

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > France > The Left (France) > **“A form of political paralysis is affecting the French left over the war in (...)”**

# **“A form of political paralysis is affecting the French left over the war in Ukraine”**

Sunday 15 May 2022, by [BESANCENOT Olivier](#), [GESLIN Laurent](#), [GOANEC Mathilde](#) (Date first published: 11 May 2022).

**How should one approach the conflict as an anti-capitalist activist? Back from Ukraine, Olivier Besancenot believes that the progressive forces of the European continent must support more frankly the Ukrainian people, victims of Russian imperialism.**



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A spokesperson of Philippe Poutou, the candidate of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) in the last presidential election, Olivier Besancenot was in Ukraine between May 3 and 8, accompanied by representatives of various European left-wing parties, including the movement Ensemble!. He spoke to Laurent Geslin and Mathilde Goanec.

## **Laurent Geslin and Mathilde Goanec: Why go to Ukraine today, as an activist of a political party?**

Olivier Besancenot: We were responding to an invitation from the Social Movement , an organization of the Ukrainian left, in connection with the European Network of Solidarity with Ukraine and Against the War . We spoke with political activists and trade unionists. We also met two feminist collectives (Feminist Workshop and Bilkis ), who evoked with great emotion the fate of women raped in the occupation zones, or that of those who are caught up in prostitution networks when they flee the country.

There are also many women involved in the fighting, and they testify to the sexist reflexes that exist within the Ukrainian battalions. These women especially recalled that it is not a question of “Russian brothers” who attack other “Ukrainian brothers”, but rather of Russian soldiers who attack men and women from Ukraine.

## **What surprised you in this country that the West ultimately knew relatively little about before the war?**

The most surprising thing is to see how much political life persists despite the conflict, with different realities of course depending on where you are in the country. Social issues have not disappeared in the fighting. The trade unionists we met, engaged in the resistance against Putin, continue their struggles against the liberal policies conducted by President Zelensky. His government uses, for example, the context of the war to facilitate lay-offs in factories and businesses.

Other environmental activists protest against the cutting of forests, cuts which had been suspended before the war and which has been authorized again. These battles are not in any way trivial. From a political point of view, these militants of the Ukrainian left also intend to signify to the French and European lefts that the Russian aggression has a name: it is an imperialist offensive.

### **More than thirty years after the fall of the USSR, it is still difficult to call yourself left in Ukraine...**

The activists with whom we discussed call themselves socialist. A law on “decommunization” was passed [in 2015 – editor’s note] in Ukraine: all those who refer to communism are considered Russian allies, even those who are resisting against the invader. Affirming this political identity nevertheless retains all of its strategic meaning. These activists oppose Russian imperialism, and are in favour of a democratic society, which of course has nothing to do with the bureaucratic and totalitarian systems of the past. They are thus part, in their own way, of the continuity of an anti-Stalinist left that has always existed in Ukraine, and more broadly in Eastern Europe. They have also established relations with certain independent and dissident socialist groups in Russia, even though it is very complicated today. Many of these Russians are currently living in hiding or have fled abroad.

### **Is there a legacy of Nestor Makhno, the famous anarchist, and his movement today in Ukraine?**

I met two “anti-authoritarian” militants linked to an anarchist territorial defense battalion positioned in the south of Kyiv. Collections are organized throughout Europe to bring equipment to this battalion, helmets, drones, bulletproof vests. These fighters almost have to organize themselves, like many territorial defense units. A call was therefore made to European libertarians and anti-fascists for help.

These activists insist on the need not to remain blind to the Ukrainian resistance, by focusing only on the Azov battalion. The Wagner militias, in the Russian camp, are of the same ilk. Above all, they underline the fact that there are also left-wing activists in the territorial defense units. In the city of Kryvyi Rih, for example, trade unionists have sent many of their members to fight in units in the region.

### **What is the NPA’s position on the war that has been going on in Ukraine since 2014?**

Our rule may seem elementary: we are on the side of the oppressed, never on the side of the oppressors. My hope, in order to overcome prejudices and a priori judgements, consists in believing that by initiating a direct dialogue with feminist activists, or trade unionists in Ukraine, new sectors of the French social and political left will end up understanding that the Ukrainian left also exists. From railway workers to railway workers, from nurses to nurses, from energy workers to energy workers, from academics to academics, concrete solidarity is already being put in place. In the NPA, we believe that our place is to act in solidarity alongside peoples who struggle for their emancipation and freedom, regardless of the status of their oppressor.

Imperialism is not an Anglicism, it is not reserved for North American policy on the Latin American continent. French imperialism exists, Russian imperialism too. It is an embodied reality, which responds to economic objectives and which refers to history. This Russian imperialism reconnects with the tsarist expansionist tendencies, which the Bolsheviks had shattered after 1917 by speaking out for the right to self-determination, before the Stalinist counter-revolution. Putin did not forget to oppose Stalin to Lenin during his declaration of war.

