

# Eastern Europe: Hanna Perekhoda: 'Russian political elites are openly promoting a global project'

Saturday 9 November 2024, by [PEREKHODA Hanna](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2024).

***[Editor's note: The following is an edited transcript of the speech and responses to questions given by Hanna Perekhoda on the "Imperialism(s) today" panel at the "Boris Kagarlitsky and the challenges of the left today" online conference, which was organised by the Boris Kagarlitsky International Solidarity Campaign on October 8. Perekhoda is a Ukrainian socialist, member of solidarités in Vaud Canton, Switzerland, and a PhD candidate in Political Science (University of Lausanne). Transcripts and video recordings of other speeches given at the conference can be found at the campaign website [freeboris.info](http://freeboris.info), from where the below is republished.]***

Thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to speak. First of all, I would like to be clear. I don't work on the issue of imperialism as such. My topic is related to different expressions of Russian-Ukrainian political imaginaries. I guess I'm here more as an activist and not as a researcher. My analysis has no pretension to be extensive or a scientific one.

It's now a commonplace to say that fossil fuels and the trade of fossil fuels are closely linked to dictatorship, corruption, and militarism. But paradoxically, this is something we do not talk about systematically when it comes to understanding Russian imperialism.

Let's start with the observation. Since oil and gas extraction doesn't require much labor, the wealth that is produced doesn't go back to the population. Instead, it goes directly into the hands of those who own the fields. In Russia, it's basically a circle of Putin's friends. Gas and oil are practically the only things that bring in real profits in Russia.

These profits are then redistributed to other areas. A huge part of these profits, of course, goes to a few hundred families of the highest state officials who use it to buy the longest yachts in the world, the biggest palaces, and the most extravagant luxury goods. Some of these profits go to maintain the military industry, the army, the police, in short, all the structures that help keep this small circle of people in power. What is left is generally used to keep the rest of society in a relationship of extreme dependency on the state.

As Ilya Matveev said, this system could continue like that. But there is an ideology shared by Putin's circle, by himself, and we suppose by a few people around him, an ideology that perceives the world in a certain manner, and where Ukraine occupies a central place.

It would not be an easy task to summarize why Ukraine ended up occupying this central place in the Russian political imaginary. But if we can roughly summarize Russian political elite's imaginary, we obtain a following narrative. Ukraine is a part of the Russian nation because they have a primordialist conception of nation. A distinct national identity of Ukrainians was deliberately created

by the Western enemies of Russia and by their agents (Vladimir Lenin was agent number one, he created Ukraine and he did it to divide the Russian nation). By doing that, all these enemies of Russia aimed to prevent Russia from taking its rightful position as a leading imperial power in the world.

Ukraine is seen as a pawn in a zero-sum game. If there is an independent Ukraine, Russia cannot become a great power.

According to this worldview, only great powers have true political sovereignty. This is an important point: the way sovereignty and agency are understood in this ideology. For those who hold this worldview, those who have the capacity to act are not mobilized human communities, like nations or classes, nor even the elites who represent these communities. Only the leaders of the so-called great powers have real agency. They are the only real sovereigns. According to Putin, the world has only two such sovereigns: himself and the American president.

Seeing the world through the lens of this ideology, which is a closed system, like any ideology, Putin is sincerely convinced that every emancipation movement in the world is ultimately a plot led by the United States against Russia. Whether in Syria or other countries, it is perceived as an act of aggression by the global hegemon against the aspiring hegemon.

The war against Ukraine was a political choice. It was conceived, let us not forget, as a short, victorious war in which there would be no resistance. Let's keep this fact in mind. It was imagined as a rapid overturning of the balance of power, with the aim of imposing a new, lasting status quo — a status quo that would allow these two leading great powers, Russia and the United States, to establish exclusive zones of influence, in other words, to create colonies where they could exploit populations and natural resources without limits or regard for any norms or rules, whether environmental protection or human rights.

Through this war in Ukraine, which may appear local, Russian political elites are openly promoting a global project, and they conceive it in these terms. Essentially, they argue: "You see, international law doesn't work. So what do we do? Let's admit that the only law that truly exists is the law of the strongest. Let's just be honest and make it official."

The risk of accepting this logic is very high, especially today, as we witness Israel destroying Gaza and the complicity of the United States, along with the paralysis of many other countries in the face of this total disregard for all rights and laws. It is the clearest evidence that, indeed, international law doesn't work. We are witnessing an enormous crisis. The need to maintain the current international structure seems practically useless.

The problem is that in a world where these structures disappear abruptly, those already in positions of weakness – states like Palestine, Ukraine, Armenia, to name just a few examples – and political forces in a position of weakness, such as the international left, will be among the first to lose in this struggle where only pure force and power matter. The authoritarian, productivist right that Putin represents, as well as many other politicians in other countries, is determined to completely erode these international structures and prevent the emergence of any alternative mechanisms that could limit their supremacist, polluting ambitions.

Ultimately, any act of aggression, however remote, if normalized, has implications that should concern all of us. The military victory and rise to power of a reactionary, militaristic state like Russia inevitably mean the rise of reactionary, militarist, fascist forces in other countries, and vice versa. When the victims of aggression are not defended, in any part of the planet, it emboldens the

countless psychopaths in power to resolve their problems of political legitimacy through war. And right now, they face many problems of political legitimacy, given the rising inequalities, among other issues.

I would like to say a few words about the conference itself.

I want to thank the organizers for this initiative and for what they are doing, because any act of solidarity is precious in these times. We need to maintain the practice of solidarity.

