

Six Ways Ukraine is Winning: How the European Left Marginalised a Transatlantic Red-Brown Coalition

Tuesday 21 March 2023, by [MASON Paul](#) (Date first published: 27 February 2023).

Author and journalist Paul Mason looks at how the European left has rallied around the Ukrainian people while a hardcore of 'neo-Bolsheviks' are aligning with the hard right

On the day Russia invaded Ukraine, the left swung into action: it condemned the aggression, began agitating for arms to Kyiv, and dispatched activists to the borders, working 24x7 to support the flood of refugees. But that was the Polish left, not their British and American counterparts.

The far left of the Anglosphere, by contrast, disgraced themselves. In the UK an alliance of self-styled "anti-imperialists" and Putin fans around Stop The War had been making the Kremlin's case for months: Ukraine's borders were illegitimate; rising tension was the fault of "NATO aggression". Even the US warning that Putin was about to invade was written off as CIA propaganda.

Once the war began, an influential part of the European left made it their priority to stop the flow of Western arms to Ukraine. On 23 April a "Peace Conference" in Madrid, fronted by Jeremy Corbyn, saw MPs from Spain, Portugal, Sweden, Greece and Ireland call for practical action to disarm Ukraine. In Greece, the Communist Party delivered it - blockading a railway line being used to ferry ammunition towards Ukraine. In Berlin a prominent MP from the Left Party actually fronted a rally demanding "Security for Russia".

For anyone who's been associated with the radical left, as I have, it's been a sickening experience.

'Political Maturity' in the European Left

Over the past year, however, the internationalist left has rallied substantial forces in support of Ukraine's resistance. In France, thanks to their work, every trade union federation has signed a pledge of solidarity with Ukraine. Finland's Left Alternative party, which is part of the coalition government, helped swing their country's decision to join NATO.

Here, the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign - founded by, among others, Labour's John McDonnell - has organised practical help for the Ukrainian left group Sotsialny Rukh (Social Movement), some of whose members are fighting at the front, and provided vehicles and other equipment to combat units staffed by miners from Ukraine's free trade unions.

Poland's Razem party, which has six MPs in the Sejm, took a lead both in countering pro-Moscow "left" propaganda and organising solidarity to the Ukrainian left and trade unions. But one of the first things Razem had to do, their spokeswoman Zofia Malisz told me, was to break with the so-called Progressive International, founded by former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis.

Varoufakis' group proved incapable of issuing anything other than an [abstract condemnation of war](#)

[in general.](#)

"We asked them to stand on two principles: that Ukraine is a sovereign nation and that Russia is an imperialist country," said Ms Malisz. "They couldn't give us a straight answer, so we had to part ways with them."

By 8 March, Razem had helped create the European Network of Solidarity with Ukraine (ENSU) which coordinates the work of left groups, parties, trade unions and journalists. It has national committees in Belgium, France and Catalonia, and also runs a "Brigade of Editorial Solidarity", involving newspapers, book publishers and writers, which promotes the translation of left news sources from Ukraine and the Russian democratic opposition.

Claudiu Craicun, who heads Demos, a left political party in Romania, believes the failure of figures like Varoufakis and Jeremy Corbyn to support Ukraine has forced the European left into a moment of political maturity. In East Europe, he says, where you are up against oligarchy and authoritarianism, you are always forced to prioritise fighting for democracy, not simply social justice:

"It would be hard for me now to work with leftists who didn't support Ukraine, or who indirectly supported Russia. If you can't see a fascist country; a decaying empire; and its threats to our democracies - then we cannot be fellow travellers. This is a watershed moment. I don't care about left unity - if we don't share the same values, it's better to split".

Szymon Martys, another Polish activist organising with ENSU, is scathing about those on the left who've labelled Ukraine's resistance a "proxy war":

"We are talking about a real colonisation now. Not just in Crimea. Contacts on the ground are saying Russia is now settling people in [occupied] Melitopol. If you want to compare it to Israel-Palestine there's no better parallel: it's a real, daily colonisation - not just a typical war."

'Neo-Bolshevism'

Many left-wing activists still struggle to comprehend where pro-Putin leftism comes from. Adam Novak, a veteran left-wing journalist based in Bratislava, who helps coordinate ENSU, believes much of the attraction of "tankism" is cultural.

"There is the folklore of a few surviving Stalinists," he says, "but they're not significant. At a second level, however, you see Stalinism coming back among a younger generation, who like the images of strength, discipline and dealing ruthlessly with your enemies. People who'll share statements by Kim Il Sung on Twitter for example."

Zofia Malisz calls the phenomenon "neo-Bolshevism": "It radiates from skilled and well-funded communication centres in the Anglo-Saxon world: using provocative narratives on social media, nice graphics - whitewashing Stalin, for example. Disinformation plays on people's best instincts - like wanting peace, or it plays on guilt, as in Germany, or a saviour complex."

The democratic left... needs to acknowledge that it has more in common with liberalism, humanism and Christianity than it has with Stalinism.

For me, the source of left sympathy for Putin is clear. Leninism was founded on the idea that working-class people are incapable of achieving socialism themselves, and that the "historical process" has therefore to be aided by an outside force.

For Lenin, by the early 1920s, that force was the peasantry of the global south. For the “tankies” of the Cold War it was the Soviet Union. For the New Left of the 1960s, it was students and ethnic minorities. But when the USSR collapsed, and the liberation movements went mainstream, all that was left were the supposedly “progressive” dictatorships of Syria and Venezuela.

Then, in 2012, came Xi Jin Ping. The logic of his “Sinicised Marxism” is clear: everything that disrupts the US-dominated global order is good; all “colour revolutions” - ie democratic revolts against totalitarian rule from Syria to Ukraine to Iran - are to be crushed. Xi and Putin even spelled these principles out in their joint communique of 4 February 2022.

So if you look at the assemblage of left organisations pushing Putin’s narratives on Ukraine, we are no longer dealing simply with Leninist nostalgia: there is a new vigour, a magnetic force and, of course, the dirty money and social media manipulation skills coming both from Beijing and Moscow.

Looking at the trajectory of the pro-Putin left in the USA, there is little doubt about where this ends: in a fusion of far-left and far-right ideologies that we saw in the Rage Against The War Machine rally in Washington DC on 19 February 2023. Far-right Republicans and Oath Keeper militia figures took the stage alongside the Green Party’s Jill Stein, and the self-styled left comedian Jimmy Dore. The red-brown politics of the 1930s, incredibly, are back.

The future of the democratic left has to be no less clear: the historian EP Thompson once wrote that there are “two Marxisms” and they are incompatible. The democratic left, he said, needs to acknowledge that it has more in common with liberalism, humanism and Christianity than it has with Stalinism.

That’s what the Ukraine war is teaching a whole new generation of anti-capitalists. You cannot achieve social progress alongside a bunch of apologists for Russian fascism, no matter how good their positions on abortion or trans rights are, or how exciting their memes look.

Paul Mason

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