

# Maidan or anti-Maidan? The Ukraine situation requires more nuance

Friday 18 April 2014, by [ISCHENKO Volodymyr](#) (Date first published: 15 April 2014).

**We should support the progressive wings of both factions, not tie ourselves up with hypocritical justifications of one or the other.**

I have little doubt that Russian security services were in some way involved in the recent escalation of violence in several towns in eastern Ukraine [1].

The seizures of administrative buildings on 12 April were well co-ordinated between different towns [2], the armed men were well equipped and showed high levels of military training. This does not necessarily mean that Russian special operations units are directly taking part; those men could be former Ukrainian riot police officers, many of whom fled to Crimea and Russia to escape punishment from the new government. But all of this does not preclude the fact that the planned provocation happened in the context of mass, grassroots, self-organised social protests which started against the new government in eastern Ukrainian regions after former president Viktor Yanukovich was toppled.

The Maidan movement has never had majority support in eastern and southern regions in Ukraine. After it succeeded in toppling the government, many people were scared and outraged with the exaggerated pictures they saw on television of violent clashes in Kiev, armed paramilitary groups including many far right elements controlling the streets, attacks on Lenin's monuments [3], and the far right Svoboda party included into the new government. Many people in the east call it the "Kiev junta" and disapprove of its actions.

Of course, there is a large degree of irrational fear driving the protesters, especially concerning the overstated problem of Russian language discrimination. But it would be hypocritical to employ double standards. Just as Maidan was not a "revolution", anti-Maidan is not a "counter-revolution" either [4]. Maidan was called a "revolution of dignity" but people in eastern Ukraine are also proudly talking about their dignity, regional identity, historical memory, Soviet heroes and language.

The anti-Maidans in the east are no more irrational than Maidan protesters who were hoping for the European dream but gained (quite expectedly) a neoliberal government, IMF-required austerity measures and increasing prices. In the eastern Ukrainian protests, "Russia" – with its higher wages and pensions – plays the same role of utopian aspiration as "Europe" played for the Maidan protesters. The economic situation in Ukraine continues to deteriorate and the national currency has lost more than 50% of its value in two months, so the protesters in the Donetsk region are talking more about the socio-economic problems the Ukrainian state was not able to solve for 23 years: collapsed enterprises, unemployment and low wages. They demand nationalisation and decent rewards for their labour.

It will sound paradoxical for those who celebrated grassroots self-organisation in the Maidan, but the anti-Maidan protests in eastern Ukraine are even more grassroots, decentralised, network-type

and leaderless at the moment. Neither the Party of Regions nor the Communist Party of Ukraine play the same role of political representation for anti-Maidan as the three former opposition parties did for Maidan. The so called “representative of south-eastern Ukraine”, the former Kharkiv region governor Mykhailo Dobkin, whom Russia was going to invite to the negotiations with the EU and US on an equal basis with the Kiev government, was violently booed by protesters in Lugansk. Equally, they do not trust the oligarchic elite of eastern Ukrainian origin; or the wealthiest person in Ukraine, Rinat Akhmetov, who has taken on a peacemaker role; or the new Donetsk governor Serhiy Taruta. And they do not want the discredited and corrupt Yanukovych back.

The social base of the protest seems to be more plebeian, poorer and less educated than on Maidan; we see more workers and pensioners and not so many intellectuals and higher-educated professionals who would help to formulate clear demands and defend them in the media.

This is precisely why these protests can be so easily influenced from the outside. It is not difficult to intervene, provoke and manipulate a decentralised revolt of scared people to serve Russian interests.

The anti-Maidan protests cannot be supported wholeheartedly and without reservation. Like Maidan they are diverse. Some people support joining Russia, some support more local autonomy within the Ukrainian state. Russian far-right nationalists, who are no better than the Ukrainian nationalist Svoboda or Right Sector, participate in the protests together with leftist organisations. The public in eastern and southern Ukraine is split. Simultaneously, with anti-Maidan rallies and seizures, demonstrations in support of the new government and a united Ukraine take place.

Even if from an abstract point of view a demand for federalisation and the direct election of the region’s governors sounds democratic, in Ukrainian reality it would instead give more powers to local “big men” rather than lead to a vivid local self-government. And like in western Ukraine during the final stages of the Maidan rebellion, the local Donetsk police is now sabotaging the government’s orders and is often allowed to take control of the buildings and weapons without much resistance, sometimes even taking the side of the protesters.