I also want to say that I don't know Boris Kagarlitsky personally and I don't share most of the analysis I've seen from him. But I support your initiative of solidarity because he is a political prisoner.

As someone originally from Donetsk, as was mentioned, my friends and family there have lost a lot — some lost everything, some lost their lives — because of the Russian occupation of our region that began in 2014. I must say I was deeply upset at that time to see how many Russian left intellectuals and activists, including Boris, completely missed the point of what was happening in the Donbas.

Many downplayed or failed to recognize the role of the Russian state and army, often being inattentive to the fact that without direct Russian involvement, this war in Donbas would never have happened. This was openly acknowledged by people like Igor Strelkov, who complained that the locals in Donbas didn't want to separate from Ukraine or fight against Ukraine. The Russian army, he said, had to do it for them.

In 2014, I was very young, but even then, I was surprised to see how many leftists projected strange fantasies about class struggle onto what was, in reality, a Russian intervention. That's why it should not come as a surprise that many Ukrainian leftists are reluctant to express their solidarity.

As for me, my position is simple: nobody deserves to be subjected to the torture of a Russian prison, which is one of the worst places you can imagine. I truly hope that political prisoners and prisoners of conscience are released as soon as possible, especially those like Boris, who opposed the military aggression of their country. But I also want to stress that there are left activists who had the courage to stand against this, not only in 2022, but already in 2014. For all these long years, they have been in Russian prison. I'm speaking of people like Daria Poludova and Igor Kuznetsov.

Most of the victims of repression in Russia today are ordinary people who had no significant involvement in political activity. Many now face long prison sentences for expressing opposition to the war on social media, even if their posts reached only ten people. They are imprisoned for that, and they don't have social capital or international friends. Sometimes we only learn about their existence and courage after their deaths in prison.

A huge number of prisoners are random Ukrainian citizens who went to occupied territories for personal reasons, such as visiting dying parents. They are being held hostage in Russia, accused of terrorism. They are tortured, humiliated, and used for propaganda purposes. An even larger number of prisoners are Ukrainians from occupied territories, with a significant number being Crimean Tatars. Since 2014, tens of thousands of people have been kidnapped, most of them disappearing forever. Many are killed without trial. This has been the reality in occupied territories for years, while in Russia, most people were living in a period of so-called "blissful times," to use the expression that was mentioned today and that Boris Kagarlitsky referred to in his letter.

Finally, we must not forget that repression is severe in Russia and in Russian client states like Belarus. In Belarus, it's a real slaughter, but it mostly goes unnoticed.

To conclude, let's be clear: victims of repression in Russia and Belarus need support and active, practical solidarity. In Ukraine, we also see cases of completely arbitrary accusations, such as accusations of collaborationism. Please check the project "Graty" to learn more and support their work, as they make these cases known and help the victims. Regular donations to initiatives like OVD-Info or the Association of Relatives of Political Prisoners of the Kremlin can also make a difference. It's crucial to support progressive movements that still operate in Russia, like the Feminist Anti-War Resistance.

But what would make a real difference, in my opinion, is to support those who fight against the source of the problem, not just against its consequences. I mean the Ukrainian army and especially anti-authoritarian and left soldiers that have chosen to risk their lives to fight Russian imperialism. So please donate to Solidarity Collectives.

I'll stop here. I hope we have some time for questions.

## **Responses to questions**

Thank you. I really appreciate all your questions and comments. I'm sorry that I won't have time to respond in detail, as I also want to hear the other speakers who will follow, and I think it would be disrespectful to take their time.

Maybe just a few points. One of them is about the extreme right in Ukraine, etc. I find myself in a kind of paradoxical situation. When addressing the Ukrainian public as a leftist, we want to emphasize how dangerous it is to normalize nationalism in the context of war. What is happening now in wartime Ukraine is also the search for internal enemies, with Russian-speaking Ukrainians being presented as one of the sources of the problem. There is this narrative: "Putin invaded us because you, Russian-speaking Ukrainians, exist; you gave him a pretext to invade our country." The longer the war goes on, the more difficult it becomes to navigate this situation, which is becoming increasingly dramatic.

At the same time, when I speak to an international audience, I want to clarify: do not confuse the cause with the consequence. Before the Russian invasion in 2014, practically no such problem existed in Ukraine. It was a Russian discourse aimed at fueling internal conflicts, using the Russian-speaking population as a tool for their own political purposes of subjugating Ukraine. Ukrainian elites within the country also used a divide-and-rule strategy to secure their own portion of the Ukrainian economic pie, further fueling this nonexistent antagonism between Russian speakers and Ukrainian speakers.

Living in Ukraine, I can tell you that these are largely invented problems, but they became more real after the Russian invasion started. As for the alleged cases of violence against "Russians" in Donbas prior to 2014, I can say they never existed. I don't know where this information comes from.

I also want to point out that one doesn't need to romanticize or create illusions about a society to defend its right to exist and defend itself against the aggression of an imperialist state. We must not create illusions about what Ukrainian society represents. It has its own significant internal contradictions. It has its own extreme right, just like any society in the world today, including in the West. In fact, compared to some Western countries, Ukrainians are not as retrograde as one might think.

Unfortunately, we don't have enough time, and I apologize for that. I'd like to conclude by saying that while we may have different analyses of certain details of the situation, we can also find common ground where we can engage together in practical solidarity. In these times, practical

solidarity with the victims of aggression and with those who risk their lives to oppose the war is crucial. I hope that our collaboration will continue, and that together we can make a difference in what seems to be a quite desperate situation.

Thank you.

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**Hanna Perekhoda**

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**P.S.**

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