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Hanna Perekhoda on Ukraine: “Thinking about solutions, we must at least not mistake the causes”

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“Activists will say ‘you are not left-wing enough, I don’t want to support you’ to people who are fighting arms in hand to defend fundamental rights and political sovereignty,” says Hanna Perekhoda.

Historian, Ukrainian and left-wing activist, Hanna Perekhoda has been a doctoral student in political science in Lausanne since 2013. Between Ukraine and Switzerland, she observes for us the mix of positions taken by European lefts. And the mirror held up to Western European activists is not the most flattering.

Can you tell us about the Ukrainian left? What are its main components?

Hanna Perekhoda: With all the weight of the legacy of the Soviet era, it is not at all easy to declare oneself left-wing or even worse, to call oneself a socialist, in Ukraine and in general in the post-Soviet space. Socialism is a discredited ideology in this part of the world, as it is associated with genocidal Stalin-era policies and, in general, national oppression and political terror.

The Soviet legacy also made any form of self-organization of workers or any other social group from below very difficult, because all attempts at collective action were nipped in the bud for decades. And then came the 1990s and the unfettered capitalism which definitively transformed Ukraine into a kind of scorched earth in terms of the collective defense of social rights or even in terms of collective mobilization, the capacity of the working classes to self-organize to defend their rights — something that began to change only in 2013, with the Maidan revolution.

Parties of the institutional Left are currently non-existent in Ukraine, because the label of socialism and communism has been used by ultra-conservatives nostalgic for the imperial grandeur of the USSR, by pro-Russian forces. Faced with this absence of the left in institutional politics, there are interesting initiatives from below – feminists, environmentalists – the “new left,” as it is called, that is to say the democratic, anti-authoritarian left. Since the start of the Russian invasion in 2022, these organizations have an important role to play. I would even say that they have become stronger. All these organizations participate in the collective effort of Ukrainian resistance against the occupying forces: armed resistance, but also civil resistance.

“By fighting for Ukraine’s victory we don’t align ourselves with the government’s neoliberal policies”

With my organization, Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement), which is based on the principles of democratic socialism, we oppose the government’s neoliberal and anti-social measures. We work together with trade-union activists to provide legal support on labour issues to Ukrainian employees

who are fighting for their social rights in the context of the war. We are also trying to exert pressure internationally so that Ukraine respects its commitments with regard to labour law standards.

We encourage our allies around the world to exert pressure, on the one hand to request military, financial and diplomatic support for Ukraine as a country, so that it can defend itself, but at the same time, we reject subjecting this aid to conditions of a neoliberal and anti-social nature. We are also campaigning to obtain the cancellation of Ukraine's foreign debt. In short, we fight unambiguously for Ukraine's victory in this war of aggression but we don't align ourselves with the neoliberal policies of our own government. Fortunately, in Ukraine, unlike Russia, we still have the means to carry out this type of campaign, even in times of war.

In this dual position, do you see tensions on the left or rather a form of holy alliance?

Hanna Perekhoda: I think that, in war conditions, any kind of tension that might have existed before has faded away. In this situation, we actually have a lot more things in common with the other components of the left than things that disunite us. Within the left, people of different tendencies – the anarchists, the democratic socialists, the anti-fascist militants, everyone except the Stalinists – came together, even before the invasion, because a number of people were aware that the new military aggression was probably going to take place.

Who will go to the army, who will stay to take care of logistical aid, humanitarian aid? Roles were distributed in advance in case this event occurred. We of course have disagreements between us, but for political debate to be possible we must first ensure that our society is viable and that we have basic rights and freedoms, something impossible under the occupation of the foreign army which denies Ukrainians not only the right to political sovereignty but even the right to exist.

The positioning of European Union countries or NATO members is often debated. What about in Switzerland where you live? Are you faced with any reluctance within the left in this conflict? How much is attributable to the Swiss tradition of neutrality?

