

Interview with Oleksandr from Sotsialnyi Rukh

When the war in Ukraine broke out, Förbundet allt åt alla decided to make a practical contribution by raising money for a socialist organization on the ground. The choice fell on [Sotsialnyi Rukh](#) (Social Movement). Martin from Allt åt alla Uppsala talked to Oleksandr, one of the group's members who lives and studies in Malmö.

The following text is the full interview with Oleksandr from Sotsialnyi Rukh. The interview conducted in English, recorded on the 18th of March 2022 and edited ahead of publication.



Martin: Could you tell us a little about yourself – what you are doing and your political background in Ukraine?

Oleksandr: I am originally from Donetsk. I lived in Europe. I lived in Kharkiv for a while. I worked in Vietnam and I started my Masters in Armenia and Georgia. After I came back to Ukraine, about two years ago, and worked at an NGO in the Donetsk region with a focus on IDP-rights and protection [internally displaced people, eds.]. Then I moved to Sweden, where I'm studying again, this

time at a Master Program in International Migration and Ethnic Relations at Malmö University. It has been one semester so I'm quite new here.

During my bachelor studies in Ukraine, I was involved in organising for the syndicalist student's union. In 2011, if I am not mistaken, we had a huge campaign all across the country – protesting against the commodification of higher education. In general, the idea was to cut costs and make people pay, which students obviously didn't like. I think that this was my biggest involvement and this was when I met most of the people I know from the left movement – for example, many of the people around different anarchist initiatives. Many of them are probably in the Resistance Committee now. I knew the anarchist who was recently killed in Kharkiv personally. We met during one of the student conventions and lived in the Autonomia squat in Kharkiv, although at different times.

Another part of the left movement then were the people who are more closely related to what we colloquially call Stalinists. They were part of the Borotba party. They were on the other side in 2014. Now they are completely strange. I mean, even a lot of the Russian people that we don't like are against war on their own terms but these Borotba people are completely pro-war.

During high-school, I was part of this young communist league as well. But after 2010-2011 I stopped being involved.

Martin: So, your involvement with the Syndicalist student's union was what brought you into Sotsialnyi Rukh?

Oleksandr: Yeah. The name of the student union was Direct Action.

When I moved back to Ukraine, I was looking for ways to get involved. I was trying to understand how the situation developed in the country. So, I contacted them.

There were constant attempts in Ukraine to create a left party. We had nominal ones – aka 'the communist party' – but in many ways it was 'left' only

on paper, because ideologically they were a mix of many different things. In terms of social protection and welfare they might be left but in terms of everything else it's a mix of pan-Slavic ideology, orthodox values, soviet patriotism, and these kinds of pro-Russian tendencies. It is a wild mix, including national conservatism, where "national" means Russian.

So, there were attempts to create a normal left party. But it's not so easy to register a party in Ukraine, you need something like 10 000 signatures and you need a lot of money for this. Sotsialnyi Rukh tried to form a party but realised that it was very difficult. Therefore, as of the moment it's a civic organisation.

Martin: Could you describe Sotsialnyi Rukh a bit more in depth?

Oleksandr: It is the only left movement that we have. It is a platform, so we have people with different backgrounds joining, because they are longing to belong somewhere and contribute somehow. The main focus was always on the labour rights, because there was this idea – especially after 2014 – that leftists should be closer to the "everyday people" and not to be like an intellectual syndicate in the capital city.

In Kryvyi Rih, a city in Ukraine with huge industrial plants, Sotsialnyi Rukh was trying to help striking workers. Almost all leftists were going there to support the strike; students, scholars, journalists, everyone. This was where most of the networks were built.

Now we have a number of members who are union activists and work practically with the unions – both independent unions and already established ones. We also have some comrades who might be less active in terms of the organisation's internal communication but they still associate themselves with Sotsialnyi Rukh. There are trade unionists, who might not have the most articulated political position but appreciate solidarity. There are also people who could be closer to the Trotskyists, maybe anarchists, as well. I would say that it is a really broad platform. I think everyone is there.

Martin: When people carry out political activities, do they do it through their own networks or do they do it in the name of Sotsialnyi Rukh?

Oleksandr: Some activists were trying to regenerate the student union 'Direct Action' but otherwise they are all under the umbrella of Sotsialnyi Rukh. Whatever we do, it is supported by the organisation. We have labour rights campaigns, for example, when the unions are striking, we then provide media support for them and we have a couple of lawyers who can advise, or even go to the court with the workers.

We also have an antifascist direction, which is a bit difficult in Ukraine, since the word 'antifascism' is kind of compromised because these imperialist Russian people usually like to identify as antifascists. Nevertheless, we have been trying to use it in the old-school way. One thing we are doing is a Remembrance Day, on the 19th of January, for when Russian antifascists were killed by right-wingers.

There are also quite active women's campaigns in Sotsialnyi Rukh. We were participating in the 8th of March demonstrations. Last year we even organised the left block in the march, because generally it's quite liberal. We're trying to put emphasis on the problems of regular women instead of the middle class. A lot of industries have unpaid reproduction labour. Furthermore, people who work in hospitals, childcare, and schools – even in the municipal government – are mostly women and they are paid very low, and they are quite often unprotected.

