salvini, Meloni has refused to participate in the national coalition led by unelected banker, Draghi. It allows her to pick up any discontent or opposition to the government. She has already done this with the obligatory vax pass.

Today the right-wing coalition is dominated by the neo-fascists and Salvini’s right-wing ‘Italians first’ party. Mainstream conservatism in the shape of the Christian Democrats collapsed in the well of corruption of the 80s Tangentopoli (Bribesville). Initially, the Trumpian politics of Berlusconi filled the space on the right. Today he has been eclipsed by his more extreme allies. Forza Italia has around only 8% in the polls compared to his partners’ 40%. Salvini and Meloni feed on anti-migrant, pro-traditional family and fear of crime sentiments. The Lega leader is on trial for breaking maritime and human rights laws when closing Italian ports to a ship full of desperate, ailing migrants. He has also questioned the importance of anti-fascism as the traditional ‘glue’ of Italian institutions.

The fascist groups and the Lega/neo-fascist Fratelli help to ‘normalise’ fascism and are in a symbiotic relationship. For instance, Forza Nuova security teams help police the rallies of the two big parties. Activists go back and forth so we find that an ex fascist joins the Lega, becomes a councillor and then is involved in some violent attack on a migrant. Fascists come off and on the electoral lists of the more mainstream parties. In turn, the open fascists are in the leadership of the big football supporter gangs (the tifosi) which help bring in funds and muscle. Even here the lines are muddled since Salvini has a notorious connection with one of the Milanese tifosi groups.

Years of defeat and retreat of the labour movement and the decline of an anti-capitalist left has left an opening for fascist ideas among angry and demoralised people, particularly the young. With the implosion and institutionalisation of the Five Star movement, the terrain is even more

favourable for reactionary ideas to take hold. A big increase in poverty and the Covid pandemic has increased the audience for right-wing and racist

populism. Anti-vax sentiment has been stronger in Italy than elsewhere and the fascists and hard right are also riding that tiger. A victory for the right-wing coalition in the next

general election could further embolden them.

Source *Anti\*Capitalist Resistance*.

# International diplomacy complicit with the junta in Sudan

2 February 2022, by **Paul Martial**

Since 25 October, the date of the coup, the demonstrations have continued. The coup was organised by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dogolo alias Hemidti, the leader of the paramilitary group Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The army continues its repression operations. During the demonstration on Monday 17 January, seven demonstrators were mowed down by bullets. More than 70 people have been killed and at least a thousand injured since the coup. From now on, soldiers parade with heavy weapons, machine guns and anti-aircraft batteries in the streets of Khartoum.

## A hand extended to the military

If the main Western capitals condemn the violence of the coup plotters against the population, they offer them a lifeline. Volker Perthes, a German diplomat and former UN envoy for Syria, with the success that we know, is the special envoy of Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary General. He is trying to mediate between the junta and the popular organisations.

One remembers General Burhan's manoeuvre of putting back in place Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok, whom he had overthrown a few weeks earlier by imposing a new agreement particularly favourable to the army. The UN diplomat saw in this agreement "a step towards a comprehensive dialogue and a return

to constitutional order". He was the only one, since even Hamdok resigned after about 40 days. Perthes considers that 'Sudan's military and political leaders will first and foremost have to rebuild trust with their own national public, especially with the younger generation'<sup>1</sup>, thus putting the military and popular organisations, i.e. the murderers and the victims, on an equal footing. The aim of the UN diplomat is to open an indirect dialogue. The military seized this opportunity because their aim is to install a puppet civilian government behind which they will continue to exercise full power. To remain in power is to continue looting the country with impunity.

## "Friends of Sudan" or friends of the junta?

Today, the informal structure "Friends of Sudan", which includes the USA, the European Union, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, has given its support to Volker Perthes' plan, which aims to perpetuate the army as a player in the country. This is precisely what the mobilized populations, who risk their lives daily, no longer want.

The "Friends of Sudan" are those who have financially strangled the country by demanding that the transitional government of Hamdok pay back the debts contracted by the dictatorship of the Muslim Brotherhood and Omar al-

Bashir. This facilitated the work of the generals who were able to surf for a while on the deep discontent of the population to try to justify their coup de force.

Another proof of "friendship", France, along with its other European partners, has financially helped the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which are only the avatar of the Janjaweed militias accused of crimes against humanity in Darfur. These same RSFs are at the forefront of the repression against the demonstrating populations.

