

# The left in Ukraine

Thursday 7 September 2023, by [STREET Dale](#) (Date first published: 5 September 2023).

## **Workers' Liberty members met with members of Sotsialny Rukh (SR — Social Movement) in Lviv and Kyiv during our visit to Ukraine in August 2023.**

SR emerged from the regrouping of (and splits from) the left which took place around the Maidan Revolution of Dignity in late 2013 and early 2014. It was formally launched in 2015 and now has functioning branches in three Ukrainian cities, plus members in others.

SR defines itself as “a Ukrainian political organisation and initiative towards the legal registration of a left political party based on the principles of democratic anti-capitalism, feminism and eco-socialism.”

Like the British left SR faces a government which pursues neo-liberal policies, a history of the country defined by nationalist narratives, the spread of casualised labour, and threats from the far right.

In other respects much is different.

There is no equivalent of the Labour Party (i.e. a trade-union-based political party), there is no single trade union centre (i.e. no equivalent of the TUC). For an older generation the fake socialism of Stalinism has been a lived experience.

There is strong and pervasive pro-EU sentiment, which undoubtedly involves illusions in the actual EU, but is also an expression of national self-identity: we are European, not a sub-section of Russia.

Political parties in Ukraine are distrusted even more than in Britain — in fact, creations of different oligarchs, as opposed to ideologically and politically defined organisations.

There is even a “black market” where, if the price is right, you can buy the name of a registered but actually non-existent party and stand candidates under its name.

This helps explain Zelenskyy's success in the presidential election of 2019 and the success of his Servant of the People Party in the parliamentary elections. Voters saw them, rightly or wrongly, as a break with oligarchism in the party-political sphere.

The left in Ukraine is even weaker than in Britain. Aside from a few small groupings of anarchists and leftists, such as the Social Democratic Platform, SR, roughly the size of the AWL, effectively is the left in Ukraine.

The struggle to defend Ukrainian self-determination against Russian imperialism overarches everything. You can scarcely find anyone who does not have a family member, friend, neighbour or workplace colleague fighting in the Ukrainian armed forces. 78% of Ukrainians have a relative or friend who has been killed or wounded in the war.

The war can also warp political judgements.

One trade union activist we spoke to, for example, thought that Boris Johnson was a great man. He had stood with Ukraine against Russia from the outset and ensured supplies of British weaponry for Ukraine. His only major failure was his “mistake” of having supported Brexit.

Obviously, if there are any inaccuracies in the summary above, or in the outline of our discussions with SR below, then the fault lies with ourselves.

SR won't be standing candidates in the next parliamentary elections (originally scheduled for this year but now put back, given the wartime conditions, to 2024) even though it could meet the legal requirements to do so.

The main arguments are that an electoral intervention would, albeit wrongly, be tarred with the same brush as other “political parties” (i.e. creations of different oligarchs). SR needs to build a stronger base among trade unionists, in workplaces, and among young people before standing candidates.

Being based in Ukraine, SR is better placed to make judgements about the value or otherwise of standing candidates.

But not standing candidates — bearing in mind that SR is effectively the left in Ukraine — means the absence of any socialist alternative on the ballot paper. No prospect of a substantial vote? That cannot be decisive.

In South Africa's first post-apartheid elections in 1994, for example, the miniscule Trotskyist group Workers Organisation for Socialist Action (WOSA) stood candidates. Given the (underserved) status of the African National Congress, WOSA knew that its vote would be minimal. (And it was: 0.02%.)

But WOSA was right to stand candidates, given that the alternative was to abandon the electoral arena to various forms of bourgeois political parties.

In some local elections SR members have stood as individuals. And surely standing SR candidates as such in the next parliamentary elections could be used to help build a stronger base, rather than posing the existence of that base as a precondition for standing?

Another issue we discussed, especially in our meeting with SR members in Kyiv, was launching a regular SR newspaper. SR opposed the idea, not because of lack of resources but as a wrong thing to do.

Given how many newspapers are produced by socialist organisations in Britain (and elsewhere), this may seem outlandish. But SR did have some solid arguments.

There are no daily newspapers in Ukraine. The nearest thing to a weekly newspaper is *Sobitiya Nedelyi* (“Events of the Week”). It carries tittle-tattle rather than actual news, and its circulation, for good reason, appears to be minimal.