Martin: How does the membership of Sotsialnyi Rukh look in terms of age and social class?

Oleksandr: Mostly young people, maybe also up to their thirties but it depends. When it comes to people who are not affiliated with the left milieu, who joined later because we are cooperating with them, they might be older on average.

Especially workers: people who come from the crane unions, from the miners' union, and people who work in hospitals.

The majority of the people in Kiev are students or people who have more free time, people who speak English, work in IT, or in some organisation. People who have the opportunity to contribute. There are also some who are kind of 'left intellectuals'.

Martin: To move towards current events, I want to ask about what topics come up when you talk to people in Ukraine? What are you talking about? What's on people's minds?

Oleksandr: Now it's probably changing but initially the focus was on checking if everyone was alright; if everyone is alive, where they are, and what kind of things they need. Now, we mostly coordinate what we can do now in terms of international things, with our comrades in our chat.

We have three messages that we are trying to attract attention to. These are:
[1] Writing off Ukraine's foreign debt, which is completely unfair and misplaced.
[2] Not only freeze but seize the properties associated with Russia and oligarchs from Russia. I think this is a message that our government is also articulating. [3] Stop tolerating offshores. Because Ukraine has been suffering from offshores for a very long time. We have our own oligarchs who try to avoid taxation, which leads to our social welfare system being underfinanced. This third message is probably not very widely shared right now.

After the first emotional shock, we can see that there are a number of internal problems that we'll have to work on in Ukraine, with one of the most acute being the housing crisis, since a lot of properties have been destroyed. The second problem would be labour rights. We have received messages that people have to work overtime quite often and they have salary arrears, so basically nobody cares how they live. The last problem is that our government is trying to introduce legislation that basically would [1] make it easier for

business to fire people, [2] make it easier for them to force people to work overtime, and [32] remove the necessity to pay taxes almost entirely, even the taxes related to the social protection of workers (like social insurance tax, for example). They say: "Okay, if you can pay you pay – if not, no problem." The income tax is also to be cut down by a lot and we're trying to argue that it's probably not the best way to proceed.

Martin: Speaking more on a personal level, are people talking about their hopes and fears for the future or is the focus more on practical stuff?

Oleksandr: Mostly practical, yes. Our activists are quite involved in many different things. Some are working with the unions to house people. Other people are organising humanitarian aid delivery. Some don't have much time or internet access because they joined the territorial defence or are volunteering with medical assistance or provisions to these units. Most people that we are able to talk to are those who are doing informational work, which might not be too representative.

If I think forward, there are, of course, risks of radicalization of Ukrainian society. Because, when there is a foreign intervention in your country it increases the degree of xenophobia. But I think that would be something that we have to deal with later on. Earlier we had a problem with right-wing people being overrepresented in the military resistance but now it has become more like a people's war. So, the invasion might also create a lot of solidarity networks between people.

We're trying to push the correct messages, we're preparing to fight further, and to give it the right direction. We're thinking that it probably would be the right moment to try to establish a party again. We are trying to get more supporters. That is why we opened an account to receive donations for political work.

In terms of how to finish the war, there is only one way: That Putin and the Russian Federation remove all troops from the territory of Ukraine.

Martin: How have you been coping with being in Sweden and following the invasion from a distance?

Oleksandr: It's not the first time for me, so I guess in a strange way it's a little bit easier. I'm from the Donetsk region, which was already a non-government-controlled area (NGCA). My parents still live there. I've been in touch with them all this time, and for a moment it seemed that they are relatively safe, as Donetsk is not the main battlefield. There were many inconveniences and a general feeling of insecurity: everyone was afraid to be caught in crossfire, as one of the biggest casualties from a missile attack happened right in the city centre on the 14th of March. Still, it wasn't anything compared to Mariupol, Kyiv, or Kharkiv. However, the situation is developing, there are already more and more accounts of issues with water supply and electricity, and it is where the heaviest clashes are about to start.

The thing is that my parents cannot leave. In Ukraine men aren't allowed to leave the country either but we haven't been aware of any cases of forced mobilisation. Hopefully, it won't get to that, for now there are enough people who enlist voluntarily. But it's not what happens on the other side of the front line, in the NGCA. Basically, almost all men are sitting at home or hiding. My parents can't even use the car because it's my father who drives. If you go outside, they can catch you, give you a gun, and send you to fight. Therefore, my family can't leave, because then my father would be alone and unable to leave the house. So, I'm really – I don't know – I can't think about what is going on. Now we're only focusing on the really short-term perspective.

Martin: Regarding the activity of Sotsialnyi Rukh, do you feel that the level of engagement within the organisation has increased or have people moved to do other things as a reaction to the invasion?

Oleksandr: I would say that it feels like the people who work with 'informational' political things are more engaged, at least. We have a number of chats with a lot of active people translating, writing letters, and talking – so in these terms, yes. Many people attend daily calls.

Also, we have some people joining the movement. It's kind of this milieu thing with many people; you know them, they can help you, but they are not officially part of the movement. Now they go: "Okay so we're working together, maybe it's time to make it official."