Thus, from 2016 to 2017, nearly 160 million euros were paid to Sudan by the European Union to combat emigration. Omar al-Bashir has entrusted the guarding of the borders to the RSF. According to a report by the Dutch think tank Clingendael<sup>2</sup>, part of the money financed this criminal militia, allowing it to better equip itself. The report states that the BSRs arrest migrants and most of them are sold to Libyan militias. They are enslaved or held as hostages. When their families have difficulty paying the ransom, they are tortured.

Our solidarity in France must be reinforced. Standing by the people of Sudan means demanding that the French government stop supporting the UN mediation, which goes against the will of the people. It also means demanding that medical supplies be sent directly to the hospitals to treat the many injured victims of the junta's violence.

# Bloody Sunday - 50 years of British injustice in Ireland

1 February 2022, by **Joseph Healy**

My first encounter with that terrible day, apart from seeing it reported on Irish television news, was when, as a 15 year old Dublin lad, I watched a furious crowd of 20,000 people burn the British embassy there to the ground, two days after the massacre. Feelings were running so high that there was talk of the Irish army marching over the border and several British businesses were attacked. For many it was the latest in a long long line of British atrocities in Ireland, which we had all learned about in school.

Bloody Sunday effectively ended the first phase of the struggle of the Irish nationalist population in the North of Ireland against the blatant injustices and apartheid like state which had been established with the partition of Ireland in 1921. It had been a gerrymandered statelet from the first, carved out from the 9 nine counties of Ulster, into a smaller unit of 6, to ensure a Protestant and Unionist majority. James Craig, its first Prime Minister, described it as "A Protestant state for a Protestant people". The British state hived it off effectively and not for nothing did contemporary observers in the 1920s compare the police powers there as akin to those of Mussolini's Italy. It was left to the Unionist elite (mostly landowners and large industrialists) to run it as they wished and as late as the 1960s MPs in the British Parliament were unable to put questions about what went on there as it was legally within the remit of the government of Northern Ireland and that regime was given carte blanche to run it as they saw fit. With a gerrymandered voting system and an almost caste system when it came to the allocation of housing, education and jobs, the only recourse for

Nationalists who didn't like it was to emigrate. For those who spoke out the brutal Protestant only police force (the Royal Ulster Constabulary) and their even more brutal reservists, the B Specials would see to it that they were silenced.

The wind of change stirred in 1969 with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in the US and the student revolts in Paris etc. Most of the leaders were moderate Nationalists, many from a Social Democrat background, like John Hume and Austin Currie. They sought to challenge the status quo through peaceful means and via demonstrations and protests. This was seen as an existential challenge to the sectarian Northern Ireland state and the police and B Specials were unleashed on the demonstrators. Several brutal attacks on the demonstrators followed, along with attacks on Nationalists by Loyalist mobs, as had happened in the 1920s following partition, when pogroms occurred in parts of Belfast and Catholic workers had been driven from the shipyards.

The British government felt forced to act as the scenes of violence in the North of Ireland proved deeply damaging for the UK state, particularly when viewed from the USA, where there was a large Irish population. British troops were dispatched to Ireland, supposedly to support the police and civil powers and to restore order. The British army was supposedly impartial and would act as a buffer between the two communities but in fact Britain was maintaining its old imperial interests in Ireland and many of the regiments

sent had deeply sectarian backgrounds and a strong anti-Nationalist and pro-colonial feeling. Some of these troops had been used a few years before to try and suppress anti-colonial struggles elsewhere in Britain's empire. Ironically looking back at the centenary of the Irish War of Independence the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries had also been sent to Ireland in 1920 to support the police and end disorder.

Unionism, was in a state of crisis, as it saw the pillars of its sectarian state shaken and called on Britain for support, while allowing its own sectarian police forces full leeway to crush the Civil Rights Movement.

The march and rally in Derry in January 1972 was due to be one of the largest demonstrations yet by the Civil Rights Movement. Many young Nationalists and Catholics had been encouraged by the rise of the movement and also by the fact that the world was now watching the North of Ireland in a way which it had not been for the preceding 60 years. There was also real hope and a sense that change was in the air. The Civil Rights Movement had been modelling itself on the one in the US and using anthems such as "We shall overcome" borrowed from that movement.

