

National rights in Ukraine

KD Tait Fri, 07/11/2014 - 13:07

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Understanding the Ukrainian national question in the context of an inter-imperialist conflict is crucial to seeing through the deceptions of imperialism ? east and west. KD Tait analyses the events in Crimea and other Russian speaking areas.

On 16 March, the population of Crimea voted overwhelmingly for federation with Russia. The results of the referendum were immediately rejected by all the major western imperialist powers, which have now barred Russia from G8 meetings and applied sanctions to figures in Russian President Vladimir Putin?s entourage.

In response to the stationing of Russian troops near to Ukraine?s eastern borders Nato has severed its relations with Russia, increased its air forces in the Baltic, and sent a US warship through the Bosphorus into the Black Sea. There it is conducting joint manoeuvres with the Romanian and Bulgarian navies. Nato has escalated its military encirclement of Russia by announcing war games with Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The belligerent words and actions of the Obama administration contrast sharply with its silence over the bloody repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. That crackdown has seen thousands killed, arrested and tortured in the wake of the US-backed military coup led by general Abdul Fattah al-Sisi last August.

Russian threats

The new regime in Kiev is composed of parties who are committed to expelling Russia?s naval base at Sebastopol. In this aim, they are backed to the hilt by the Nato powers who have demanded for years that Russia surrender its military bases in eastern Europe ? while they themselves establish ever larger airfields, missile defence systems, etc.

Since the naval base at Sebastopol serves both to guard the entrance to the waterways of the Russian hinterland and allow power projection in the Black Sea region, it is of strategic importance to Russian imperialism.

When the Crimean parliament voted to hold a referendum on its relationship with Ukraine, the Kiev regime immediately threatened to ?punish? secessionists.

The referendum demanded by the Crimean people could only take place under the protection of Russian troops ? the Kiev regime and its Nato backers did not recognise the right of Crimeans to hold a referendum. Russia?s actions were motivated primarily by its desire to defend its military position in the Black Sea against Nato expansionism and secondarily by popular political pressure in Russia to defend Russians abroad. Nevertheless, the machinations and motivations of imperialist powers are no reason for denying people their democratic rights.

Events in the east

Putin's threat of military intervention in the event of attacks on the ethnic Russian or Russian speaking population in the east is a warning to the West that Russia will not tolerate disruption of its links with eastern Ukraine. Leaving aside the historic and cultural ties, the new regime in Kiev contains forces whose desire to cleanse Ukraine of Jews, 'Moskalis' etc, is on record. It is hardly surprising therefore that many people in the East look to Russia to defend them. This is not the same as desiring the dismemberment of Ukraine.

Like the situation in Crimea they are a response by sections of the population that did not support the 'Maidan Revolution' and fear its fascist militias. They believe that if it was justified for fascist militias to occupy government buildings, and even declare independence as they did in Lviv, then they have no right to threaten and attack those who do the same in the east.

What sparked the resistance in cities such as Donetsk, Luhansk and Kharkov was the Kyiv government's removal of local governors and the installation of its own agents - reactionary oligarchs who had gone over to the side of the new regime.

Doubtless Russian agents, including members of its special forces have been present in the ten cities where government buildings have been occupied.

Doubtless too Great Russian chauvinists, pan-Slavic reactionaries and outright fascists have been involved. But the objective reports from journalists and socialists in the east (including members of the League for the Fifth International) make clear that the events in the Donetsk region are not some sort of Russian organised putsch to act as a pretext for annexing two or three eastern Ukrainian provinces.

What people rejected was a coup financed and backed by western imperialism. Without in fact most people in the east and south calling for secession from Ukraine or federation with Russia, the population simply rejected subjugation by the Kyiv. This is the motivation for calls for autonomy for these regions within a federal Ukraine - a democratic right that the Kyiv regime decided to suppress by force.

This rejection of the illegitimate regime in Kyiv was justified and socialists in the West should support them.

Does this mean that we should support any actions by Putin to annexe parts of eastern or southern Ukraine? Not at all.