Martin: So, now they become organised.

Oleksandr: Yes. Even people who aren't active in the chats and the informational politics in Sotsialnyi Rukh are part of other initiatives. They are building social capital in their other organisations. We're trying to work more with the union activists, who see us there. Some of our activists are not involved in chats, for example, because they are workers and might not be interested in these daily conversations on theoretical topics. Now there are some practical things that we do together and there is a chance to build these networks more strongly and deeper.

Martin: In our communication ahead of the interview you mentioned that the focus on the geopolitical aspects of the invasion, on the part of the international left, has tended to frame Ukraine as an empty space, devoid of people. Could you perhaps develop on that description?

Oleksandr: A lot of people already elaborated on this topic but even now, if I look at some of the hardcore arguments of the traditional western left, they focus just on this one part. Although, this is maybe less of the case in Scandinavia. I think it's called the 'international politics realist doctrine'. They acknowledge some sort of Russian sphere of influence and 'legitimate' Russian security concerns as one part of this situation and they say: "Okay, NATO

provoked Russia, Russia had to react” and in this case, I mean, okay... but there is also Ukraine.

Ukraine is a country with millions of people. We have our own free will and we have our own ideas, so why do you look at Ukraine as just a battlefield between NATO and Russia? I watched a video from some Greek Marxists and they’re saying: “Yeah, we have no illusions about Russia. Russia is bad but our main enemy is NATO so if Russia is destroying something connected to NATO it’s good, it makes NATO weaker” but, again, at what cost? Do you want to sacrifice a whole nation for some kind of idealistic goal?

Also, a thing that is quite often missed in the discourse, is that Ukrainian people are positioned like victims of Euro-Atlantic blocks and their collisions but it does not always look like this in Ukraine. We had our own discussions about NATO but we didn’t have any strong position in our organisation, because it’s difficult to have a strong position in this situation where we have this constant threat.

After the war started, [this discussion] was discarded completely, because we don’t care if it is NATO or somebody else. We need to feel protected. A lot of Ukrainian people from different backgrounds are pushing to join NATO. It was a popular idea that we should join NATO, because joining means protection. Now, I think people look at NATO with a bit more disappointment, because they’re trying to say something but we don’t see much support. With what is happening now, I guess it’s changing to disillusionment.

I was talking to people from the Polish party Lewica Razem (Left Together, eds.) and they articulate quite similar ideas. NATO is something different for Eastern Europe and Baltic countries. NATO is not bombing anyone there. Russia is. Russia is threatening countries, so NATO is their chance to survive. If this is so triggering, we should probably come up with different security mechanisms. We were neutral before but Russia does not respect neutrality. If we don’t have a collective security system we are completely unprotected.

Martin: One of the things I was going to ask you, which you sort of brought up, is about how some media commentary has treated the invasion as mainly, or simply, an expression of power struggles between Russia and NATO.

Oleksandr: Exactly.

Martin: What is your take on such a framing?

Oleksandr: I wouldn't argue that NATO and Russia might have their own ideas about how to fight each other – and about how they divide the world – but I'm talking about how the situation looks from our side, with our land unprotected.

There is a long history of Russian colonialism and imperialism in the region, where they try to attack or control the countries around themselves. All of these nations surrounding Russia feel completely insecure. So, if you think about how the United States interferes in the affairs of South American countries, because they feel it's their backyard; the same thing happens with Russia in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states.

Martin: Yeah. Also, it seems to me that there are a lot of really specific aspects pertaining to Ukraine in the way Russia frames its invasion. Those aspects don't seem like they are picked out of the air just to get at NATO.

Oleksandr: That was the whole historical part about how Russia became the biggest country in the world; because they always feel threatened and always have this internal urge to expand. They conquer, they annex nations that are close to them, and they grow and grow but they always feel insecure. I don't see in any way how Ukraine would threaten them. We are a smaller and poorer country after all.

Martin: What would you wish for people to focus on and understand to move away from these more problematic perspectives on Ukraine?

Oleksandr: Forget about trying to understand Russia, because that is not the issue. Focus on the people who you usually discard; whole Eastern European countries, Baltic countries, all of them.

In Ukraine, a lot of people pay attention to foreign policy, especially after 2014. When you see, for example, that there is an election in another country, we're trying to follow how the media presents which parties are supporting Ukraine and which parties are supporting Putin. Always, the parties who support Putin are on the right wing or the left wing, often on both sides simultaneously. So, these completely opposite parts of the spectrum are the ones who are trying to understand Russia.

It's really crazy. Firstly, it eliminates you personally. We are also a left-wing group but other left-wing parties just don't listen to us. They already have some concepts in their mind, so we just don't exist. Secondly, it affects the perception of left ideas in Ukraine, because when you read in the media that all these left parties support Putin – that they support Russia – it makes it more difficult to talk about such things. I told you about antifascism. It's completely discredited because it's used by Russia in their propaganda. They're not anti-fascist. They have the exact same kind of right-wing people as in Ukraine. The difference being, that in Ukraine the right wing focuses on national ideas, when in Russia they focus on an imperial idea. Still, they're the same kind of right-wing people but in Russia they say: "We defeated Germany, we won over the fascists. We're always right. If you don't agree you're a fascist, you're a Nazi, and we will come and pacify you."