Rather than constructing necessarily hypocritical justifications as to why military suppression of some armed protesters is better than military suppression of other armed protesters, why the pro-Ukrainian far right is better than the pro-Russian far right, why the Ukrainian neoliberal government is better than the Russian neoliberal government, or why we are ready to fight Russian imperialism but ready to accept western imperialist interests in Ukraine, it would be better to support progressive wings of both Maidan and anti-Maidan, and try to unite them against the Ukrainian ruling class and against all nationalisms and imperialisms on shared demands for social justice.

**Volodymyr Ishchenko**

*\* The Guardian.com, Tuesday 15 April 2014 10.17 BST:*

[http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/15/maidan-anti-maidan-ukraine-situation-nuan  
ce](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/15/maidan-anti-maidan-ukraine-situation-nuan-ce)

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## Discussion

### 5 Responses to Maidan or anti-Maidan? The Ukraine situation requires more nuance

**Stephen Velychenko** says:

15 April 2014 at 18:44

SOME NUANCE FOR CONSIDERATION

The genuine emancipation of the Ukrainian people is inconceivable without a revolution or a series of revolutions in the West which must lead in the end to the creation of the Soviet United States of Europe. An independent Ukraine could and undoubtedly will join this federation as an equal member. The proletarian revolution in Europe, in turn, would not leave one stone standing of the revolting structure of Stalinist [today Putinist -SV] Bonapartism.

Leon Trotsky 1939.

Ishchenko's idea to "support progressive wings of both Maidan and anti-Maidan, and try to unite them against the Ukrainian ruling class and against all nationalisms and imperialisms on shared demands for social justice makes logical ideological sense. It may also be considered desirable in its own right. It does not however tell us what to do in the here and now when a de facto neo-colonized country is being parceled by force by its former imperial ruler. Ischenko fails to consider that it is preferable and easier to struggle for social issues in national states than in empires.

Leaving aside the issue that there is no critical mass that supports the kind of socialist alternative he proposes, Ukraine's geographical position means that it can only choose which great power to ally with and whether it will integrate into the world market via the European Union or Putin's Eurasian Union. After 200 years as a Russian colony, no one should be surprised that the mass of Ukrainians and a majority of Russians and Russian-speakers, with the exception of the Crimea, regard the EU as the only alternative to the neo-soviet Russophile oligarchic order in which they live. They desire integration into EU looking to Poland Slovakia and Hungary as models. Polls taken in early 2014 show that had presidential elections occurred then, no more than 15% would have voted for clearly neo soviet Russophile candidates. 12% supported full integration with Russia. In the most heavily colonized and Russified provinces where most of the population tune-in to Russian rather than Ukrainian media, 24 percent in Luhansk and Odessa, 33 percent in Donetsk, and 41 percent in Crimea, supported political union with Russia.

<http://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=236&page=1>.

All leftists realistically detail future problems stemming from EU association. Ukrainian leftists, oddly enough, whom one should expect to be trying to organize a left-led anti Russian national-liberation struggle, in the tradition of the Ukrainian left SDs and UKP-isty in 1919-1920, however, are not even discussing such a plan. They correctly do not consider the Euromaidan a revolution in so far as its socioeconomic demands have been replaced with the neoliberal capitalist agenda of the new government. However, they do not consider the new government progressive or revolutionary in so far as it is anti-imperialist or anti colonialist, or, that it arguably represents the national bourgeois anti-colonialist revolution that Ukraine never had. It declares the need for "unpopular decisions" on prices and tariffs and readiness to fulfil all the conditions of the International Monetary Fund. It has appointed oligarchs as provincial governors. It will probably thereby, as the leftists note, generate disappointment, impoverishment, an unacceptable encroachment of private interests in public administration, de-industrialization and the proletarianization of government employees.

Ukraine's Euromaidan national movement and new government, are politically liberal-conservative and have chosen EU membership with its neo liberal capitalism over Putin's Eurasian neo liberal

capitalism. But, regardless of the adverse socio-economic consequences of EU neoliberal capitalist policies in every country in which they have been adopted, the bourgeois national government in Kyiv presents a lesser threat to Ukrainians and Ukrainian independence than Russian imperialism.

Transnational corporations through their various "trade agreements" destroy what Marxists term "bourgeois" freedoms in the countries where they were won, often by force of arms and bloodshed. Marx considered these the great achievements of the eighteenth and nineteenth century revolutions: freedom of the press, elected representative assemblies, constitutions, the rule of law, and strong legal trade unions. In Ukraine, which never had a successful bourgeois anti-colonial revolution, these freedoms were never enacted and enforced. These freedoms never existed in Stalin's USSR and, after 1991, despite their formal adaptation in a written constitution, Ukraine's 1% and their hired politicians ignored them whenever they pleased. Re-establishing closer ties with Putin's Russia would only re-establish and reinforce the criminalized neo-feudal soviet-style order that Ukrainians rose against en masse in November 2013. For this reason, even in truncated form, today's EU member countries remain as beacons of these freedoms and liberties to people living in a corrupt neo-feudal authoritarian post-soviet republic.