Hanna Perekhoda: Switzerland's place in this conflict is peculiar. It is first of all the main trading platform for raw materials, and especially fossil fuels, the extraction and sale of which not only destroy the planet, as we know, but also strengthen authoritarian regimes and in this specific case the Putin regime. Switzerland is also, thanks to its banking secrecy, the safe for all those who make money through pillage and the illegal exploitation of resources, whether in their own country or elsewhere. Those close to Putin keep their wealth and their families hidden from view. There are between 150 and 200 billions in deposits of Russian oligarchs close to Putin in Swiss banks and Switzerland has blocked only a tiny part of them. In addition, many Swiss companies are circumventing sanctions and continuing to sell to Russia dual-use components, such as electronic chips, that can be used to build weapons.

The position of the committee that we founded in Switzerland is to ensure that Switzerland ceases to be a comfortable shelter for the business, wealth and families of those who wage wars, of those who exploit populations, who use repressive policies and who destroy the planet. On the right of the political spectrum, there is no desire to talk about it, because it requires questioning the entire system that allows Switzerland to remain so rich and "neutral." Neutral is not the right word for me. I should say, which allows Switzerland to remain so economically cynical in its international policy.

The left is also reluctant to talk seriously about these issues. People like to talk about geopolitics. On the other hand they are less inclined to question the source of Switzerland's wealth, from which the local left also benefits. And above all, what is the price of this wealth? For us, these questions must appear in the public debate. We must ask ourselves these questions, even if they are uncomfortable.

In terms of support and solidarity, what demands does the Ukrainian left make of the rest of the European left?

Hanna Perekhoda: I think the number one request is to be in solidarity with all the oppressed and against all the oppressors, and above all not to confuse the two. Once we are clear on this, it would be good to ensure that the voices of progressive organizations, initiatives, personalities, Ukrainian and Russian, are heard.

“Sotsialnyi Rukh and the Russian Socialist Movement published a joint manifesto, but their opinion counts less than geopolitical experts who have never set foot in Ukraine”

The demand that we share, both the Ukrainian left and the anti-authoritarian left in Russia, is the defeat of the Putin regime. On the one hand, this regime is massacring Ukrainians and on the other hand, it is sending hundreds of thousands of Russians, like cannon fodder, into a war that they have no reason to wage. If we are in solidarity with our class and not with the great revanchist powers who present themselves as “humiliated,” we have every interest in supporting the Ukrainians who defend themselves against imperialist aggression, as well as the Russians who refuse to go to a foreign country to kill. There are several organizations in Russia that understand this, but what surprises us is that many organizations in Europe seem not to understand it... Sotsialnyi Rukh and the Russian Socialist Movement even published a joint manifesto at the very outset of the invasion, but obviously the opinions of Ukrainian and Russian socialists count less than those of geopolitical experts who have never set foot in Ukraine or Russia.

What obstacles does the Ukrainian left encounter in building these bonds of solidarity?

Hanna Perekhoda: We have found that several left-wing organizations or figures who are otherwise respected for their strong positions against American imperialism have demonstrated astonishing complicity with their right-wing adversaries on the subject of the invasion of Ukraine. We often find among them an ignorance, even a complete denial of the historical experience of a number of countries which suffered the oppression of the imperial Russian and then Soviet regime. I think there is a strong psychological component that comes into play. We are facing methodological egocentrism. It is easier to believe that the West and especially the United States are behind all the wars on the planet than to assume that non-Western countries can act on their own. According to this logic, even the Russian state is deprived of its own capacity for action and can only act in response to the actions of the all-powerful West. It is the only real actor in the story, whether good or bad. Thus, the most virulent critics of Western imperialism do not escape Western-centrism, but are a paradoxical expression of it.

“We are faced with methodological egocentrism: it is easier to believe that the West is behind all wars than to assume that non-Western countries can act on their own”

Of course we must oppose the imperialism of the United States and Western hegemony, a declining hegemony in fact. But let's not linger in this binary logic of opposition between the West and the rest of the world, composed only of the oppressed it would seem. In this logic, we find ourselves, sometimes without understanding it, supporting the ruling classes of countries which claim to be oppressed by the United States, but which, in reality, are seeking to redistribute the spheres of exclusive domination.

