Two years since the Kiev coup

Part two

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This, the second part of a two-part article on two years since the 2014 Maidan coup in Ukraine, reviews the role of various pseudo-left organizations. The first part was posted on March 7.

The pseudo-left and Maidan

In February 2014, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych was overthrown in a right-wing coup backed by the US and Germany. In the months leading up to and after this event, the World Socialist Web Site exposed the forces behind the “Maidan” movement, which was led by a combination of free-marketeers, ultra-nationalists and neo-fascists who exploited popular discontent with Yanukovych to install a virulently anti-Russian government with close ties to Washington and Berlin.

The analysis of the WSWS then and now demonstrates the immense chasm separating it from a line-up of pseudo-left tendencies such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO) in the US, the New Anti-capitalist Party of France (NPA), and the Russian Socialist Movement (RSM), which applauded the Maidan “revolution” and claimed that it bore some sort of progressive character. Hailing the ouster of Yanukovych as a positive transformation that could be utilized by the “left” for its own purposes, they sought to cover up the fact that the real target of the coup was not the anti-democratic and corrupt practices of Yanukovych, but the working class of Ukraine, Russia and the world.

In taking this position, these organizations simply extended their support for imperialism to a new domain. Having backed the interventions in Libya and Syria, portraying these imperialist wars for regime-change as democratic revolutions, they lined up behind Washington and Berlin and their fascist proxy forces in Ukraine. In 2011, for instance, the NPA’s Gilbert Achcar wrote: “Every general rule admits of exceptions. This includes the general rule that UN-authorized military interventions by imperialist powers are purely reactionary ones and can never achieve a humanitarian or positive purpose.”

From the very outset, the RSM served as a leading mouthpiece for the Maidan protests. Formed in 2011, this organization, like its fake-left counterparts around the world, declared its goal to be the creation of a broad coalition of “anti-capitalist leftists.” It rejected Trotskyism and the lessons of Trotsky’s struggle against the nationalist degeneration of the Russian Revolution under Stalin. It accommodated itself to anti-immigrant chauvinism and promoted economic nationalism.

The RSM maintains that the major task confronting the “left” in Russia today is the fight for a “democratic revolution.” On this basis, it champions various forms of identity politics. It has forged coalitions with an array of forces, both liberal and overtly right-wing, including proponents of free-market capitalism, trade union bureaucrats and Stalinists. During the anti-Putin protests of 2011-2012, a leading faction of the group welcomed the campaign of the right-wing Russian nationalist and anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny as having opened “the door to public politics.”

During the Maidan protests, as reports of assaults on workers and leftists at demonstrations and images of protesters smashing statues of Lenin hit the media, the RSM insisted that Maidan not be abandoned. In late January 2014, when the WSWS was warning that the Western-backed Ukrainian opposition was determined to provoke a civil war to gain power, the RSM’s Workers’ Platform group proclaimed, “In today’s Ukraine, we’re seeing the most genuine revolutionary situation.”

In another statement issued the same day entitled “Maidan: Not Our War?” the RSM described those opposing participation in the protests as “philistines” who did not wish to get their hands dirty. It proclaimed, “This is our movement! This is our war!”

Ivan Ovsiannikov, a leading member of the RSM in Saint Petersburg, insisted, “Russian official propaganda representing the Ukrainian events as a putsch by Lwow fascists, professionals of the US State Department, is false.” He then admitted, however, that this characterization rested upon “a half-truth,” on which he failed to elaborate.

Ilya Budraitskis, an RSM member whose views were broadcast widely in pseudo-left publications of various stripes, readily acknowledged the overwhelming presence of the far-right in the Maidan demonstrations. He described the fascist Right Sector as “courageous fighters.” When asked what the “left” should do given that the movement was dominated by neo-Nazis, Budraitskis said it had to participate alongside these forces. “Of course,” he wrote, “it means I have to leave my beloved red flag at home because it doesn’t get a good reception. So what? I want to come into political contact with people. Radical is what brings success.”

On February 20, 2014, as observers became increasingly horrified at the savage violence meted out by the Right Sector, including the use of improvised napalm, the RSM posted an article entitled, “Don’t cultivate pity for tyranny.” It was accompanied by a picture of a member of the Ukrainian security services being burned alive after what presumably was a fire-bomb attack.

Budraitskis argued that it was necessary to build a “Left Sector” in Ukraine, with the primary goal of bringing down Ukraine’s Communist Party (KPU). He welcomed “a close to [the KPU’s] ignominious existence,” and insisted that the call to ban the organization and outlawing of the KPU and the banning of all Communist-era symbols by the new Ukrainian government, Budraitskis has gotten what he wished for.

This anti-communism was accompanied by a fawning attitude towards Maidan’s ferocious Ukrainian nationalism. The RSM, for instance, insisted that Maidan was progressive because it expressed the population’s desire to get out from under the Russian yoke, a position that
was likewise filled with denunciations of “backyard.”

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The main target of all of these groups was and continues to be the Putin
government, which they denounce for everything from anti-gay bigotry to
the civil war in Syria, even as they support American, German and French
imperialism’s military interventions and regime-change operations in the
Middle East and elsewhere.