Martin: You said that many people were closely following foreign policy, to what extent was the invasion expected in your circles?

Oleksandr: We didn't believe in it. Nobody believed in it. Even the experts didn't believe it, because it's hard to explain rationally. What would Russia win with this?

People were analysing how many troops were on the border: "Can these troops be used to occupy the whole country? No, it's not enough" and what would Russia gain from intervening? Nothing.

Again, it's not rational. They would receive sanctions; they would get stuck in the war. The maximum of what was expected was some kind of local escalation. Particularly in the Donetsk region, because if Russia recognized these republics, they would recognize all the territories that they claim, which include all regions, not just the small part they control. So, there we could have expected escalations, otherwise no one expected anything.

It looks like Russia was not prepared either. They didn't have enough logistical supply. They didn't carry out the invasion properly. They didn't expect that someone would resist. They didn't expect that people wouldn't be happy to see them. They were probably engulfed in their own propaganda.

Martin: Nobody in Allt åt alla or in the Swedish left in general expected the invasion either. Only the most hardcore Russia-fearing militarist people predicted the invasion. Then again, they're always predicting invasions of Sweden by Russia.

Oleksandr: That's the thing, actually. That is what gives all these people extra legitimacy now. Because no one expected the invasion before. While things were more complicated after 2014, even then people said: "Okay, there is more or less a status quo, there is no reason to expect an invasion" but these right-wing people were always prepared to fight with Russia. We can find videos from 20 years ago where they say: "Yeah, Russia will invade, they will occupy Crimea" and now they can say: "Yes, all this time we were talking about this." So, now it's easy for them to build credibility.

Martin: How would you describe the historical build-up to this point? Maybe not going too far back but since Russia frames this development in relation to 2014...

Oleksandr: Oh, it goes way before that, even in the famous historical lecture by Putin. Russia builds its legacy on the idea of the Russian empire. Even the way they conceptualise the Soviet Union, which they basically see as a different phase of their empire.

As you can see from Putin's speech, he doesn't really like Lenin, because Lenin said minority nations have rights and established all these republics, which was not the way of the Russian empire. The Russian empire would just occupy and enforce the Russian language and the Russian orthodox religion. Everywhere they think in these imperial ways and the collapse of the Soviet Union was, according to Putin, the greatest geopolitical catastrophe – not in terms of ideology but in terms of the size of the empire, its influence, and its prestige.

In Crimea there was also some kind of separatist movement, even before Russia's annexation. Crimea is a very particular kind of region. The first people – the most indigenous, let's say – were Crimean Tatars. They already had problems after the Second World War. Their whole nation was deported, so there were almost no indigenous people left in Crimea. The people who were coming to resettle were mostly Ukrainians and Russians. It was a Russian military base throughout all of this time. A lot of retired military people were staying there. On the discursive level Crimea was a part of Russia. Then again, there was the displacement of the indigenous population that no one cared about. Still, for Russia it was like: "How come that Nikita Khrushchev just gave Crimea to Ukraine and we lost it." So, from all these things, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were always these ideas about Crimea.

Martin: In more recent history, there's this framing of Euromaidan-protests as a NATO-backed coup, which can be seen both in Russia's framing as well as in that of certain leftist groups. I wanted to ask you about this framing, since Sotsialnyi Rukh has its roots in the 2014 protests. Could you give your perspective on that?

Alexander: It wasn't a coup; it was a popular uprising. I didn't see much direct western involvement either. I mean, there was of course some support but it was called for, a lot of people insisted on it.

Maybe you could say that the protest was western inspired, in terms of that people were demanding integration with the European Union. For many that was the main idea. However, the thing is that this European dream was there for a very long time for many Ukrainian people.

It was not that the previous government (the Yanukovich government) was opposing this European dream either. Quite on the contrary. When his government took power, they said: "Okay, all these western-Ukrainian politicians, they were just talking about European integration but we are the people who can do it."

All of the government machinery was pushing this propaganda; that they will sign this agreement with the European Union, that it will be like a paradise, and that they will be the ones to deliver it. Then there was a sudden 180 degrees turn. Of course, people felt disappointed. People just couldn't understand it. For many young people this was especially true. They were drawn into this European dream and politicians had to react and support the movement, because it was appealing to Europe.

There are structural factors as well, Ukraine is basically controlled by different clans of politicians but none of them had a monopoly on power. So, because they were always fighting, there was a certain freedom in Ukraine. You can say something, you can organise your own political activities, because no one has a monopoly on power. This previous government was trying to establish such a monopoly.

Of course, there was a mix of participants in the protests. There was this liberal-ish public. There were nationalists, for whom the protests were another chance to attack the government, which was kind of pro-Russian. There were

just a lot of regular everyday people. It was not the first time either, we had a Maidan before in 2004.

The thing that was really weird for us was not even the nationalists, because they took hold later on, it was that there were politicians coming in, who were trying to hijack the protests. We were always warning: "Don't believe the politicians, they will only use [the protests] for their own purpose." In a way they did use the protest but the idea behind them was really genuine and many people were participating in it and more so the further it went.