Concretely, the Western left often finds itself justifying the actions of the Chinese, Russian or Iranian ruling classes under the pretext that they are directed against the United States. This strato-centric approach is intrinsically incompatible with left-wing political values, because it renders the working classes of these countries invisible. Some left-wing activists in Europe, too busy contesting American

hegemony, apparently feel closer to Putin, Xi or Raisi than to workers who resist these dictators and fight for freedom and dignity, often at the cost of their lives. If we think in terms of class solidarity and not in terms of state interests, how then can we not be in solidarity with those who fight for their freedom, whether against the imperialism of the United States or against that of China or Russia?

To welcome the rise of non-Western imperialisms because they present a so-called “multipolar” alternative to Western hegemony would above all be irresponsible towards those who actually experience the consequences of this “multipolar” world, the emergence of which involves wars and the strengthening of dictatorships. I mean, these people who live peacefully in rich countries protected by the NATO umbrella do not suffer the consequences of what they defend as the “multipolar world.” But it is the Ukrainians, the Syrians, the Kurds, the Uighurs who are already paying the price of this “multipolarity.”

“Neither Ukrainians nor Palestinians are perceived as active subjects, but only as objects of fantasies and projections”

I have the impression that what matters most for activists here is not so much solidarity with societies fighting against oppression, but the desire to go against the “mainstream.”. And often, the only reason why they support, for example, the struggle of the Palestinians and not that of the Ukrainians is that the Palestinian struggle allows them to assert their anti-mainstream identity in their membership’s eyes. In reality, neither Ukrainians nor Palestinians are perceived as active subjects, as flesh-and-blood human beings, but only as objects of fantasies and projections. To foster real, tangible solidarity with people fighting against oppression, the left will have to come out of this identity bubble.

There are also concepts like internationalism and pacifism, which are at the heart of the legacy of the left, and which we hear a lot about in debates about the Russian invasion. They are used both to defend a position and its opposite. In your opinion, why do these notions not allow us to come together today?

Hanna Perekhoda: Internationalism, solidarity across borders, class solidarity, are indeed at the heart of the legacy of the left. But I’m not at all sure that pacifism is part of it. Throughout history, people have fought for their rights and freedoms. In most cases, this involved taking up arms. It didn’t happen with flowers. I also don’t think pacifism is relevant for Ukrainians. On the other hand, for the Russians it is, and we are also campaigning in favor of Russian pacifists to make their voices heard.

“Throughout history, people have fought for their rights and freedoms. In most cases, this was not done with flowers”

In justifying the invasion, Putin said it explicitly: independent Ukraine is a historical error, it has no right to exist as a society and as a country. In this context, if you invoke pacifism to deny to your neighbor who is facing a deadly danger the right to defend himself, you either like living in a world where the right of the strongest prevails over everything else — and this is the case of such celebrated pacifists as Viktor Orban, Donald Trump, or Jair Bolsonaro (who have an interest in Putin’s methods becoming normalized) — or you are afraid and you hope that the aggressor will only kill your neighbor, and not you. What surprises me most is that we already have fairly dark precedents in European history which should have taught us that we have never managed to stave off war by hoping that the aggressor who killed his neighbor was going to stop at our door.

Faced with obscurantist, fascist, ultra-conservative and authoritarian forces, we must act. There is

an impression that concepts like peace or democracy have fallen from the sky. No, these are the achievements of a social struggle, and a result of our victory in a war against fascism in 1945. Putin is counting on our moral laziness and our short memory in Western Europe. We must not forget the lessons of the 1930s, where we find the same divergences within the European left. There were also organizations for whom British imperialism was enemy number one in 1939 and who hoped that the rise of Nazi Germany would create a more balanced international system.

To follow up on your comments on pacifism, one of the arguments on the left is precisely linked to armed support for the Ukrainian resistance. Part of the European left is worried about this support, in particular military and logistical support, which could fuel right-wing, or even far-right, violent and revanchist nationalist components, in the worst of cases. In the best-case scenario, this support could help a regime that you yourself have described as neoliberal, with very little concern for social and civil rights. How do you respond to this type of argument which highlights the indirect consequences of supporting the Ukrainian resistance?

