Interview with Ukrainian and Russian socialists

At the recent International Committee of the Fourth International, held at the IIRE in Amsterdam, two delegates from Ukraine and Russia attended. The interview below is with Vasylyna, a member of Sotsialnyi Rukh/Соціальний Рух, and Mia, an activist in the Russian Socialist Movement/Российское социалистическое движение, about the war and their organisations' activities.

How did you get involved in politics?

Vasylyna: My interest in political activism emerged during my studies in urban studies, where we often used Marxist theory to analyse different processes that affect our living spaces. Surrounded by lots of young progressive people from all over Europe at the university and united by similar struggles of being international students, we initiated a union for the students of our department, fighting for equal tuition fees for European and non-European students. I joined Sotsialnyi Rukh because theory alone is not enough, driven by an urge to be active on the ground. Facing devastating current challenges, Ukrainian society is extremely vulnerable but definitely more open to change. Obviously, things cannot go on in the same way as they did before. For instance, there is a lot more discussion on corruption, and journalists are uncovering examples at the highest levels of power, so it feels like things are starting to shift.

Mia: I became interested in politics during my school years. When I was 14 years old, the annexation of Crimea happened. This was a moment when I really started to dive into news reports and listen to political commentators. However, I was almost unaware of differences on the political spectrum. The opposition field in Russia is predominantly liberal, so for

many, the words “liberalism” and “democracy” are often equated. Like many people my age, I was anti-Putin, anti-conservative, pro-free elections, civil rights, and anti-corruption. I suppose my time spent at the university was important in this sense. I started reading a lot more about history and politics, and I was able to engage in political debates from a much more critical perspective. Since 2021, I have engaged in politics outside of the Student Council and university settings. I served as an election observer for the parliamentary and municipal elections of 2021 and started to participate in the activities of RSM. Soon after this, I became a full member.

What is Sotsialnyi Rukh’s position on the Zelensky government?

Vasylyna: The government’s stance is clear about fighting for the sovereignty of Ukraine, and this gets a lot of support from people. But we as an organisation are extremely critical of the political direction of the government, accompanied by neoliberal reforms and massive cuts to public spending. In Sotsialnyy Rukh, we are finding ways to organise around these issues. People stand united to defend the country, but this does not mean that Zelensky has unanimous support.

Unfortunately, oligarchy and foreign capital have a significant influence on our current president. The current government was not capable of transitioning from an economy based on profit to a war economy that would work for providing defence capacity and solving humanitarian problems. Seeking allies amongst international partners, mostly among the richest states that have their own imperialist interests (like the USA), could cause harm to the support of Ukraine and bring out confusion in the countries of the Global South. We do not believe that our government is capable of fixing mistakes. That’s why there is a strong urge for mass grassroots pressure and political critique from a leftist perspective. The key priorities of the state should be based on the protection of people’s interests, fostering social cohesion, and promoting

global solidarity against oppression.

What campaigning work is the Revolutionary Socialist Movement doing?

Mia: Campaigning work is difficult for our comrades in Russia due to the repressive regime. We try to work within the law because we don’t want to endanger activists. Our main goals now are to shift the oppositional political conversation to the left and provide practical support for people. For instance, we have been doing work with independent trade unions in Russia. There is a union for delivery workers, which we have been helping to organise and support. When the activists and independent trade union leaders are imprisoned, we organise help—financially and via media campaigns.

We are actively working within the “University Platform” that unites professors and students to defend their rights and freedoms. We try to build communities and provide a space to discuss politics to overcome the atomisation of Russian society. Even inside repressive regimes, there are still struggles and problems that are fought on the ground. When possible, we align with grassroots initiatives to defend people’s rights against construction companies’ lobbying and resist the destruction of nature. We are also prioritising the feminist platform as well as anti- and decolonial work within our movement; this is particularly important to us given the invasion of Ukraine. What is often overlooked is that while our government wages a colonial war against Ukraine, indigenous people in Russia are dying out. Indigenous populations often live in poor outlying areas of Russia’s periphery, where people are mired in poverty and debt. Mobilisation occurs disproportionately in poor regions of the country, where people are pressured to join the army to pay off debts, often lack the ability to resist, and have fewer sources of information than the rest of the population.

What about the war?

Vasylyna: We support the Ukrainians' right to resist the invasion and colonisation. Some Sotsialnyi Rukh members have joined the armed forces and are fighting the Russian army. There are not really other viable options in terms of separate fighting militias and units at the moment.

Some on the left say that the conflict is primarily a proxy conflict between imperialists; do you agree?

