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The Left in the West must rethink

Notes on the war from Kyiv – a conversation with
Taras Bilous

Jan Ole Arps

12 March 2022

If leftists continue to blame NATO for the Russian invasion, they only show that they have not grasped the changed situation,« says Taras Bilous. The editor of the left-wing Ukrainian magazine *Commons* wrote a letter to the left in the West shortly after the war began. In it, he criticized the fact that the people in the Eastern European states and their political ideas, but also Putin's aggressive imperialism, do not seem to exist for the left in the West, which is fixated on NATO. Taras Bilous has stayed in Kyiv and joined an anarchist group that organizes aid activities and builds its own defense unit. In this interview, he talks about how the war has changed his political perspective, what possible developments he sees, and what the left in the West needs to rethink. The interview took place on March 8, Oksana Dutchak translated. Oksana Dutchak is a sociologist and researcher in the fields of labor issues and gender inequality and also an editor at Commons. She has left Kyiv and is currently in western Ukraine.

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Where are you, how are you? Can you describe your current situation?

Taras Bilous: I am in Kyiv, in a reasonably safe place. The first days of the war were a shock. I was disoriented and couldn't do anything. I then tried to join the territorial defense units, but at the moment that is not so easy for people like me who have no combat experience. Now I am in a volunteer group from the anti-authoritarian-anarchist spectrum, which takes care of humanitarian relief and supports a defense unit. So now I'm doing something practical together with others. That helps to cope with the situation.

You don't come from anarchism yourself.

Taras Bilous: No, but that doesn't matter any more at the moment. I'm actually from a political organization called Sozjalny Ruch (Social Movement). But at the beginning of the war Sozjalny Ruch was very disoriented – unlike the anarchists, who have a bigger organizing problem in normal times, but in times like these they work better.

You have been warning about a Russian attack on Ukraine for months. Did you expect a war on this scale?

Taras Bilous: No, as recently as two weeks before the attack I said that an invasion of the whole of Ukraine was very unlikely. I expected a Russian offensive in the Donbas, but not a full-scale invasion like this, because I thought and still think, that this will be a disaster for Putin and his regime. Another former editor of our magazine, Volodymyr Artyukh, realized much earlier that there was a threat of a full-scale offensive. I was skeptical and thought he was exaggerating the danger. I understood that there was a really high threat of a new war only in December when the Russian Foreign Ministry published a draft agreement with the US and NATO. The demands included not only that NATO rule out any further expansion, but also that it withdraw all troops and weapons stationed in countries that joined the alliance after 1997. Moscow knew of course that these demands were unacceptable for NATO States, but

to support all sanctions, but it is important to clarify priorities. At the moment, the priority is to put pressure on Russia to stop the war. Social movements should support the protests against the war and support people who have to flee. And what is also already happening is material help. Anarchist groups organize that, but also many others, and that helps. When it comes to leftwing parties, I also think they should demand debt cancellation for Ukraine. Leftwing parties have very different positions on different aspects of the war, but I think this could be a unifying demand. Personally, I am also in favor of Western countries supplying more weapons, including aircraft, but I know that this is not a demand that all left parties would be able to agree on.

How have the events of the last weeks changed the way you think about politics?

Taras Bilous: The problem is that almost no one – not even in Ukraine or Russia – expected this war, although there were the signs. Also because it seemed so risky for Russia, we did not expect a war of this scale. Even when I wrote that the war in Donbas would escalate and that Russia would intervene directly, many considered this unlikely and asked: What interest would Putin have in doing so? In practice, politicians' decisions are often not simply derived from economic conditions or interests, but are also shaped by their previous decisions. For leftists, it is important to develop a better situational analysis, one that would also include the practice of the actors involved, what we can observe in the political behavior of actors – not only what we would like to observe.

NATO, such polls are no longer mentioned. Many leftists in the West only cite such polls when it fits their perspective.

Taras Bilous: Another problem is the portrayal of the people who are now suffering from the war in Ukraine as victims only. That is wrong. Many people are resisting. Seeing people as only victims is a very common mistake of the Western left. It is also evident in the leftwing perspective on NATO's eastward expansion in the 1990s, which is understood as a US-project. This ignores the fact that it also happened because of pressure from Eastern European states. It was not simply an initiative of the West, but corresponded to the interest of the majority of people in the Eastern European countries. This does not mean that the left in the West should support NATO expansion to the east. But it must understand that many people in Eastern Europe do see NATO membership as a safety guarantee. I find it very sobering that left analyses here are so much more schematic and weaker than those of a liberal historian like Mary Elise Sarotte, who in her book *Not One Inch: America, Russia and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate*, published last year, gave a very thorough and accurate description of NATO's eastward expansion in the 1990s. And I also have the impression that in its positions the left often lags far behind events.

What do you mean?

Taras Bilous: Many on the left find it difficult to change perspective. That is understandable: You have mainly protested against wars that were in the interest of the West. We have been living with a war in the east of the country for eight years. So we have had some time to rethink our position. But I think leftists need to understand better that situations can change very quickly. If leftists continue to blame NATO for the Russian invasion, then they show that they have not understood the changed situation.