Hanna Perekhoda: It is perhaps worth remembering that Zelensky is a Russian-speaking Jew, who did not even speak Ukrainian before being democratically elected president. Unlike previous presidents, Zelensky emphasized unity between Ukraine's different regions, between Russian speakers and Ukrainian speakers, going against ethnonationalist discourse. And yet, more than 70% of the Ukrainian population voted for him. Strange for a country that is presented as right-wing nationalist, isn't it? The far right, despite having an electoral coalition, could not obtain more than 2% in the last parliamentary elections. Do I need to remind you of the score of far-right candidates in many European countries?

“The far right could not obtain more than 2% in the last parliamentary elections in Ukraine. Do I need to remind you of its score in many European countries?”

Ukraine is a complex society, like all other societies. Yes, the extreme right exists in Ukraine, as in all countries, but despite its presence in society, in culture, in the media, it has not been able to become a legitimate political subject. The violent and revanchist far right, as you say, is indeed in power, but not in Ukraine, it is in power in Russia. They have gone from a kind of form of neoliberal authoritarianism to a form of fascist dictatorship. And when I talk about fascism, it's not an insult. Fascism is a very concrete form of political regime. To resolve its own crisis and the challenges arising inside the country, the Russian authoritarian regime introduced increasingly radical measures, until it became ready to invade the independent country and threaten the world with a nuclear weapon.

It is important for me that we do not mistake our target and that we do not exaggerate the presence of obscurantist forces in Ukraine, while turning a blind eye to the fact that in Russia, the extreme right is in power and is waging a war of aggression while advancing a discourse that can be described as incitement to genocide.

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In an ideal world, there would be no war, and no choices to make. However, we are faced with this choice today. Either we support the victim, or we abstain and give the attacker the opportunity to continue killing. It is important to note that this goes beyond just Ukraine: regimes that resemble Putin's will become the norm, if Putin gets his way. This would be a signal to all aggressors in the world that it is now legitimate and acceptable to resolve questions of internal political legitimacy

through wars of aggression. If we do not act, we will wake up in a world where all the countries that consider themselves great powers will try to redistribute areas of influence, in other words, we will wake up in a world of generalized and total wars.

“Some activists will say ‘you are not left-wing enough, I don’t want to support you’ to people who are fighting arms in hand to defend fundamental rights and political sovereignty. This is a very arrogant posture”

As for the concerns around supporting Ukraine, it made me think of Lenin’s comments during the Irish revolution of 1916. Many people on the left did not support it, saying it was a putsch and that socialists had nothing to gain from supporting the Irish nationalists. Lenin responded that anyone waiting for a pure social revolution would never live to see it. This is a bit like what is happening today: some left activists are going to say “You are not left-wing enough for me, I don’t want to support you” to people who are fighting arms in hand to defend the fundamental rights and political sovereignty that we take for granted here. This is a very arrogant posture.

To conclude, why are these two readings of the war in Ukraine on the left – that of a clash between two geopolitical blocs in which NATO shares responsibility, and that of a conflict determined by factors internal to the Russian regime – necessarily contradictory? Couldn’t they both be true at the same time?

Hanna Perekhoda: In theory, we might not want to favour one reading to the detriment of the other. In practice, I have noticed that once we postulate that NATO has a large share of responsibility in the outbreak of the war, we are laying a bad foundation for its rationale and therefore for the structure of its thinking as a whole. There is this idea that NATO has encroached on the Russian zone of influence and that Russia is only reacting to this Western threat. This interpretation leads to a conclusion with important political implications: if Russia started the war because the West allegedly encroached on its legitimate zone of influence, this means that the war could have been avoided or even ended if Russia’s demands were met.

