

Bulgaria: Between Pro-War Consensus and the Need for an Anti-War Movement

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As the reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine have shown, Bulgaria is not ready for a new anti-war movement, despite the urgency of the task. The majority of people with some access to the public space act as if the year were not 2022, but the Soviet Union had just collapsed yesterday, as if we hadn't lived through a single crisis, hadn't learned a single bitter lesson, and the Cold War rhetoric couldn't be shaken.

"How so?", one might ask amid the seemingly universal condemnation of war across all media. The territorial proximity of the war in Ukraine has brought out all the political demons we've known were there without realizing their full extent. Because what matters is not just the call "No to war!" but what comes after.

Since the beginning of the invasion in Ukraine, the Bulgarian public space has witnessed some pro- and anti-war discourses silently converging, all under the guise of the "No to war!" slogan. On the left, the majority with conservative and authoritarian leanings - mainly current and former representatives of the Bulgarian Socialist Party of various ranks and times, as well as some marginal Stalinist groups - defend or at least relativize Putin's war with their realist analysis of international relations; for them, peace comes with accepting the Russian demands, and the war is simply a necessary evil to bring about stability. On the right, liberals and conservatives - mainly vocal intellectuals and right-wing politicians marginalized in the years of the transition - call for NATO intervention via a typical hawkish realist-moralist analysis; for them, escalation in the cultural, economic, but also military planes is... a necessary evil to stop the aggressor and bring about stability. These two camps dominate the public space, of course with the active cooperation of the national public television and a plethora of online news and analysis websites. So far, despite their clear position, the government maintained a more or less balanced policy, serving as a humble and obedient member of the EU and NATO in their broader approach.

A fragile anti-war discourse is born by a handful of rather silent liberal intellectuals and activists, and mostly by progressive informal leftist and anarchist collectives (dVERSIA, KOI, LevFem, Fabrika Autonomia, Feminist Mobilizations, among others) and activists who have found ample occasions for tactical alliances before. As I am finalizing these lines on March 8, the International Women's Day demonstration is going to be the first public event to stand for a principled anti-war position - for solidarity and peace - giving some hope that the anti-war discourse could become stronger.

Putin's repeated and very clearly stated aspirations are for a new Russian Empire, not a new USSR. Over the years, he has taken a firmly anti-Bolshevik position, including in his [speech](#) from February 21 in which he explained that he would decommunize Ukraine by reversing what Lenin had done (i.e., the "artificial separation" of Ukraine as something not fully Russian). Yet both the right and the left in Bulgaria seem incapable of understanding that we're not dealing with Brezhnev's or Gorbachev's USSR, or any socialist union, but rather a new Alexander III. While for the right this is understandable, albeit regrettable, for the left it is regrettable only. And quite shameful at that.

As expected, in the new-old conflict that has erupted the voices advocating the loudest for reinforcing NATO troops in Bulgaria, and consequently worsening the war, come from the right. Rightwing analysts and politicians openly maintain that having a more visible presence of allied forces on Bulgarian territory is a matter of prestige and future benefits.

More interestingly, the right has also latched on to some puzzling historical revisionism. On the day Putin began outright nuclear blackmail, they went out to [dismantle](#) Soviet monuments with spray paint and [petitions](#). For the middle-class right and all the offshoots of the erstwhile Union of Democratic Forces (SDS), this was an opportunity to round off their decades-long effort to position themselves as executive demolitionists of the socialist past. The dividends for a number of prominent opponents of the monument are obvious. They and their ilk sincerely believe that such exercises move the aggressor - i.e., "the USSR" - that the symbolic gestures of civil society in an irrelevant country matter, even though the aggressor itself openly denies the Soviet legacy and makes a mockery of it. At the same time, this is a case of both poor imagination and historical ignorance, trying to remove a monument erected to a predominantly Ukrainian unit (the Third Ukrainian Front of the Red Army) as a sign of solidarity with Ukraine. It is only made possible by a kind of transhistorical political, cultural, not to say genetic continuity somewhere out there in the far northeast - a classic racist fantasy. For instance, Bulgaria saw a renewed public debate about March 3rd as the country's national holiday. We are yet to find out the exact implications of this raging Russophobia and outright racism, but in any case it will reinforce revisionism, militarism, and the rightists' confidence that history is on their side; that they are more powerful with each passing day. So much stronger, in fact, that they can repeat Putin's pseudo-historical talking points completely unnoticed and still profit from it.