Initially, it was difficult to understand why you would want to fight the police just for some trade agreement, which probably won't even benefit you. But based on the government reaction – trying to disperse the protests, to violently attack them, to instate innumerable 'dictatorial' laws against them – people then said: "Okay, there is no chance if we don't act, everyone has to go into the streets and support the protest." Even if you didn't feel that you shared the cause, at least you could be a volunteer medic because this is where the people are.

Martin: When the protest was over, how would you describe the political field that resulted?

Oleksandr: At the time, we could only speculate about how it would be. Right-wing people, especially football hooligans, were protecting the demonstration against the hooligans that were used by the government ('titushky' is the word we used for them). So of course, the football hooligans gained credibility. Right-wing people definitely became more visible through the protests but not as visible as they became after Russia started their aggressions, because with that there was a real threat.

After the Euromaidan events, the government was out. A lot of these 'establishment people' were trying to protect what they had, so they retreated to their regions. In my region, for example, they were trying to use their

networks for negotiations. They said: "We can also protest, we also have people who support us, so please don't touch us."

There was of course also the Russian involvement, which back then was their propaganda. The president, who was seen as an ally to Russia, was already using this propaganda about how there were Nazis around, which was bullshit. I mean, there were Nazis in Ukraine but there were no less Nazis on the Russian side.

There were, of course, also a lot of regular people who were triggered by the protests. Because in our regions, some people are sort of 'beneficiaries of the regime' and they were not so inclined to protest. They were scared, as well. Many of them listened to the politician who represented them, they listened to Russian TV, and they felt threatened. So, of course, there was some genuine intent to protect the status quo.

With this combination of factors, the situation got out of control and everyone lost in the end. Ukraine became more prone to right-wing discourses. The wealthy people lost their power but normal people lost almost everything.

Martin: Could you talk a bit about the relation between Ukraine and Russia in the build-up to the invasion?

Oleksandr: There have been ups and downs in recent years. Initially, the Russian government pictured Ukraine as a junta, as some sort of military dictatorship, because the 'legitimate' government had fled the country and there was an interim government. It then became very important to organise an election in Ukraine, which Petro Poroshenko (Ukraine's previous president) won.

It then looked like Russia sort of recognised Poroshenko. They were able to build a dialogue, in a way. Although there was this military campaign in the east, which I think was the most difficult part, there were still relations between Russia and Ukraine.

When Poroshenko then lost the next election, Zelensky won with overwhelming support from almost all the regions. His political platform, basically, was based on peace. If Poroshenko's message was: "Give me power and I will gain control over all Ukrainian territories and finish the war easily," then Zelensky's messages was more about uniting people, peace, and respect for everybody.

I wouldn't talk about Zelensky in any way related to a 'junta', He was a democratically elected president. We can judge what he did or didn't do but he is the elected leader of the country. So, it's really weird to hear what the Russian propaganda about Nazis. It's not even about the presence of Nazis. Because, yes, there are Nazis, but it's become more difficult to get rid of them because of the Russian threat.

Zelensky's government was neoliberal and the thing with this ideology is that, when it became clear that Ukraine and Russia were not so friendly anymore, the government didn't have any sort of backup mythology to build upon. Instead, they just used the one that was provided to them by the right-wing. Then again, in a way, no one takes it seriously.

Martin: What was your attitude toward Russia in Sotsialnyi Rukh? Did your understanding and attitude match or differ from the Ukrainian mainstream? What was your take on relations between Ukraine and Russia?

Oleksandr: There was not much of a relation between the countries, to be honest. We in the Social Movement were trying to build connections with adequate leftists in Russia. We were in dialogue with the Russian Socialist Movement. Furthermore, we never saw Russian people as a problem, per se. It was more about the Russian government and their imperial ambitions.

In practice, our attitude probably wasn't that different from the mainstream, although our framing was. People in the liberal circles like to picture the situation as a civilizational conflict, which just brings memories of [Žižek standing](#)

[on the bridge in Ljubljana](#) and ironically pointing to the difference between Balkans and Middle Europe.

Still, we see Russia as an Imperial state, a fascist state in a way. For us, the problem with Russia is that they interfere with affairs in Ukraine and that they make it more difficult to conduct any kind of social struggles in Ukraine by appropriating a lot of the left vocabulary. Because, if you talk about antifascism, if you talk about workers' rights, it is basically the same vocabulary Russia uses. There is a certain suspicion towards leftists because of this. People say: "Okay, so you are using the same words, maybe you are working in the interest of the Russian government."

Martin: You spoke about how the right-wing can build legitimacy from and mobilise around the Russian threat. How has the Ukrainian left approached this topic? Did you try to present an alternative way of approaching the subject?

Oleksandr: It is actually difficult to approach it differently, it's a very artificial question. If you take a look at the sociological polls, it's usually something other than the Russian threat that people are concerned with. These kinds of fears are something that politicians always play on when they try to mobilise people, so we're focusing on something else.