What do you expect from the left in Europe now, is there anything meaningful to do from your point of view?

Taras Bilous: At the moment, leftists should demand that their governments put pressure on Russia. That doesn't mean they have

threatened at the same time that ignoring them would lead to a military response. At this point it became clear that Putin had no plans to step back. I think there is a structural problem in leftist thinking. It is obvious that an analysis that focuses only on the »objective« economic interests cannot adequately grasp what is happening.

Where do you think things go from here? Do you see a way to end the war?

Taras Bilous: Through our victory. The question is when Russia will realize that they don't have the resources to hold Ukraine. Even if they bomb and capture Kharkiv and Kyiv, their resources will not be enough to hold power. The only question is how many more people will die and how many more cities will be destroyed before the war ends.

That's a pretty grim prospect.

Taras Bilous: One can think about the war based on the principle of de-escalation, and I think many leftists are doing that at the moment. But this question was relevant a month ago, not anymore. The contradiction between what the Russian government wants and what Ukrainian society wants is irreconcilable. I don't see what agreement would be possible. The resistance in society against the Russian invasion is so strong, Zelensky could not make any concessions to Russia at the moment, even if he wanted to. Such concessions would not be acceptable to Ukrainian society. There would be guerrilla warfare. I think the war can only end with the defeat of one side.

In Germany, the war has ignited nationalist and militaristic sentiments in society. In Ukraine, so we hear, nationalism is also on the rise, and right-wing units are heavily armed and gaining more combat experience. Would you agree? How does this affect your situation?

Taras Bilous: Of course, nationalism and anti-Russian resentment are on the rise. It's a problem, but it didn't start with this invasion. We have been facing it since 2014. I hope that the extreme right will not benefit so much from this war because their role in

defending the country is now much smaller than it was compared to 2014. I also hope that when the war is over, questions of social justice will come into focus.

What are you and your comrades doing now? What possibilities are there for you to stay active or simply be in contact?

Taras Bilous: We have internet and continue to exchange ideas in our editorial chat. At the moment, everyone is trying to do something. The anarchist group I am active in is mainly concerned with military defense and humanitarian relief. We are a small volunteer group, but we receive a lot of support, also from abroad: money, material, everything. Even if Kyiv is completely surrounded and cut off from supplies, we can continue for a long time. There are also international brigades, volunteers from other countries, who are now coming to Ukraine.

What do you hear about the situation in Russia and the protests there?

Taras Bilous: We are following it. But I am honestly somewhat disappointed in what is going on in Russia. The protests are not big enough to change the situation, and the support for the war is much greater than I expected.

Aren't the anti-war protests in Russia one of the few things that can influence what happens next?

Taras Bilous: The longer the war lasts, the more people in Russia will see what is happening: that it is not a »special operation« but a full-scale war in which Putin is sacrificing his soldiers.

Oksana Dutchak: I would like to add that I am more pessimistic. I also think that a long war will undermine political stability in Russia, but not through resistance from below, but rather through a split in the Russian elites.

Taras Bilous: I agree. However, the longer the war goes on, the more disenchantment there will be in Russian society, and that can have an impact on the political dynamics in Russia.

In January, you wrote that the left should not take the perspective of states, but should start from the interests of the people, es-

pecially those people who suffer most from the conflict on both sides. That was before the invasion. Do you stick to this guiding principle? What would this mean in the current situation?

Taras Bilous: I still believe that we should be guided by the interests of ordinary people. But the situation has changed fundamentally. When I wrote that article, it was mainly about the war in the east of the country. In 2014, until just before the invasion, the situation in the Donbas was much more complicated than it is now. Many people there supported the separatists or hoped for help from Russia. In that situation, it was important to look for some kind of compromise. Now very few people are pro-Russia, even in the areas under Russian control. Instead, there is a lot of resistance to the invasion. That doesn't mean that there is no one there who supports Russia. But even many people who were pro-Russian before now hate Russia and demand that the Russian army leave. From a global perspective, a victory for Ukraine or a defeat for Russia is of great importance for another reason: it is the only way to prevent this from setting a precedent for the future.

In your letter to the left in the West, you criticized the Western left's focus on NATO. In what way does the left in the West need to change its perspective, what does it need to understand better about the post-Soviet region?

Taras Bilous: I think it is slowly getting through that Putin's actions are not to be understood solely as a reaction to the policies of the West, even if this attitude still exists. What many leftists have not yet realized is that the people in the countries between the West and Russia also have their own political subjectivity and the right to decide their own fate. Many leftists in the West still make the mistake of looking at these people only from the perspective of the confrontation between the West and Russia.

Oksana Dutchak: I would like to add one example. The polls in Ukraine on NATO or EU expansion were cited by many leftists before the war, when a majority was still against the expansion. Now that a large majority of the population is in favor of joining