Revolutionary socialists are under no illusions about Putin's democratic or humanitarian concern for the Russian speakers. His real interests are those of Russia as a great power and himself as a despotic leader who has already crushed the civil rights of Russians and continues the cruel and genocidal occupation of Chechnya.

But the perpetrators of Western interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans, who themselves supported Putin's bloodbath in Grozny, cannot adopt the moral high ground. All of them together are repulsive war criminals.

Nevertheless, socialists should reject the one sided 'anti-imperialism' that sees Russia's actions alone as imperialist, cancelling out and overriding the democratic rights to self-determination of an ethnically Russian Crimean majority and the right of Russian speaking Ukrainians to resist a regime imposed against their will, which includes extreme Russophobic nationalists and fascists.

Those socialists who were deceived by the Euromaidan movement into believing this was a democratic

anti-corruption movement, similar to Occupy Wall Street or Tahrir Square, made a terrible mistake. To justify this they are now insisting that the regime imposed in the February putsch is 'legitimate' ? concentrating all their fire on the threat of Russian imperialism and ignoring or downplaying the belligerent anti-Russian frenzy stoked up by the Western imperialist powers.

Equally useless is 'third campism?', which refuses to support those resisting the reactionary Kyiv regime and calling instead for support to an abstract and imaginary working class, rather than the class that is actually resisting the attacks on it.

Crimean rights

The surrounding of Ukrainian military bases in Crimea and the sealing of the border with Ukraine did prevent pro-Kyiv forces from behaving as they have done in the west and east, banning demonstrations and violently attacking anti-regime forces. It enabled the referendum to take place.

Crimeans demanded the referendum in response to the new regime in Kyiv, which threatened to 'punish secessionists?'. Other towns in the east and south of Ukraine have also demanded autonomy as a measure of self-defence against the new regime, which has appointed pro-regime oligarchs as governors to enforce its writ.

No one has seriously claimed that the referendum did not reflect the desire of a substantial majority of the people of Crimea to join the Russian Federation, at least whilst the present neoliberal-fascist coalition rules in Kyiv.

Those 'revolutionaries?', taken in by Ukrainian nationalism, who denounced the referendum as just a Russian imperialist plot or a vote by 'Russian settlers?' who have no right to live in the Crimea and no right to decide the future of the peninsula, lack not only an understanding of history but also the basic principles of working class internationalism.

While the referendum was far from meeting democratic standards (a very short campaign, no access to media for its opponents, etc), the pro-Kyiv forces declared in advance that any vote that challenged the unity of the Ukraine would be invalid. In short, the opponents of the referendum denied the democratic right of the Crimean population to determine their own future. As such, their claim to represent democracy is plainly a fraud.

While revolutionaries should condemn the mobilisation of Russian troops, as well as instances of pro-Kyiv activists being detained and even 'disappeared?' by Russian security forces, as actions purely designed to defend the strategic interests of Russian imperialism, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of Crimeans, including many ethnic Ukrainians and Tatars too, voted for federation with Russia.

The high turnout and overwhelming vote plainly represents a vote by the population against being subjected to the nationalist-fascist coalition in Kyiv. This is not only, and not mainly, the result of 'Kremlin propaganda?', but a reflection of the undeniable fact that the Kyiv government was installed by a putsch, led by fascists and nationalists, who are extreme Russophobes.

For evidence of this, one does not need to turn to the fascists of the Right Sector, but to the bourgeois leader, Yulia Tymoshenko, lionised in the western media as a martyr persecuted by pro-Russian forces in Ukraine, who said in an intercepted phone call: 'One has to take up arms and go wipe out these damn 'katsaps?' [a derogatory term for Russians] together with their leader.'

The Crimean secession was not the result of a Russian 'invasion?', as many claim, but started with the

rejection of the illegitimate, fascist-backed government in Kyiv by the mass of ordinary people in the east and especially in Crimea. This government, installed with the full material and political backing of Western imperialism, was a provocation that in its first actions posed and continues to pose a serious threat to the Russian and Russophone population.

Seeing that the western imperialists would impose no serious limits on the terror mobilised to secure the new regime, the Russophone population, lacking significant working class organisation or self-defence capacity, naturally looked to Russia to defend them.