Ukraine is not like Britain, where fewer people read newspapers today than twenty or thirty years ago. Ukraine is much more “extreme”. It is a post-newspaper, online country in which hard-copy newspapers do not exist. It would be a matter of trying to sell a newspaper in a country where people simply did not read newspapers.

A weaker argument in support of the SR position was that a Ukrainian version of Socialist Appeal UK

had attempted to launch a regular newspaper, but quickly abandoned the project with no success.

But given the quality of journalism in Socialist Appeal's network, that failure looks unsurprising. And, if the paper were still being produced, the fact that Socialist Appeal has been an apologist for Putin since February 2022 would guarantee a Ukrainian readership of zero.

Although the arguments against producing a newspaper certainly carried weight, they did not engage with the more basic concept, which we failed to introduce into the discussion, of a revolutionary newspaper being, as Lenin put it, being "not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, but also a collective organiser."

A revolutionary newspaper is not just a medium through which to promote socialist ideas to a broader audience. It is also a mechanism around which to build, train and organise the revolutionary party itself. Does the total absence of a newspaper-reading culture in Ukraine mean that a revolutionary paper is no longer required for that function?

The SR comrades were not arguing: Why produce a newspaper when you have Facebook and Twitter/X? They were clear that online "campaigning" by itself does not amount to much.

They argued that social media allows SR to gain an audience for its ideas, and that needs to be followed up by what we would call "contact work": chasing up and engaging in political discussions with individuals who have shown an interest.

They cited the SR intervention into the Be Like Nina health workers' campaign.

SR argument is not arguing that there is no point in producing any hard-copy material. On the contrary, they cited numerous examples of where they had intervened in workplace disputes and campaigns through the production of targeted hard-copy materials.

SR has also published a handbook on workers' rights (as a campaigning tool, not just as a handbook of legal rights) and produces a zine which, very roughly, is the equivalent of *Women's Fightback*.

There was a more confusing discussion — due to our own lack of clarity — about what political activities should or could be undertaken by the (very limited) number of SR members in the Ukrainian armed forces.

Equally unsuccessful, through no fault of SR, were our attempts to clarify the reasons for the split in the Ukrainian trade union movement between the FPU (the Stalinist-legacy trade union federation) and the KVPU (a more militant federation).

Was it simply a split between conservative and more militant trade unionism? Had it been a split between supporters of Poroshenko and supporters of Tymoshenko? And when did it take place?

SR's membership has increased, if not massively, since Russia's full-scale invasion in February of last year.

Relatively speaking, it has been easier to gain a hearing for traditional left-wing causes, such as anti-fascism and anti-imperialism. (And anti-imperialism in Ukraine is the real thing — not the bogus anti-imperialism of the likes of the Socialist Workers Party and the Stop the War Coalition.)

There have been opportunities to tap into the popular discontent about anti-social measures adopted — and then sometimes withdrawn in the face of that discontent — by the government. (Particularly when such measures have hit those serving in the armed forces).

Shortcomings in the government's failure to adequately equip and supply members of the armed forces have also created openings for campaigning. Arguably, a kind of network of "civil society" organisations has emerged to provide soldiers with what the government is failing to provide.

SR has benefited from support provided by the (not-pro-Putin) left internationally since the Russian invasion, through networks such as the European Network in Solidarity with Ukraine (though more could be done).

The far right in Ukraine seems to be weaker than it was previously (contrary to the delusional claims of the likes of the *Morning Star*, it was never a mass force anyway).

An online attempt by sections of the far right to whip up transphobia against trans members of the armed forces, for example, backfired badly. The social media response was: These people are fighting for their country — unlike the keyboard warriors denouncing them.

Ukrainian "leftists" who share the politics of the British Stop the War Coalition are also thoroughly discredited. Or, more accurately, the sole such "leftist" out of a population of some 44 million, Volodymyr Ishchenko, now based in Berlin University, and a speaker at the SWP's recent Marxism 2023.

SR is a "looser" organisation than the AWL. But its active opposition to the Russian invasion and its ongoing campaigning in support of workers' rights even in the midst of war puts much of the British (and not just the British) left to shame.

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