The World Socialist Web Site is intransigently hostile to the Kremlin
regime and the capitalist oligarchy it represents. The power and wealth of
this ruling elite were handed to it by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which in
the 1980s set about destroying the nationalized property relations
established by the Russian Revolution in order to transform itself into a
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However, the denunciations of Russia as “imperialist” by the pseudo-
left have no purpose other than to downplay and cover up the crimes of
the United States and the European powers. By supporting so-called
“humanitarian interventions,” “national liberation” struggles and
allegedly democratic “color revolutions” against “Russian imperialism,”
these organizations are attempting to provide a cover for the rapacious and
neo-colonial policies of Washington and Berlin. In April 2014, the RSM
wrote: “It is time to acknowledge that we live in a society that is much
more right-wing that any country in Western Europe, and even the United
States.” This was nothing more than a justification for lining up behind
the aggressive and militaristic policies of Western imperialism, which
seeks to reduce Russia, as well as China, to the status of semi-colonies.

Today, the RSM is attempting to give the Maidan movement Marxist
credentials by claiming that the far-right coup in Kiev was the equivalent
of the 1905 Russian Revolution, which Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks
supported. In an article entitled “Lenin on Maidan,” the organization
writes: “The experience of the past period’s ‘color revolutions’ did not give
us examples of a transition of power from one group of the elite to
another, but to organs of self-organization that grew out of a popular
movement.” The RSM essentially claims that the ultra-nationalist militias
formed out of Maidan, which serve as a major base of support for the
current government and its austerity measures, are somehow equivalent to
“a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry.”

What of those in the pseudo-left who claim to have opposed Maidan and
the Kiev regime?

After initially arguing in February 2014 that the predominance of far-
right forces in the Maidan movement “does not mean that one should not
take part and be active in Maidan (or in its orbit), and use the temporary
weakening of state control and the really emerging power vacuum to
create personal autonomous spaces through which one can enter into the
new ‘post-Maidan’ stage of political life,” the well known Russian
pseudo-left figure Boris Kagarlitsky began to denounce the Kiev
government and call for the building of a Novorossiya (New Russia) in
Ukraine’s Donbass.

Kagarlitsky is a long-time political operator in Russia. During the 1980s
he was a proponent of Mikhail Gorbachev’s pro-market perestroika and
supported the restoration of capitalism in the USSR. Up until a few years
ago he was closely associated with the RSM. He maintains close relations
with the Communist Party and Russia’s trade union bureaucrats.

In July 2014, Kagarlitsky teamed up in Yalta, which is on the Crimean
peninsula, with a number of pseudo-left forces to issue a “manifesto” on
Maidan and the pro-Russian separatist movement that erupted in
Ukraine’s southeast. It argued that the separatists in the region were
leading a “popular-liberation revolution” that could be pushed to the left
and result in the creation of a state that guaranteed “the interests of the
people and their all-sided development,” forbad exploitative private
property and “usurious finance capital,” and provided pensions and social
benefits.

Nothing of the sort happened, nor could it have. The forces that came
to power in the breakaway regions of Ukraine’s Donbass were not left-wing
representatives of the genuine mass opposition that existed in the region to
the Kiev coup. They were a mixture of right-wing Russian nationalist, pro-
capitalist and even monarchist elements, who filled the political vacuum
created by the collapse of support for the Kiev government and the mass
exodus of a population fleeing war. While there was an initial attempt on
their part to make use of left-wing sentiment and nostalgia for the Soviet
past to find a base of support within the population, this was a mask for a
reactionary, nationalist outlook.

For instance, even as they played the Internationale at official functions,
the leaders of the “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DPR) proclaimed
Russian Orthodoxy to be the state religion. On July 8, 2014, then-DPR
military commander Strelkov vented, “We are fighting here specifically
for Russia and for the rights of the Donetsk Republic’s people. We are
battling here for the USSR and for the Donetsk people’s rights as a part of
the USSR. For the USSR as our universal, divine Motherland.” These
remarks, which are a rejection of the revolutionary and internationalist
origins of the Soviet Union, are a crude product of Stalinism and Russian
chauvinism.

From the start, the leaders of these “People’s Republics” explicitly
stated that they had “no relationship to communists who seize and
nationalize things,” and insisted on “respect” for “the right of private
property.” Eduard Limonov, the head of the Russian far-right National
Bolshevik Party, praised the pseudo-left’s “Novorossiya” project as a
“red-brown” alliance.

Kagarlitsky and those groups around him now lament the failure of
Novorossiya, arguing that it is a product of the betrayal of the Russian
nation by the Kremlin, which intervened in southeastern Ukraine to

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defend its neo-liberal agenda and bureaucratic interests. A recent editorial posted on Kagarlitsky’s web site, Rabkor, states: “The hope that in Novorossiya it would be possible to create a new, more democratic and more progressive state than currently exists in Russia (not even talking about Ukraine) never materialized. And not because these hopes were groundless. Rather, the very opposite. They were entirely real. The Kremlin administration, as well as we and our co-thinkers, understood this and alas... [the Kremlin] worked on suppressing everything living and progressive that there was in the movement for Novorossiya.”

The idea that a progressive statelet that guarantees the welfare of the population could be carved out of an impoverished section of Eastern Europe and southwestern Russia ravaged by deindustrialization, wholly dependent on access to international markets for whatever wealth it produces, and at the center of an explosive conflict between the West and Russia is absurd and reactionary. It is little more than a rehashing of the Stalinist program of “socialism in one country”—minus even the reference to socialism.

*Concluded*

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