But with the left in Bulgaria performing elaborate moral and political equilibristic in defense of the invasion, things are even more dangerous. Alongside Putin himself, they are doing their best to demonstrate that the wildest dreams of NATO imperialism are now a reality - the evil from the East has truly and definitively awakened for the first time since the end of the Cold War (and in fact since the Second World War), revealed its true nature, and with it activated all its devoted trolls from near and far.

The closest to an anti-war position these leftists have to offer came across in the words of military minister Stefan Yanev, in a [Facebook post](#) he wrote the day before he was asked to resign. According to Yanev, Bulgaria should not take sides because the country's peace and security, as well as Bulgarian identity, are all that matters, as if a principled position of neutrality wouldn't be necessary for the sake of peace in general. As if not having a war is only important insofar as the war is not on our territory. As if peace, much like the grounds for war, were a national issue and nothing else.

In advocating such positions, too many on the left ignore any sort of class and anti-imperialist analysis. They ignore it when they repeat how the war has been eight years in the making, quoting Putin's policies verbatim (though he, while his army roamed the border for weeks on end, said nothing about the Donbas); when they defend the need for guarantees of Russia's security, as if the only way to problematize the collapsed post-Cold War international order is a new and hot war; and when they invoke the right to ethnic and national self-determination, defending (and stopping at) the argument for an end to Ukrainian atrocities in the Donbas, as if war was indeed the only solution. All that these reveal is that they have no substantive, let alone left-wing anti-war position, but are in fact backing aggression.

It also seems impossibly difficult for the leftists holding these positions in Bulgaria to simultaneously acknowledge the real problem of fascism infiltrating Ukrainian institutions and the Western support for it on the one hand, and hold anti-war positions on the other. Putin has managed to convince only

these leftists and no one else that there is no contradiction in going to war for decommunization (i.e., redrawing state borders) and at the same time for the denazification of Ukraine, and that even just the latter is sufficient justification. After all, the right-wing's age-old racist narrative of a "civilization" under attack from the evils of savages (especially communism), which has re-emerged in full force, is now reflected and evidenced in Russia's imperialist behavior, fighting for all the supposed Russians and their "historical" territories - a rather notorious irredentist discourse.

It is basic, but begs repeating: there is no good war and no good empire for the oppressed. The principle "The enemy of my enemy is my friend" may work in the case of nationalism and militarism, but it makes no sense in the historical war of the classes. From Engels to Zetkin to Liebknecht and Luxemburg, to Lenin and to popular and revolutionary anti-war movements around the world and throughout history, our entire legacy speaks against pro-war positions. Only feeling for Russia and resentment towards the West, as well as a nationalist, at times authoritarian bent, can explain the opposite.

As if the wars of recent decades and the ongoing conflicts in many places around the world were not enough to remember that we cannot reject one imperialism while defending another; this only sounds paradoxical or illogical to those stuck in the 20th century, or in some reactionary realpolitik. It is a matter of basic recognition that the forces that sustain capitalist exploitation in all its forms and manifestations, with all the crises it plunges us into, care less about nation states than ever before and take advantage of their institutions more unhindered and successfully than ever before. Anti-war and anti-imperialist theory and practice (far beyond Lenin) can and should be, in this context, powerful weapons of united action for a new world, not an invisible ink on the papers of the old.

We need an anti-war movement, not enclaves in defense of these and those individuals, states, or alliances, because only a movement from below can rely not on the institutions of our capitalist nation-states, but on the interests, will, and energy of the workers and the oppressed. At the very least - which should be enough - tomorrow we will probably have to oppose another NATO war and we will be left without any legitimacy to do so.

An express public opinion [poll](#) taken right after the start of the invasion showed that almost two-thirds of Bulgarians fear that the war will affect their lives. Instead of solidarity and peace, are we going to allow this very legitimate concern to be harnessed by nationalism and instrumentalized in support of global imperial atrocities? Because that is what is already happening.

Stanislav Dodov

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P.S.

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