First of all, this reasoning overtly tells us that if your country is not a “great power” like Russia, the United States or China, you have no right to sovereignty and you are forever doomed to be a colony. But even if we put aside all moral and ethical questions and admit that the key to peace in the world is to accept that it is divided into several exclusive zones of influence (let’s even forget that this type of global architecture has already led to two world wars), several questions nevertheless arise.

Let us imagine that, in pursuit of the noble goal of stopping the war, we partitioned Ukraine and “guaranteed” Russia that what remained of that country could never join Western military, political, and economic alliances. What makes us think this will appease Putin? I remind you that, in his ultimatum to the West made in December 2021, he demanded all of Eastern Europe. The Russian zone of influence imagined by Putin does not end in Ukraine and in truth no one knows where it ends. The most likely answer is that it does not stop anywhere, because any democratic country on its borders is a threat to Russia, not to the security of the Russian population but to the security of the authoritarian regime .

When we attribute the causes of the war to a clash between two blocs, our underlying assumption is that NATO poses an objective threat to Russia’s security. And that’s where we’re wrong, because we’re taking Putin’s speech at face value.

A quick reminder: Finland joined NATO this year. At the same time, the Finnish foreign minister states that no additional Russian troops have been moved to the common border since Finland joined the alliance. If NATO was the objective threat to Russia, why are there no troops, or even official

propaganda presenting Finland as a threat? Obviously, the NATO membership of this country, which has a 1,340 km border with Russia, is not a problem for Putin. In contrast, Ukraine, which has never been an official NATO candidate, is presented as an imminent threat to Russia's very existence. So maybe it's not NATO that threatens Putin, but something else?

We tend to forget it, but Putin has not always been anti-Western. It was only in 2011 that he began to say that Russia was in danger and that this danger was coming from the West. What happened in 2011? Was this a year when a Western country was particularly aggressive towards Russia? No way. The only thing that happened that year was that ordinary Russians took to the streets to protest against Putin, who was violating the constitution to get elected a third time. The elites' fear of losing power generated a discourse that presented Russia as a besieged fortress, surrounded by enemies, and Putin as the only leader capable of protecting Russia from this existential danger. "Without Putin, no Russia," said Vyacheslav Volodin, one of the leaders of the Putin party.

In my opinion, this war is not a response to an objective threat to Russian society, nor to the external threat that would result from tensions between the blocs. This war is a response to a subjective threat against the Russian mafia which has seized the state apparatus and which does not want to let go of the slightest bit of its power. It is therefore not Russia that is in danger, but its political regime and this threat results from tensions between class interests within the Russian state itself. It is not easy to retain power within a country where 1% of the population owns 75% of the total wealth. This is why the regime is doing everything to stifle democratic tendencies in the neighborhood, and especially in Ukraine. Ukraine is a country with which ordinary Russians have the greatest cultural proximity. If it succeeds in building a democratic and prosperous state, it risks awakening dangerous ideas among Russians. They might indeed ask themselves the question: if Ukrainians do not need an authoritarian and repressive state to live normally, why do we Russians need one?

And finally, we must admit that NATO is not the initiative in Eastern Europe: it is the countries themselves that desperately want to join the alliance, and are exerting pressure to do so. Why? Because Russian imperialism, for them, is a very real threat. And above all, they do it because we are incapable of offering these States security guarantees other than membership in NATO. As a reminder, Ukraine has the Budapest Memorandum in 1994, under which it gave up its entire former nuclear weapons arsenal, the third largest in the world, in exchange for a guarantee that Russia would respect its sovereignty and borders. When Russia violated this agreement and the world fell silent, all the countries of the post-Soviet space realized that all these papers are worthless, and that Article 5 of the NATO treaty, which provides for mutual assistance by Member States in the event of aggression, is the only valid way to protect ourselves. As long as the UN is brain dead and the international community is incapable of proposing alternative security mechanisms, it is cynical to call for the dismantling of military alliances.

To think about possible solutions to this war, we must at least not be mistaken about its causes. I do not believe that geopolitical reasoning is adequate to understand this war, and even less to propose exit routes.

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Transcription by Camille Wernaers

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