The average Ukrainian, even if such a person is aware of the neo-liberal corporatist destruction of the post-war order in Greece or Ireland or Portugal, also sees the EU corporate neo-liberal capitalist order as one that still provides better conditions of life than the post-soviet Russian-style robber state-corporatist capitalist order they live under in Ukraine – as their protest has shown. Because between 75-80% of Russian government revenue derives from gas and oil exports, Putin's government can pay employees, and finance services and pensions. It thus ranks ahead of Ukraine in the Human Development Index. Poland, however, with no finite resources to export, ranks ahead of Russia, while it is doubtful that Russians who do not live in either Moscow or St Petersburg are better off than Ukrainians who live outside Kyiv. Since 2000, moreover, Ukrainian migration to Russia has been steadily falling while migration westwards has been steadily increasing.

[http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/migration\\_profiles/Ukraine.pdf](http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/migration_profiles/Ukraine.pdf)

For Ukrainians EU membership also promises the final end of two centuries of cultural russification and the threat Ukrainians will disappear as an ethnos – or be reduced to the level of an "aboriginal people." A comparison of the evolution during the last 100 years of the Ukrainian diaspora in North America with that of the diaspora in Russia adds little weight to any argument in favour of joining Putin's Eurasian Union. It is also inconceivable that Ukraine's political Russophiles, if any remained in the country after EU accession, would try defend their old soviet right there of not having to learn or use under any circumstances Ukrainian, or, to use Russian as administrative language INSTEAD of Ukrainian in Ukraine. Russians in Germany or Poland or any other European country make no such absurd claims, let alone feel second rate because they can't speak to non-Russians in Russian. Nor would Ukrainian in the EU disappear as a living language as Belarusian has in Belarus. It would no more be displaced by English than have Polish or Czech or Dutch.

EU membership for Ukraine would arguably make the introduction of a Keynesian Social Democratic order there more likely than if it belonged to Putin's Eurasian Union. The excesses of the neoliberal corporate order have now led some US and EU leaders to realize that it has to be restricted. Such people realise that aiming to produce the greatest amount of goods at the lowest price will ultimately turn the entire planet into a desert. World Bank executives fired Joseph Stiglitz for his opposition to neo liberal capitalist policies, while IMF board members fired Dominique Strauss-Kahn as chairman on the basis of a phony sex-scandal for trying to introduce regulations and controls on capital and corporations. Nonetheless, U.S. and Britain, have now nationalized major financial institutions, reversing the privatization trend of the last two decades. French President Sarkozy proclaimed, "Laissez-faire is finished." There are, in short, reformists within the ruling class calling for renewed government regulation, protection of citizens from foreign monopolies, and equalization

and redistribution through more taxation on capital flows and the 1%.

<http://www.sagepub.com/cleggstrategy/Kotz%20D%20M.pdf>. Argentina unilaterally reduced its debt in 2003 and channeled its money into domestic development not foreign bankers' pockets. In Venezuela and other Latin American countries, neoliberalism has been reversed as a result of mass political mobilization.

Against this background, it should be remembered that Tymoshenko in her time promised policies to regulate capital flows and Ukraine's 1%. Should Ukraine's new government follow her lead they would have the support of EU reformists for regulation, re-nationalization and, most important, a write-off of all debt – something EU bankers did for Poland. Ukrainian leaders are also likely to follow Polish advice — in particular keep the national currency and severely restrict inflow of foreign speculative capital. All of which would bring living standards public services and infrastructure up to Polish, if not western European levels. Should this not happen, if their new government, Brussels, the IMF the World Bank, the WTO and Washington, blindly impose neoliberal capitalist policies rather enacting legislation to regulate and control Ukraine's 1%, they will turn Ukraine into another Ireland or Greece. Under such conditions it is not inconceivable that a new Euromaidan by Ukrainians in the EU joining a renewed Occupy movement would shake the EU to its foundations.

