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Hanna Perekhoda: ‘The fight for freedom in Ukraine is intimately linked to the global struggle against fascist forces’

In this interview, Ukrainian historian and activist Hanna Perekhoda looks back at some of the preconceptions and simplifications that, in Western Europe, shape discussion of the war in Ukraine.

Thursday 13 February 2025, by [BARCA Francesca](#), [PEREKHODA Hanna](#) (Date first published: 11 February 2025).

Hanna Perekhoda is a historian and researcher at the University of Lausanne - Institute of Political Studies and Centre for International History and Political Studies of Globalisation, specialising in nationalism in the context of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Her doctoral research examines the political strategies of the Bolsheviks in Ukraine between 1917 and the 1920s. Perekhoda also studies the historical development of the Russian political imaginary, with a particular focus on the role of Ukraine in Russian state ideology. Perekhoda is also an activist with Sotsialnyi Rukh (‘Social Movement’), a left-wing Ukrainian political organisation founded by activists and trade unionists in the wake of Euromaidan.

Voxeurop: It is now three years since [Russia](#) launched its [all-out invasion of Ukraine](#). What is your view of the situation today?

Hanna Perekhoda: With the return of [Donald Trump](#), it should be clear by now that Russia’s impunity is directly fuelling the rise of fascist forces in our own countries – and vice versa. These forces are actively working to dismantle any international structures that limit their ambitions. The fight for freedom in Ukraine is therefore intimately linked to the global struggle against these destructive trends. But it must be clearly stated: the prospects for liberation are shrinking by the minute.

The rise of forces combining authoritarianism and libertarianism in the United States and Europe must be taken very seriously. Capitalist reason, with its cult of unlimited growth and profit, puts profit above all else: from individual life to our collective security. In such a world, if this dynamic is not broken, Ukraine will have no future. But let’s be clear: in such a world, nobody will have a future.

Part of the debate in the West, especially but not exclusively on the left, has focused on pacifism on the one hand, and the danger posed by [far-right](#) - or even neo-Nazi - forces in Ukraine on the other. What is your view on this?

Imagine looking out of your window and seeing someone being attacked, beaten and raped by an assailant. This person sees you and begs you to help. You have the necessary tools to enable them to defend themselves, but you choose to do nothing, leaving them to die. Regarding an individual person, failing to intervene is obviously tantamount to encouraging the crime and aggravating its

consequences. If the witness tried to justify their inaction by claiming their pacifism and opposition to all forms of violence, the argument would be seen as inappropriate or even absurd.

Even if they escape criminal liability, such an attitude is generally considered profoundly immoral. So I ask myself: why does this same attitude suddenly become acceptable when the situation moves from the level of an individual under attack to that of a society under attack? As if by a miracle, the refusal of assistance is transformed into pacifism and has the appearance of a legitimate moral position.

The reality is that a lack of support for victims encourages aggressors. This is obvious at the level of personal relationships, within families, in the workplace or any social institution. But it is also true in international politics. If you abandon the victims of military aggression, you are signalling to all the psychopaths in positions of power that they are now free to solve their legitimacy issues with wars.

The impunity granted to those who advocate the law of the strongest on the international stage inevitably fuels the rise of forces that defend the same principles at home. Forces such as Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in [Germany](#), the Rassemblement National in [France](#), Donald Trump in the [United States](#) and [Vladimir Putin](#) in Russia all share the same cult of brute force - in other words, fascism. Ultimately, any aggression, however remote, if normalised, has implications that sooner or later will affect us all.

The argument that the presence of the far right in Ukraine justifies a refusal to send arms is based on a rather blatant error of logic. Refusing to help a people on this pretext is tantamount to punishing an entire society for a reality that exists everywhere. Yes, there are far-right groups in Ukraine, as in many countries. In the [elections before 2022](#), these groups received only minimal votes and failed to win any seats. There are far-right movements in France and Germany that are infinitely more influential than in Ukraine, yet no one would dispute their right to self-defence in the event of aggression. Is this attitude not rather the expression of the Western fantasy of a reactionary and retrograde "East", which persists even when Western societies are themselves at the vanguard of the fascisation against which the left in these countries seems to be completely powerless?

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This argument is all the more hypocritical given that many of these same voices on the left do not hesitate to support resistance movements that include actors who are more than problematic. Why demand a purity from Ukraine that no other society is required to show when it has to defend itself?