Vasylyna: We do not see this as a proxy war. It is, first and foremost, a people's war for national liberation. At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, people were self-organising, doing anything they could to resist the occupation, speaking to soldiers, and older women making homemade explosives. People from all walks of life—LGBT+ people and women, artists, workers, and academics—joined the army to fight for the Ukrainians' right to self-determination.

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Mia: Some on the left have this false pacifism, and they put an ideological lens on the war that obscures rather than clarifies, but actually obscures the situation for real people on the ground. Of course, the Ukrainians have the right to defend themselves; they are the main victims in this conflict. This label of 'proxy war' doesn't give any agency to the Ukrainians themselves. People calling for negotiations and a ceasefire need to be clear on what basis. The problem is, no one would dictate to Russia the price they would demand for peace. But some on the left want to dictate conditions to the Ukrainians and say they need to sacrifice their national sovereignty by accepting annexations. Why?

What is the strength of the far right in Ukraine?

Vasylyna: The far-right can still be a threat to some individuals and social movements, but in general, Ukrainian

society stands against authoritarian and chauvinistic ideas, as those ideas are at the base of Russian imperialism. Moreover, the influence and visibility of far-right movements in Ukraine are less strong compared to Western societies, for instance, Germany. Currently, far-right activists are not represented in big politics, but we need to be prepared to resist far-right interests in the future. History shows that wars, unfortunately, shape the favourable base for spreading hateful ideologies. Nevertheless, Ukrainian society demonstrated that it's empowered by its diversity and not by cultivating ethnic nationalism and national isolation.

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Will Ukraine win the war?

Vasylyna: Of course! It is the only way to liberate the country. We have to end the Russian invasion as a priority. We definitely need more arms because this is an actual fight, and these things matter.

How can the international workers movement and left help?

Vasylyna: We have the European Network of Solidarity with Ukraine, which meets weekly. There have been international visits by delegates from different countries. There was a good campaign to cancel Ukraine's debt and, recently, to free the Ukrainian human rights activist Maksym Butkevych, who was captured by Russian forces and tortured before being sentenced to 13 years in prison. Anything that people can do to help spread information about people like Butkevych and put pressure on Russia to release him would help. We would very much like the international left to offer Ukraine progressive solutions that would allow us to implement a just reconstruction and ensure sustainable development. The people of Ukraine want to live in peace and decent social conditions,

and for this, it is necessary to eliminate the influence of the oligarchy, transfer all economic resources to public ownership, and write off the foreign debt.

Mia: We urge comrades around the world, but especially in the Western world, where politics is more open and you can have more public discussions: We don't want the Russian regime to win; it will be a disaster in Ukraine and Russia. There has been a precedent for lifting sanctions from Russian oligarchs in Europe (for example, the head of "Alfa Bank," Mikhail Fridman). We claim that sanctions against Russian capitalists should be maintained, and the money should be directed towards the Ukrainian resistance, Russian civil society organisations, and helping reconstruct Ukraine after the war. We also call for international solidarity with political prisoners. Among them are leftists, anarchists, anti-fascists, and trade union organisers. We welcome direct actions to help us raise money to help those needing political asylum and those already imprisoned. Prosecuted activists often escape, but they end up fleeing to places like Kazakhstan and other countries under Russian influence, where they are detained and then face deportation back to Russia. At the same time, the visa regime is very restrictive, and the procedures take a very long time. Land borders with EU countries are effectively closed, and the simplified procedure for obtaining visas has been canceled. There is a need to support those needing political asylum—those who refuse to be sent to war and escape. It is necessary to demand that the European Commission and the European Parliament adopt a unified approach to providing international protection for Russian citizens who are at risk of persecution.

What was your view of the International Committee meeting?

Vasylyna: It was very important to come and hear the arguments from different organisations. There are certainly some contributions that my organisation would disagree with. But also, I am interested in discussing within SR how to develop

our policies and ideas based on some of what I heard.

Mia: There were some positives, but also some negatives. On the positive, everyone is open to hearing other positions and wants to know more about the positions of the RSM and what is going on in Russia. But my criticism is that we merely exchange political opinions; the left spends so much time arguing over concepts like whether something is imperialist or not. But where is the practical solidarity? We need to do more to share what we are doing on the ground. It cannot just be ideological positions.

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NOTE: The Fourth International is a worldwide organisation of revolutionary ecosocialists. Defending the self-organization of the exploited and oppressed, towards the abolition of capitalism and the building of ecosocialism, the Fourth International brings together organizations convinced that this is not possible without a root and branch, revolutionary, transformation of society. Read more here: https://fourth.international/en/166