## **What can this war teach the European left?**

I do not have the pretension to have to teach anything on the subject nor to give lessons. I simply believe that this war is one of the major issues affecting the rebuilding of the European radical left. The conflict in Ukraine marks the end of a cycle, that of the “happy globalization” of the capitalists. Competition between the blocs has reasserted itself in recent years and Putin’s Russia hopes to find new outlets outside its borders. Rosa Luxemburg also explained that wars are often the extension on the military terrain of a competition which until then only took place on the economic terrain. This competition is also being played out in Ukraine, and the outcome of this war will therefore have an impact on social and political forces around the world. The situation will not be the same whether imperialism wins or loses.

## **What is your opinion on the position of La France insoumise concerning this conflict and has the subject been part of disagreements during discussions with the NPA over the legislative elections?**

It’s not up to me to speak in the name of La France insoumise, and I do not intend to hand out advice. What I do know is that we need a collective movement, as broad and as unitary as possible, to carry out effective actions of solidarity with this Ukrainian left. This must overcome partisan differences.

Today, a form of political paralysis is affecting the French left: if you are for the withdrawal of Russian troops, you are necessarily a CIA agent, and conversely, if you denounce NATO as being part of the problem, you pass for an FSB agent. We need to reconnect with complexity, to understand that something is at stake there, and that this war is not a shameful subject that sticks to us like a piece of band-aid.

## **What is your position on arms deliveries to Ukraine and economic sanctions against Russia? These could lead to high inflation in Western countries and ultimately affect the most economically fragile populations...**

We find it understandable that the Ukrainians are asking for weapons, especially defensive weapons that allow them to control the skies. Those with whom we discussed there repeat that they do not intend that forces other than their own replace the Ukrainian resistance.

On the question of economic sanctions, we are campaigning to sanction the oligarchs, but we are still very far from the mark. In Great Britain, in Cyprus, we are at one hundredth of what could be done.

Ukrainian environmental activists also explain that it is urgent to draw all the consequences, at the same time, from our dependence on fossil fuels, on gas, but also on the dangers of nuclear power. Imagine that the power stations are affected during the fighting? The war in Ukraine once again raises the question of the energy transition. Ukrainian trade unionists are proud of their industrial tool, of producing energy, but within the framework of the Social Movement, they have no hostility to discussing with environmental activists.-

## **The Ukrainians now say they want to fight until victory. Some European diplomats, on the contrary, want to put an end to the conflict, by finding a way out for Russia. How to make peace and at what cost?**

It’s up to the Ukrainians to decide, not up to us. It is a question of renouncing any paternalistic attitude towards them. The question of a lasting peace obviously concerns everyone, but it involves

showing solidarity with the peoples who are the first victims of Putin's policy, the Ukrainian people, the Russian people as well. And time is running out. In fact, the Ukrainians I have seen are no longer quite in the same position as at the start of the war. The possibilities of a ceasefire or an agreement recede as the weeks go by and the crimes add up...

The right to self-determination will probably not be about just holding a referendum or imposing a military solution. A genuine democratic process should allow all Ukrainians, from East and West, to recognize themselves in the solution found. This requires that we let them decide freely on the Ukraine of afterwards, once the withdrawal of Russian troops has been obtained. Without being stuck between Russian imperialism, which has attacked this country, and the interests of Westerners. Without having a gun pointed at their head. Without the whole planet, which defends its own interests, inviting itself to the table to tell them how to do it.

**We sense in Ukraine a desire to “overturn the table”, to organize a “reset” of the political system in the country. Society has organized itself to defend itself and people explain that it will be necessary, after the war, to free itself from the influence of the oligarchs. People want to take control of their destiny...**

The reset is indeed an expression that I have heard. Many people want to oust the oligarchs once and for all and end corruption. The question of cancelling the debt imposed on Ukraine is a key issue from this point of view. The idea of the members of the Social Movement is to immediately bring out all these social issues, without waiting for a bright future. This democratic vitality persists even in times of war.

With them, we do not find, on the one hand, the soldiers who go to the front and, on the other, the militants who contribute to the democratic discussions. In reality, these two worlds are intimately linked. Some territorial defense units have even set up very partial forms of self-organization.

**Sweden and Finland will certainly ask to join NATO. Are we forced to choose between Russia and NATO, or can we criticize both sides?**

We criticize Russia and of course NATO, which not only did not disappear after the end of the Warsaw Pact in 1991, but continued to develop, and not for the defence of the human race... NATO will still be part of the problem and not part of the solution.

**What do you think of the action of the European Union (EU) in the war in Ukraine?**

It is absolutely appalling to allow refugees to be sorted according to their country of origin at the European Union's borders. At the start of the war, Prime Minister Jean Castex explained that France could accommodate 100,000 Ukrainians, and that's good. How many times have we been told that the principle of freedom of movement and settlement that we were defending was certainly honourable but completely impractical. For years, I heard “we would like to but it's impossible”.

We have sad proof today that when the reception of refugees has not worked in favour of Afghans, Kurds or Syrians, for example, it is not because the authorities could not, but because that they didn't want to.

To build another Europe, of workers and peoples, which breaks with the liberal treaties, we must start from terribly concrete things. Our Ukrainian comrades are asking for many things and many debates. They want to know in detail what European integration has meant, in terms of social and democratic rights, for the Eastern European countries that have joined the EU. In fact, even among supporters of European Union membership, there is no illusion but that a collective balance of

power will be necessary in any case to achieve emancipatory horizons shared by all.

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