What is undeniable is that the war, which has lasted for more than ten years, has already helped to strengthen and trivialise nationalist symbols and discourse that were previously marginal. Wars do not make any society better. However, the relationship between the delivery of arms and the strengthening of the far right in Ukraine is inversely proportional.

The weapons sent to Ukraine are used first and foremost to defend society as a whole against an

invading army. Ukraine's victory guarantees the very existence of a state in which citizens can freely and democratically choose their future. Conversely, nothing strengthens extreme right-wing movements or terrorist organisations more than military occupation and the systematic oppression that goes with it.

Indeed, if Ukraine obtains peace under Russia's conditions - the peace of the graves - it is more than likely that the radical groups, which will capitalise on the frustration and sense of injustice, will rapidly gain strength, to the detriment of the moderates.

The role of languages (Ukrainian and Russian) is very important in understanding the (often artificial) debates and arguments. Could you help us put things into perspective?

It is indeed useful to place this issue in its historical context. Since the 19th century, the Russian state has sought to marginalise the Ukrainian language by presenting it as an inferior form of Russian. The Russian elites felt that recognising a distinct Ukrainian language would threaten the unity of their nation-state under construction. Under the [Soviet Union](#), Russian was imposed as the only legitimate language of modernity and progress. After Ukrainian independence [in [1991](#)], this linguistic hierarchy persisted.

Until 2014, speaking Ukrainian in the big cities was frowned upon, while Russian remained associated with prestige. So basically, for Ukrainians, the promotion of Ukrainian in the public space is not an attack on Russian speakers, but an attempt to rectify centuries of marginalisation. To see this as evidence of aggressive nationalism is to ignore the (post-)imperial context that underpins these dynamics. This is a context that is often invisible to those who belong to historically imperialist nations and not to culturally oppressed groups.

So the language issue is instrumentalised?

Yes, what is important to consider is the way in which Russia has used the language issue to legitimise its aggression against Ukraine. In 2014, at the time of the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in the Donbass, the Kremlin justified its actions by claiming that it wanted to protect the Russian-speaking population, who were the alleged victims of "linguistic genocide". While the Ukrainian and Russian languages used to coexist fairly peacefully in everyday life, this use of the linguistic question as a weapon of political manipulation has exacerbated the divisions.

It is crucial to emphasise that speaking Russian in Ukraine does not mean being pro-Russian or pro-Kremlin. We should avoid blindly adopting the narrative imposed by Russian propaganda, which does everything it can to legitimise, in every possible way, the attack on the sovereignty of neighbouring democratic states.

It was only with the Russian aggression of 2014 that the Ukrainian state broke the *status quo* of relative non-intervention in linguistic affairs. In 2018, the parliament passed a law requiring the use of Ukrainian in most aspects of public life, obliging civil servants and public employees to know the language and use it in their communication. Ukrainian also became compulsory in schools. This did not necessarily lead to radical changes: many people used both Ukrainian and Russian in their daily lives, not to mention those who spoke a mixture of the two. The reality of Ukraine is one of linguistic porosity.

The war and the atrocities committed by the Russians have led many Ukrainians to speak only Ukrainian and to view with suspicion those who continue to speak "the language of the occupier". It is not uncommon for Russian-speaking survivors of the bombings to be accused of a lack of patriotism by Ukrainian-speaking residents of towns far from the fighting. The radical rejection of

Russian, which was not an issue in 2014 but was brandished by Putin to legitimise military aggression, has become a self-fulfilling prophecy ten years later.

‘The reality of Ukraine is one of linguistic porosity’

The problem for Russian speakers in Ukraine is that the state that claims to be protecting their language is using it to spread narratives that deny Ukraine’s right to exist. At the moment, Russian speakers have no spokesperson capable of articulating their experience without exploiting it for political ends. If Russia did not exploit language and culture as tools of expansion, and if the presence of a Russian-speaking population were not used to justify political domination and - subsequently - military invasion, the coexistence of these languages would likely pose few problems.

At the same time, Ukraine’s self-proclaimed intellectual elite is particularly backward-looking and frankly ridiculous when it tries to construct national identity according to nineteenth century formulas. In reality, it is impossible to fit the contemporary Ukrainian population into either of the obscurantist frameworks offered to them: Ukrainian ethno-linguistic nationalism on the one hand, and Russian imperial nationalism, on the other.

