

'Aid for Ukraine must not have neoliberal strings attached'

Tuesday 14 March 2023, by [ROWLEY Thomas](#) (Date first published: 13 March 2023).

UK MPs John McDonnell, Nadia Whittome and Clive Lewis join Ukrainian solidarity event with international activists in London

Ukraine must not only defeat Russian aggression but resist neoliberal economic reforms if it is to thrive, British MPs told an international audience on Saturday.

Labour MPs John McDonnell, Clive Lewis and Nadia Whittome joined Ukrainian, British, Syrian, French, Polish, Afghan and European activists and researchers to discuss progressive approaches to Russia's war at the '[Solidarity with Ukraine: Building a New Internationalism](#)' event, held at the London School of Economics (LSE).

The trio affirmed their support for a people-led reconstruction for Ukraine, which would keep worker protections and welfare policies for a society ravaged by Russia's invasion.

"We need a campaign that joins the fight against neoliberal economic conditions on international aid for Ukraine with Britain's role as laundromat for Russian and Ukrainian cash – to make a just reconstruction for Ukraine," said McDonnell, a former shadow chancellor during Jeremy Corbyn's tenure as Labour leader.

That recovery must also include justice for victims of Russian war crimes, participants said.

Ukraine has [opened](#) 70,000 individual criminal cases over potential crimes committed by Russian forces since the invasion began in February 2022.

"The Russian Federation uses war crimes as a way of achieving its war aims – and it has never been punished," Ukrainian human rights defender Oleksandra Matviichuk told the conference.

"Ukrainians are fighting to build a country where the rights of all citizens are protected – and the freedom to be Ukrainian, rather than have their identity destroyed," she added.

The conference "felt like a moment of crystallisation for a new international solidarity movement around Ukraine, one with considerable future potential," conference organiser and researcher Luke Cooper told openDemocracy.

"It was exciting to bring Ukrainian movements into dialogue with activists promoting solidarity and support for civil society and human rights in other countries facing the hardships of war and conflict," Cooper said.

Participants discussed a range of topics, from the difficulties of achieving justice for victims of war crimes and Ukraine's future security in a fraying international system, to frictions in the Global South over western support for Ukraine and the danger of a market-led recovery that does not

protect social and economic rights of Ukrainians.

Marina Kaljurand, former Estonian Foreign Minister and current MEP, told the conference that she didn't "believe that Putin will physically stand before a court", but "that it's important for Ukraine, and it's important for Russia that this happens."

Human rights include economic, cultural and social rights, added LSE professor emeritus Mary Kaldor, and that "means addressing economic inequality and gross corruption" as part of Ukraine's resistance and recovery.

Researchers and activists were cautious about the current outlines of Ukraine's recovery plans, noting that the Ukrainian government appeared to have used the invasion as an [opportunity to pass controversial legislation](#) on workplace rights.

"The outcome of progressive causes in Ukraine is crucial to the future democratic make-up of Ukraine. And those discussions have to begin now" - Taras Fedirko

Under the extreme pressure of the Russian invasion, the Ukrainian government has pursued a policy of reducing state influence in various sectors of the economy - rather than using the state's powers to harness the country's resources in service of the war effort against Russia - according to a [recent report](#) by Luke Cooper at the LSE.

But participants were also optimistic about the chance for a fair and inclusive reconstruction that met Ukrainian society's need for economic stability and growth - a chance guaranteed by including more local government officials, civil society, workers' and women's groups, in the recovery process.

"The outcome of progressive causes in Ukraine is crucial to the future democratic make-up of Ukraine. And those discussions have to begin now," said Taras Fedirko, lecturer at the University of Glasgow.

Anthony Barnett, writer and founder of openDemocracy, called for a peace that eventually involves dialogue between Ukrainian, Belarusian and Russian societies. The global crisis caused by Russia's invasion, he told the conference, was an extreme challenge, but also an opportunity for democratic renewal.

"We're now in an era when the politics of neoliberalism has failed," he said. "This told us it was pointless hoping anything could be any different, and the 'market knew best'.

"In a way Putin's invasion of Ukraine seeks to impose a similar, related fatalism. But his invasion is failing too - and so a striking, fresh, honest conversation about how we defend and create democracy is beginning."

That conversation, however, must also deal with the lack of action the West - including progressive circles - took over Russian aggression against Ukraine in the first stage of the war in 2014, writer Olesya Khromeychuk told the conference.

"We must confront the lack of response from the western left in 2014 over Donbas and Crimea," she said.

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