What about the Tatars?

The integration of the Crimea into the Russian Federation raises the question of the democratic rights of the Tatar minority, some 12 per cent of the peninsula's population or 243,000 people. It was pro-Kyiv Tatar demonstrations under the fascist slogan 'Glory to Ukraine' that unleashed developments on the streets that led to the independence movement.

The Tatars' preference for Ukrainian 'protection' is very understandable, given the genocidal treatment they experienced under Stalin in 1944; the deportation of 238,000 to central Asia in which as many as 100,000 (48 per cent) died. More than 150,000 descendants of the 1944 deportation still remain in Uzbekistan. Socialists should stand for the right of all those who wish to return to do so.

On 18 March, the Crimean government announced it would require Tatars to abandon land they occupied without legal documents of ownership. The USSR, and post-independence Ukraine, both failed to return land that the Tatars had inhabited before deportation. As a consequence, Crimean Tatars squatted vacant land.

Expulsion from this land would clearly be a tyrannical, racist and oppressive act that should be condemned internationally. On 29 March, the Crimean Tatar parliament, the Kurultai, voted for 'ethnic and territorial autonomy' by 'political and legal' means. However, there was disagreement about whether to seek this autonomy within the Russian Federation or within the Ukrainian state.

How feasible territorial separation would be, given the minority character of Tatars in all districts of the Crimea, is open to debate but, clearly, the fullest right to self-government, use of their language and culture and equality of all other political and social rights is not only democratically justified for them, but is in the interest of Russian and Ukrainian speaking citizens, too. All progressive forces in Crimea, Ukraine and Russia should defend the rights of the Crimean Tatars against all and any form of racism or oppression, wherever it comes from.

Internationalism

Ukrainian revolutionaries should resist all moves to set Ukrainian and Russian speaking citizens at one another's throats. Working class international solidarity is the only solid foundation for this. Unity can be preserved or restored by opposing all attempts to impose a single ethno-linguistic 'national identity' as the basis of citizenship and all its associated rights. This means rejecting both Great Russian and (west) Ukrainian nationalism.

Socialists should stand resolutely against any disintegration of Ukraine as a state, unless secession is the democratically expressed will of the majority of the population in a given area. It is the right-wing nationalists and, even more, the fascists, who will 'if they are not checked and defeated' pull Ukraine apart and make it a semi-colony of the West. Many western Ukrainians, who have the illusion that life within the EU will be much better than what they experience now, will soon be disillusioned by the savage

austerity the Maidan government and its masters in Berlin and Washington are planning for them.

Meanwhile, the Russophone populations of the east and south have every right to resist the imposition of the illegitimate decrees and imposed governors or mayors from Kyiv over their regions and to seek and install de facto autonomy. For this, they will have to build, or extend, self-defence militias and to create democratically elected councils, rooted in the factories and communities.

They are right to reject the elections planned for 25 May and to demand their own referendums in which they can vote for autonomy, including democratic control over all armed forces in their regions.

Beyond this it would be best of all to raise the call for elections to a pan-Ukrainian Constituent Assembly. The Assembly should be absolutely sovereign ? i.e. not subordinated in any way to the present government in Kyiv or its police, its so-called National Guard, let alone the Right Sector and other fascist gangs.

Elections to a Constituent Assembly should be under the democratic control of workers and community organisations and with the media taken out of the hands of the oligarchs or the state and open to all points of view, apart from those fomenting racism and ethnic hatred. The elected representatives should be answerable to, and if need be, replaceable by, mass assemblies of their electors. Local workers defence guards should protect the elections

One burning question will be the austerity and privatisation programme being foisted on Ukraine by the EU. Socialists should argue for the re-socialisation of the factories, land and businesses plundered by the oligarchs and the creation of a democratically planned economy.

They should also seek links with working class and socialist organisations in Europe and Russia to oppose military escalation and the economic attacks being prepared by IMF bureaucrats. They should call for a Socialist United States of Europe and a socialist federation of central Asian states currently subordinated to Russia.

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