Before 2022, there was still a possibility of building an alternative Russian-speaking culture in Ukraine, one that was not infected by the Russian imperial imaginary and did not depend on the political priorities of the Russian state. The invasion has made this project absolutely impossible. Putin should probably be pleased about this: his main fear is not Ukraine cutting all ties with Russians, but rather Ukraine sharing the Russian language while developing a solid democratic political system, thereby infecting Russians with the virus of freedom.

The European Union is often perceived as “unfashionable” at best, if not “neoliberal” and “undemocratic”, by the left and activists in Western Europe. In Eastern Europe, on the other hand, whether in [Moldova](#), [Romania](#), Ukraine or [Georgia](#), citizens mobilise behind the idea... What is the reason for this difference? What does the EU represent in the east of the continent? And particularly in Ukraine?

Seen from the inside, the EU can be seen as a project where market logic takes precedence over social justice; where decisions are often taken behind closed doors; and where the interests of major economic powers like Germany take priority. In this context, it is not surprising that some see the EU as an obstacle to be thrown aside.

But for European countries outside the EU, and particularly for Ukraine, it represents something different. Above all, “Europe” represents an aspiration, the idea of a future where rule of law, individual freedoms and a certain level of prosperity prevail. What is less obvious to Western Europeans is that here the EU represents an alternative to an authoritarian and oppressive model, a model that Russia imposes on its neighbours by force.

So for EU citizens, the EU is first and foremost an economic project. But for those who are not EU citizens, the EU is above all a cultural and civilisational project. Whether they admire it or hate it, its supporters and opponents outside the Union treat it as a primarily political force. Russia, moreover, is explicit in this respect: since at least 2013, it has treated the EU not as an economic competitor,

but as a geopolitical and ideological rival.

This dimension became even more obvious in 2014, when Ukrainians literally [gave their lives](#) to defend their country's "European" future. It was an act that many Europeans looked upon with incomprehension, even condescension or pity. Yet for these demonstrators, "Europe" was not an economic area, but a symbol of dignity and freedom.

'For the vast majority of Ukrainians, the details are not so important. "Europe" represents a promise of justice, democracy and emancipation'

Europeans struggle to recognise that there is indeed substance behind the idea of a politically united Europe, because it seems to be discredited by neoliberal policies. However, like any project born of modernity, the European Union bears contradictory tendencies. To use the words of the philosopher and economist [Cornelius Castoriadis](#), the European Union bears within it both the unlimited expansion of rational mastery of the world, which manifests itself in neoliberalism, and the potential for autonomy and political openness, which takes the form of democracy.

Which trend will prevail? This depends on the political forces that invest in this project. But what is certain is that abandoning the idea of a politically united Europe while legitimately combating the EU's neoliberal policies is to throw the baby out with the bathwater. While Europe was lulled into the illusion of a post-national peace, of prosperity built on Russian hydrocarbons and Chinese goods, the elites of these countries were amassing armies, resources and, above all, resentment. And this resentment is aimed precisely at Europe's democratic imaginary, not its economic liberalism.

It might seem paradoxical...

The paradox is sadly logical: the democratic potential of the European project seems more obvious from the outside. It's a bit like vaccines: the more effective they are, the more they are denigrated. In a country that has only just implemented vaccination, where children are dying of polio on a massive scale, an anti-vaccination movement would seem absurd. In the same way, Europeans who so easily abandon the idea of European unity appear naive in the eyes of those who are confronting an army determined to destroy it.

That said, Ukrainian left-wing activists are not fooled by the economic realities of Europe. They have carefully observed what has happened in [Greece](#), for example. But you have to understand: Ukraine is already a highly neoliberal country, with predatory elites and precarious labour laws. In certain sectors, European legislation could effectively dismantle what remains of social protection. But in others, it could bring standards and regulations that do not exist under unbridled capitalism. So there are no easy answers.

However, for the vast majority of Ukrainians, the details are not so important. "Europe" represents a promise of justice, democracy and emancipation. Facing the abyss of Russian occupation, Ukrainians - like Georgians - are clinging to the only alternative political unity that exists on the continent.

□ *This article is published within the [Come Together](#) collaborative project*

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