The Irish Republican Army, which believed in the use of armed force to drive the British out of the North of Ireland, had been in existence since 1921 but had been a marginal force, sometimes almost disappearing but it re-emerged in 1969 and carried out some small attacks on British forces and police. It had a limited role beside the much larger peaceful Civil Rights Movement, which had the support of



the Catholic Church and much of the Catholic bourgeoisie.

Britain had introduced internment without trial in an attempt to arrest and detain those Nationalists believed to be in the IRA without access to civil trials, via the Diplock Courts, which were judge only courts, which gave no real voice to those accused. This led to huge resentment in the Nationalist communities and many now turned against the British Army, which some of them had regarded as neutral referees in 1969 when they first arrived. Egged on by the Unionists and Heath's Conservative and Unionist Party government, with all of their ties to the Unionist elite, the British army was turned into an instrument of oppression against the Catholic community.

The march in Derry was to protest against Internment and large numbers were expected. Whole families took part in the protest which was centred in the traditionally Nationalist Bogside area of the city. The notorious Parachute regiment, which we now know had carried out a massacre in Belfast's Ballymurphy a year before and had escaped with impunity, were brought in to support the police and to supposedly ensure that the IRA did not infiltrate the protest and carry out attacks. When the demonstrators being held back by police started to throw stones and petrol bombs the troops were let off the leash and murdered 13 innocent demonstrators in cold blood. The fiction was that those who died had been in the IRA and that the troops had been protecting themselves against IRA fire. This is the line held to this day by the elderly commanding officer of the regiment at the time and some sections of the Unionist community, some of whom flew the flag of the Parachute regiment on flagpoles in Derry this week.

The global outcry after the massacre was immense and the British state had to cover its tracks. It did this, as it had

done many times before in its imperial history, by establishing a seemingly impartial legal inquiry which would investigate the incident and acquit British troops of any guilt. This was the Widgery Inquiry which was a farce. Widgery, as expected, cleared the troops of any guilt and claimed that they had been acting in self defence but was unable to find any evidence of the weapons which the victims had been allegedly carrying. Naturally it was denounced as a kangaroo court.

The Civil Rights Movement had achieved one of its main aims, as the Irish journalist, Fintan O'Toole wrote recently in the Irish Times: "The truth is that those methods were in fact successful; by the end of 1972, the Orange State was gone. The unionist monolith would never return to power."

The anger and resentment produced by both the massacre and the cover up moved the Troubles into a new phase - that of armed conflict. Many of those killed in Derry had been young men and many of their friends who had witnessed the massacre now joined the IRA. In an interview held in 1992 one of the friends of a victim, who had himself been on the march, described how he and six of his friends had joined the IRA as a result and as he had witnessed "how British rule in Ireland will always result in oppression and bloodshed." He had learned the lesson that generations of Irish nationalists had learned before him, that there was no reasoning with British imperialism in Ireland. Many historians now argue that Bloody Sunday was the central turning point in the Troubles and convinced many young nationalists that peaceful protest against Unionism and the British was ineffective.

Decades later the Saville Inquiry which took 12 years and interviewed hundreds of witnesses overturned the Widgery Inquiry and pronounced all

those killed innocent and found that the troops had deliberately killed them and that there had been no involvement by the IRA in the march and no attacks on the troops. David Cameron later apologised to the victims' families on behalf of the British state. The sting in the tail was that the Saville Inquiry had promised those giving evidence that no prosecutions would follow.

The families of the Bloody Sunday victims still believe that those responsible should be brought to trial, as should all of those state forces who carried out atrocities in the North of Ireland. The current British government is currently wanting to push through legislation which would ensure that this never happens. They want to close the book on the crimes carried out by British forces and their Loyalist paramilitary allies in Ireland.

Only two years ago in Dublin a theatrical event was held to commemorate another Bloody Sunday, that of the massacre of Irish civilians at a football match by British troops on the rampage in 1920. The event recreated the scene and gave voices to the characters of those who had been murdered. The play "The White Handkerchief" named after the infamous white handkerchief which the Catholic priest, Father Edward Daly, held before him as wounded victims of Bloody Sunday were carried behind him, is being performed both physically and online by the Derry Playhouse, in the city in which the massacre took place.

Two events separated by 50 years in the long line of murderous actions by the agents of British imperialism and colonialism in Ireland. The events of Bloody Sunday are a reminder that there will never be justice for the victims of British violence in Ireland but they also revealed the true nature of the Northern state and Britain's murderous role there.

*Source [Anti\\*Capitalist Resistance](#).*