We didn't have a shared approach regarding how to deal with the situation. Because some people were being more radically idealistic, so they were talking about how there should be worker's collectives organised everywhere, others were thinking about the situation in practical terms. The last statement we approved before the war, was about calling for peace keepers. Because, as long as we can stop the aggressions and if we can somehow mitigate the threat, that will give us more space to focus on the internal struggles in Ukraine.

Martin: Could you comment on Russia's demand for recognition of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic?

Oleksandr: We definitely condemn the recognition. It's just an escalation of the conflict. It undermines the territorial integrity of Ukraine, to speak in a legalistic language. The recognition of these regions was one of the prerequisites of the conflict. Their de-facto authorities only control small parts of the regions, even if they are the most populous parts.

The question itself is very complex. We didn't have a simple answer. One way could be people-to-people diplomacy. Worker collectives should somehow come to agreements. The thing is that in Ukraine it's possible to be a labour activist or a socialist activist, however difficult it might be and the unions, even if they are weak, still have agency and voice. They have autonomy. This is not at all the case in those republics. We were discussing this with our labour activists and they said: "No, you can't even talk to the unions in the republics, they are completely controlled by the government and do not represent the people." Furthermore, the wages are super low and there is no work in these regions.

It's so funny to see how leftists who supported them tried to justify themselves. The people who lived there made the former Communist Party of Ukraine into a party of their own. They were then expelled from the parliament and eventually banned from the elections. Then, their convention was bombed. It's impossible to do any kind of independent political activism there. It's completely under the control of the local government, which is dependent on Russia. Money, weapons; everything comes from Russia.

Martin: What is the position of Sotsialnyi Rukh, regarding the DPR and LPR?

Oleksandr: The least objectionable thing that we as an organisation could agree on is that if we don't have an answer on how to manage the conflict then it should at least be stopped. It's vital that there are no further acts of military warfare. There was irregular escalation on the front line, with mostly shelling.

Peaceful people – and military people – from both sides were dying. It's not a good thing.

When I talk to my relatives, I can see that the population there is constantly mobilised by fear – especially older people, who watch television more. Every week they declare that an invasion of Ukrainian forces is imminent. They say: "Just give it a couple of days and there will be a new war."

So just stop. Freeze the situation. If you don't trust us and we don't trust you, at least let's use an intermediary, put peacekeepers there. Try to somehow play down the conflict. Maybe after 5 years of peace there will be a better chance to resolve it. If there is no answer, at least there shouldn't be war.

Martin: You mentioned that Sotsialnyi Rukh didn't really have a formalised standpoint towards NATO or the EU ahead of the invasion. Could you develop on that?

Oleksandr: We had discussions. We were definitely not supporting joining NATO. I mean, we're leftists and it's... NATO. Even though NATO might be helpful in some ways, you still know about the legacy of NATO and what they did and are still doing in the world.

The European Union issue was a bit more complicated. On the structural level, the industry in Ukraine would suffer from joining. In this case we can't support it. There are, of course, some industries that would gain from joining, like agriculture and maybe raw material exports but these industries don't need that many workers, so a lot of people would remain unemployed. However, there are other things regarding the European Union too, for example, higher protection standards in terms of labour and environment.

Now we have received a promise that Ukraine could get a candidacy in the EU. We're trying to see the perspective of the people, because from their side, the European Union gives a lot of opportunities. Ukrainian people are going to work

in Europe anyway and if we join, they will be more protected, have better access to labour markets, and will be able to study in the European Union.

Martin: Do you believe that your position toward NATO or the EU will change following the invasion?

Oleksandr: Yes. You can even see from Finland that because of this constant escalation, the support for NATO is rising. With this war, I would say that the majority of the Ukrainian people would support joining NATO. Again, I don't say that we have a position that we can agree on in Sotsialnyi Rukh but we've stopped these discussions. Even people who held that NATO was nothing but imperialists still feel that it's not the time to discuss such things, that we need to survive first. Even the worst thinkable nation comes and helps. We would welcome it.

Martin: Regarding the no-fly zone and military support from NATO, there is a discussion about how such actions would escalate the conflict even further. People are talking about a third world war, even about a nuclear war. What's your take on that discussion?

Oleksandr: I hope they are not completely crazy in Russia. It's difficult to understand how rational their thinking is right now but a nuclear conflict, especially in the vicinity of Russia, wouldn't do any good for them.

I understand the logic behind the no-fly zone. Basically, it's based on bluffing. NATO says that: "Yeah, Ukraine's sky is under our protection" and then they would expect Russia to not escalate. But if they do, then what? However, with military supplies I think everybody is in favour. Ukraine needs weapons. We see how much bigger the Russian army is and Ukraine is one of the poorest countries in Europe. The weapons that are supplied now, the anti-tank launchers, are helpful. They're now talking about the more serious assistance. We definitely welcome the military supplies. We have to defend ourselves.

Martin: In contrast to the Western institutions providing support for Ukraine and sanctioning Russia, other such institutions have previously been driving austerity and structural adjustments in Ukraine. Do you feel like there is a reason to bring these different layers of policy into discussion together?

