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Ukraine: They equip the left in the fight against Putin

Volodya Vagner

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Ukrainian activists with backgrounds in the anarchist, anti-fascist and student movements collect equipment missing from the front lines.

– If you don't want to see a big right-wing movement on Ukrainian streets: then you should support Ukraine, says Sergei Movtjan when Flamman meets him in Kiev.

UTRIKES I'm not very patriotically inclined," laughs Sergei Movtjan during the meeting in a cafe in central Kiev. The city outside is covered in a thin layer of snow and a thick blanket of patriotic messages, in the form of graffiti, flags, and facade-sized posters on government buildings. The full-scale war against Ukraine launched by Vladimir Putin in February has changed the daily lives of all Ukrainians. Even left-wing activists such as Sergei Movtjan, formerly active in the student movement and as a writer for the left-wing newspaper Polititjna Kritika, have had to change their ways.

Like countless other Ukrainians, many of his fellow leftists decided to take up arms and defend the country against the invasion.

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But with the chaos that prevailed, especially in the first weeks of the war, many struggled with a lack of basic equipment. To rescue their comrades in arms, a group of left-wing activists launched a network which, with the help of like-minded people abroad, procured what was missing. Initially called Operation Solidarity, the project now goes by the name Solidarity Collectives, and Sergei Movtjan is one of the driving forces behind it.

– Our main purpose is military aid, to support our comrades who are fighting,” he explains.

While at the beginning of the invasion there were special left-wing units within the Home Guard-like Territorial Defence, most left-wing soldiers, in order to get to the front, have now moved on to other, front-located volunteer battalions or the regular Ukrainian army. The selection of who will benefit from Solidarity Collective support is therefore done on an individual basis.

– They are different kinds of people. We use the term anti-authoritarian, which then refers to anyone who is libertarian left, anarchist, anti-fascist, people from this broad movement. Plus, through trade union leaders and their contacts, especially in the health care, mining and railway sectors, we also provide for trade union people, which I think is important,” explains Sergei Movtjan.

The nerve centre of Solidarity Collectives is in Kiev. Here, Sergei Movtjan and others receive lists of the needs of soldiers in the field. Requests that cannot be met on the Ukrainian market are forwarded to comrades in Dresden, Berlin and Warsaw, among other places. There, the goods are purchased, sent to a warehouse on the Polish-Ukrainian border, and from there by car to Lviv and Kiev. Finally, the items are sent by post to the respective soldiers at the front.

Wish lists range from long johns and winter uniforms to cars and drones. War is material-intensive, and Sergei Movtjan has been taught to stop looking at physical things through everyday civilian eyes, not to get too attached to cars, for example, whose lifespan at

the front can be short. Something that sometimes also risks causing bureaucratic headaches down the road.

– One car we procured was hit and it caught fire, he says.

– We had temporarily registered the car with my old organisation, the newspaper Polititjna Kritika, under the regulations that allow duty-free humanitarian imports while the war is going on. But now the car is gone, and I have to de-register it somehow. But the people in the car died, and we don't even have any pictures to prove that it was destroyed, so I don't know how to go about it," he sighs.

In addition to military aid, the Solidarity Collective also organises humanitarian aid, for example for a hospital in the town of Kryvyj Rih.

– The hospital there does a very important job, as they receive many injured soldiers from the front and internally displaced people. They need a lot of everything.

The contact between the activists and the hospital dates back to before the war, when members of the Ukrainian socialist movement Sotsialnyi Ruch supported the employees there in a workplace dispute.

– It's a long-standing contact, and I think it's crucial, even for the post-war period, when they will face a whole range of challenges," says Sergei Movtjan.

Exactly what the post-war reality will be, he says, is hard to predict. But one thing that is clear, he says, is that the left must stand up for Ukraine's cause. There are several reasons. For one thing, he says, it is crucial for the credibility of the Ukrainian left in a post-war era when all political factions will be touting their veteran credentials.

– Once the war is over, there will be a big contest, with veterans from different political groups wanting to use the wartime prestige to promote different versions of Ukraine. The parliament will be packed with people in camouflage, Sergei Movtjan believes.

Contrary to what is put forward by some left-wing voices abroad, often as an argument against supporting Ukraine militarily, it is by no means a given, he says, that the far right will be able to reap the greatest benefits from the war.

– This is something I always have to explain to comrades abroad. Have they been strengthened by the war? Probably. But unlike in 2014, they no longer have a monopoly on the role of war heroes. Back then, it was all about their units, the Right Sector, Donbass, Ajdar, Azov, but now it's the regular Ukrainian army that's in the spotlight, and its reputation is enormous, he explains.

And the better Ukraine does on the battlefield, he argues, the better the chances for a left-wing hopeful development in the country.

– If Ukraine emerges victorious from the war, it will be Zelensky's victory, and his party will have a majority. Since he is dependent on the West, and must maintain at least a facade of democracy and human rights, there will be a chance for democratic processes.

For those foreign comrades who don't want to support Ukraine for fear that it would promote the far right there, Sergei Movtjan replies that in reality it's just the opposite.

In fact, a Ukrainian defeat, such as the loss of large territories, would be a gift to the far right, which could then benefit from revanchist sentiments.

– If you don't want to see a big right-wing movement on Ukrainian streets: then you should support Ukraine," he says.