## Reply

**Toshimaru Ogura** says:

16 April 2014 at 8:07

I translate this essay in Japanese and up to my blog

[http://alt-movements.org/no\\_more\\_capitalism/modules/no\\_more\\_cap\\_blog/](http://alt-movements.org/no_more_capitalism/modules/no_more_cap_blog/) . Also I have already translated Volodymyr Ishchenko's essays and other essays on the LEFTEAST in Japanese. These are very helpful for progressive or independent leftist people in Japan because none of Japanese media have never reported Ukraine situation from ordinary people's point of view and diversity of their desire not reduce into power politics based on nation states. Also as Japanese media sell short about far-rightist and nationalist, Ishchenko's essays are very informative for us.

## Reply

**Volodymyr Ishchenko** says:

16 April 2014 at 10:48

Thank you very much! By the way, I'm coming to Yokohama in July for the World Sociological Congress. Would be glad to meet you and other comrades if you live somewhere around.

## Reply

**Stephen Shenfield** says:

16 April 2014 at 13:44

When a war (interstate and/or civil) breaks out people come under enormous social pressure to support "their" side. In principle socialists are antiwar, but upholding principle can get you ostracized, insulted, jailed, beaten up, etc. So it is understandable that many socialists are unable to withstand the pressure. However, they feel bad about betraying their principles and therefore think up excuses. These excuses are often along the lines that victory of "their" side will create better conditions for social progress. Thus in 1914 British and French socialists referred to the backward and authoritarian nature of the German regime, while German socialists used the same argument but directed it against tsarist Russia. The same thing is happening this time — and again on both

sides. (Many Russian leftists who used to be extremely hostile to the Putin regime are now rallying around the Russian flag.) The important thing for socialists is to uphold an independent working class position, to refuse to fight for the interests of oligarchs and politicians, whether Russian or Ukrainian, Orange or Blue. Nothing is at stake that is worth the shedding of a single drop of working class blood.

## Reply

**Stephen Velychenko** says:

16 April 2014 at 17:27

There is a difference between socialists who rally around an imperialist government and socialists allied with an anti-colonialist national bourgeoisie for national liberation

If national liberation is not worth “shedding working class blood” then what are we to make of the national liberation struggles during the last 150 years from China and Vietnam and Ireland to Algeria? Why did the democratic and anti Stalinist left support these movements EVEN THOUGH they took arms from the Stalinist state-capitalist USSR? Was dictatorial state-capitalism preferable to corporate capitalism for the 90% of the population who had to live under it? How many defended it when it collapsed in 1991?

Why is it leftists are more concerned by a relatively weak “Ukrainian fascism” than a very powerful Russian imperialism. Why is it when we look at left sites that are not financed by the kremlin do we not see analysis of Russian colonialism, Russian imperialism, Russian militarism, Russian neo-nazis, or linguistic/cultural russification of non Russians. Where is the condemnation of the Dugins and Surkovs and “eurasianism” — the obnoxious counterparts to the equally obnoxious Cheney’s Rumsfelds and US neo cons? Where is the analysis of Putin’s ties to and sponsorship of the pro-Russian EU neo Nazi’s? Does Svoboda or Russia have nuclear weapons? Does Svoboda or Russia have the third largest military in the world? Are the victims of Russian imperialism less significant than the victims of US imperialism?

Is there not a difference between socialists who rally around an imperialist government and socialists who ally with an anti-colonialist national bourgeoisie for national liberation? Even Marx in his manifesto condoned such temporary alliances. Did not Trotsky point out in 1929 the key difference between the pre 1917 Chinese and Russian bourgeoisie was that the former was a colonized bourgeoisie in an oppressed country while the latter was an imperialist bourgeoisie of an oppressor state? I am amazed that Shenfield can even imply that if Ukrainian leftists support their Kyiv government there are no better than their Russian counterparts who support Putin!! By ignoring such vital issues the democratic anti Stalinist left is reflecting the interests of the Russian ruling class — the “Putinist Bonapartist clique” as Trotsky would have called them.

FYI to those interested in Ukrainian left-wing anti-colonialism:

[http://abimperio.net/cgi-bin/aishow.pl?state=pdf;fn=201009/15\\_13.4velychenko.pdf;Code=](http://abimperio.net/cgi-bin/aishow.pl?state=pdf;fn=201009/15_13.4velychenko.pdf;Code=)

“Ukrainian Anticolonialist Thought in Comparative Perspective. A Preliminary Overview”

AB IMPERIO 4 (2012).

\* <http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/ukraine-situation-requires-more-nuance/#comment-9760>

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## Footnotes

- [1] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/14/prorussian-militias-fill-vacuum-kiev-control-eastern-ukraine-slips>
- [2] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27000700>
- [3] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/08/ukraine-opposition-viktor-yanukovych-european-integration>
- [4] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/28/ukraine-genuine-revolution-tackle-corruption>