Oleksandr: Right now, the IMF doesn't seem to demand much. They just give money for macroeconomic help. They were more restrictive before and sometimes even our government couldn't agree with them because they wanted to commodify everything and introduce market principles everywhere. But even if the IMF forgets all of these demands, we still have a huge amount of debt that's been piled up by many governments in succession and we have to pay it back. Furthermore, there's no revenue in Ukraine. 50% of businesses have shut down and even more downsized significantly. A lot of corporations consider themselves to be broke. There is no revenue generated to pay the debt.

On top of that the country is destroyed. They've estimated the damage to be around 100 billion dollars already, maybe more. It will take years to rebuild and a lot of funds would need to be invested without immediate return. In this case it's simply unfair to demand a payback. Ukraine is the poorest country and it's fighting the biggest power in the world but afterward it's: "Good job, give us back our money."

Martin: How do you see the struggles of the labour movement being affected by the invasion?

Oleksandr: The situation is developing. We are waiting for the reaction to the proposed changes to the labour law from the Federation of Trade Unions, which is independent but not militant at all. However, since we have some connections with smaller unions with younger activists, the cooperation was moving forward, and they made a statement in support of debt cancellation.

For many years we were working with the traditional unions, as well as independent ones, to protect the regulation in the labour law, against the threat of 'flexibility' and 'de-bureaucratization', which relate to reduced social protection for workers and undermine unions quite a lot. This was one of the main points of cooperation between all leftist.

Right now, the unions are heavily involved in humanitarian work. From Soviet times they have had a lot of healthcare facilities and sanatoriums that they now use for housing IDPs. They are doing all this humanitarian stuff but if the new law is implemented, they won't have any source of funding. Part of the social insurance is paid by employers and if they don't have to pay it, the social insurance would also be disconnected from the union.

Also, they want to make it more individual in many cases: how you agree about vacation, how you agree about working hours, about breaks, and that the unions wouldn't have to approve your firing anymore. They are constantly trying to push such things and we're always trying to rebut them.

Martin: In a situation where there is such a clear threat, do you see that there is an increased risk that the unions would be seen as acting unpatriotically and sabotaging the defence effort?

Alexander: Such things were alleged even before the war. There were voices that used to make such claims. I haven't seen such messages since the invasion, because at the moment the main focus is the war. People just don't pay attention to what is going on with the unions and there's little time or resources for this fight. Everyone is distracted. We have union members, members of Sotsialnyi Rukh, who are involved in the territorial defence in the central Ukraine and Kryvyi Rih. They're resisting the invasion right now, they're fighting.

Martin: What do you believe the role of the labour movement will be in a post-invasion Ukraine and in this rebuilding scenario?

Oleksandr: We should push for more articulated demands from the labour movement. One of the ideas that we were discussing is a sort of post-war solidarity consensus in Europe. In such an atmosphere we could put pressure on the oligarchs to share their wealth and to use it to rebuild the country, especially if the European Union would help with this. A lot of money is hidden in the West: in Cyprus, in the Netherlands, in the Virgin Islands. If we can use this atmosphere of unity, we could redirect the money and stop offshoring. We see this as a unique chance and that our role is to apply pressure.

Martin: You believe that the labour movement can be the driving force in pushing through such demands?

Oleksandr: We hope so and we're trying to work on it but it's more of a strategic perspective, because we don't know where we will be in one month from now in Ukraine.

Martin: Sotsialnyi Rukh describes how it's repeatedly been the target of far-right violence. Could you talk about how the conflict between nationalists and the left translates into the current situation?

Alexander: Right now, I haven't heard about such cases. Although, if there is some kind of normalisation of the current situation, maybe there will be.

Some activists were questioned by security services. Because, in left circles, even if you're not that pro-Russian, you probably know people who are. For example, as a member of the young communist league I knew some people who took high ranking positions in the so-called DPR after it was proclaimed. If I was politically active and staying in Kiev, maybe they would question me as well.

Before, the violence was related to these militant right-wing groups, especially ones with subcultural young people. These groups could try to attack us, LGBT-groups, feminist movements, and so on.

They were using attacks to create an image of an enemy and mobilise their base. The problem was more that the police didn't want to get involved and we suspected that there was some kind of cooperation between the police and right-wing groups on street level.

But the thing is, a lot ethnic minorities do support Ukraine and condemn the invasion. We have Azerbaijani people and we have Chechens coming to fight for Ukraine. Minorities that are racialized in Ukraine also made a statement in support of the struggle. The organisation that is monitoring ultra-right violence also issued a statement that there is no ground for the propaganda Russia is using. Yes, we have problems with far-right violence but it is exaggerated – and we have to deal with them ourselves. We don't need a foreign army to destroy the country.

Martin: Do you have any thoughts regarding whether the invasion will shift the relative power of different progressive and reactionary movements – or is it hard to say something about such things at the moment?

Oleksandr: It's hard to predict. What we can see is that there is a rising level of negative feelings towards Russians, sometimes indiscriminate feelings. I think you can see it all around the world, which may create problems in the future. Right-wing people might gain credibility, since they were the ones warning everyone before.

Other than that, we don't know how it will develop. This is the problem of this kind of radicalization that war forces on society. Now, these problems are not the main thing but if the war stops, they may come up. There will definitely be political struggles. At least, that's what we are preparing for. That's why we are trying to be actively involved, so that we're not just standing somewhere in the library and saying smart words.

Martin: From the international left there has been worries that the west is arming such groups as the Azov legion, do you believe this fear is proportional or warranted?

Oleksandr. Oh, we definitely don't like Azov. However, the thing with Azov is that while they're quite iconic now, they're just a small part of the army. They're holding Mariupol now, and I'm not even sure how much of the weapons can reach them.

They were incorporated into the military system to be manageable. After 2014 many voluntary battalions became either institutionalised or disbanded. Some of their radical fighters were prosecuted and put in prison or dismissed.

Azov folks were using their credibility to build a political movement, but I wouldn't say that they were very successful. We can see a larger proportional representation of the right-wing in the military structures – they see it as their mission – but in general their influence in the society is overrated.

Martin: What do you think leftists have the hardest time understanding about the situation in Ukraine?

Oleksandr: Maybe the false pacifism. People believe that it's enough to just call for peace and be above the conflict, which is not feasible because all parts of the society are under attack. Even if we just give up arms it wouldn't lead to anything good. Because however bad the Ukrainian government is and however influential the right-wing groups could be, it is still the government that is bound by the human rights regime. There are means for you to protect yourself and to pursue your agenda. In Russia, there are not.

Feminists, the LGBT-movement, left-wing activists, and liberals would be targeted by the Russia government. They can't just give up arms. When Crimea was annexed, many leftists were arrested almost immediately by Russian security services or had to flee, so there is no way for us to be pacifist here.

Martin: What are some ways that the western left can act in solidarity with Ukraine, and especially the progressive left in Ukraine?

Oleksandr: Their focus should be on the three messages I talked about, which were: The cancellation of debt, the seizure of Russian assets, and ending the tolerance of offshoring.

Otherwise, even if the war stops right now, there would be a flow of refugees. Sweden, as I understand it, expects up to two hundred thousand of them. The first reaction, of course, is emotionally driven solidarity but it won't stay like that forever. There will be some real problems regarding what to do with people. In many Swedish cities, the infrastructure is already strained in terms of healthcare and housing and there probably will be conflicts about what to do.

Furthermore, currently refugees don't have any access to the system of adult education. There should be some more finance given so that people can get involved and gain some new skills that they can use in Ukraine, Sweden, or somewhere else. Also, there should also be some kind of financial support for students, because Sweden is an expensive country.

Martin: What lessons can be learned from the experiences of Sotsialnyi Rukh in the years it has existed?

Alexander: There is a certain gap between people that identify as left and regular people and this is something that should be overcome. It was difficult to organize on a larger scale, despite the demand, because people were doing it in their free time. Sometimes it was chaotic, messy, dependent on personal connections – so not really sustainable.

Before the war, we were trying to negotiate with the Swedish Left party so that we maybe could get access to their [Zetkin-platform](#) which we saw as beneficial. There are up to two hundred people involved in Sotsialnyi Rukh, with maybe more that can be mobilised. However, only a minor part is involved in

daily conversations, our coordination is done mostly through Telegram chats and Google docs. A way to scale up with minimal resources – because left in Ukraine is not so strong – would mean a lot.

Martin: What strengths and what potential do you see in the Ukrainian left – and specifically in Sotsialnyi Rukh?

Alexander: There is definitely a demand for the left agenda – but there is no left movement in the country. Previously the left was represented by the Communist party, which was communist mostly on paper and associated with Russia. They, along with others, contributed to the discreditation of the left.

Hence, currently there is a gap for articulated social agenda. We can even see right-wing organisations drift into the left trying to answer this demand. Furthermore, we have, on the one hand, the successful liberal people who are trying to shape the country how they see it and, on the other hand, the everyday for people whose life is basically survival. I lived in the countryside, because I worked as an analyst for UNHCR, and you can see that people there have no money, they may work multiple jobs because they have to survive. The last thing they care about would be some ideological things regarding European values, when they have never left the region or have never been to the capital. We have to focus on these people too.

Martin: Finally, although an immensely complex question, what do you see in the future for Ukraine? What do you hope for?

Oleksandr: I can only hope for the best. I don't know what will happen in Ukraine. I hope the war will stop but it will not be the end.

Even though Russia is weakened and it's a huge blow to the mythology of the Russian army, Russia is nevertheless a huge country with a lot of resources, so the war can last really long. Further, while the Ukrainian army can defend more

or less successfully, I'm not sure that we have enough force to counter-attack Russia. This is a big problem.

There should be some pressure put on Russia. Maybe something should happen there: a strong peace movement or the coup or whatever, I don't know.

The thing is just that, even if the war stopped there would be this huge layer of problems. If it stops now, it's one thing but if it stops in half a year, it will be completely different. According to the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme, eds.) up to 90% of people in Ukraine would live in extreme poverty in case of prolonged fighting.

Then again, we can only speculate about what will happen then. In a country full of weapons, poor people, and an unresponsive government, anything could happen. So, we are trying to prepare for this as well, put out the right messages and organise people.