Savas Michael-Matsas lauds nationalist forces in Donbass region of eastern Ukraine

Johannes Stern
10 July 2021

Since the United States and Germany backed the fascist-led coup in Ukraine in February 2014, the imperialist powers have continuously intensified their pro-war offensive against Russia.

The exercise Defender 2021, NATO’s largest military manoeuvre since the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy 30 years ago, was held in May and June. The imperialist-backed regime in Kiev is demanding Ukrainian membership in NATO and planning a military offensive to reassert control over the Donbass and “retake” Crimea.

The peninsula in the Black Sea, which is home to the Russian Black Sea fleet, has been part of Russia since March 2014. In a referendum organised by Moscow, a majority of the population voted for the annexation. The measure was the Kremlin’s response to the fascist-led coup against pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych, and the offensive by the Ukrainian army and fascist militias against coup opponents, above all in the east of the country.

The ongoing civil war in eastern Ukraine between the Ukrainian military and Russian-backed separatists has claimed the lives of some 14,000 people over the past seven years and turned millions of people into refugees. An open NATO-led war against the nuclear power Russia would call into question the survival of humanity as a whole. The recent confrontation between Russian armed forces and a British destroyer in the Black Sea underscored just how great the danger of such a conflict is.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) condemned the far-right coup in Ukraine and the offensive backed by the imperialist powers from the outset. It polemised against the liberal and pseudo-left organisations and publications who praised the regime change operation in Ukraine as a “democratic revolution” and covered up and defended cooperation with fascist forces.

At the same time, the ICFI is an opponent of Russian nationalism. The Putin regime and its proxies in eastern Ukraine do not represent an antidote to the imperialist war-mongers. They represent the interests of a criminal oligarchy that emerged through the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Their military operations increase the danger of war and promote nationalism to divide the working class.

The ICFI advocates the standpoint that the struggle against militarism, fascism and war requires the revolutionary mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist programme. With regard to Ukraine in particular, Trotsky warned as early as the 1930s that its independence on a bourgeois basis would have reactionary consequences and turn Ukraine into the plaything of the imperialist powers. As the Stalinist terror raged against hundreds of thousands of socialists, Trotsky fought for an independent Soviet Ukraine as part of the struggle for world socialist revolution.

Political tendencies that trample these historical perspectives and political principles underfoot and subordinate the working class to Russian nationalist forces in eastern Ukraine, sabotage the struggle against imperialism and in fact play directly into the hands of the fascist NATO-backed forces in Kiev.

One of these tendencies is the Greek Workers Revolutionary Party (EEK), which belongs internationally to the Coordinating Committee for the Refoundation of the Fourth International (CRFI). Other members of the CRFI include the Workers Party (PO) in Argentina and the Workers Revolutionary Party (DIP) in Turkey. On May 10, the general secretary of the EEK, Savas Michael-Matsas, published a statement offering “fraternal greetings and congratulations to the people of the Donets People’s Republic (VRD) on its seventh birthday.”

In his statement, Michael-Matsas attempted to portray himself and the EEK as anti-imperialists and internationalists, and the Donets People’s Republic as a bulwark against fascism and war. For example, Michael-Matsas wrote that the “struggle in Donets and throughout the Donbass against the fascist coup in Kiev in 2014 is the continuation of the same struggle against the successors of the Bandera gangs and their imperialist protectors.” He and his party therefore declared “our solidarity with your people and other peoples exposed to the attacks of the imperialists and their collaborators, fascists, successors of Bandera, and oligarchs.”

It is a fact that the coup, the subsequent military offensive and the crimes of fascist forces—including the murder of dozens of coup opponents in Odessa on May 2, 2014—triggered enormous opposition among workers in eastern Ukraine in particular. But the claim that the Donets People’s Republic is a weapon in the struggle against these forces is utterly false. The VRD is not a progressive expression of the deep-rooted opposition of Russian and Ukrainian workers to the imperialist-backed regime in Kiev, which lauds Nazi collaborators like Stepan Bandera. The elements which call the shots in Donets are themselves right-wing extremists and nationalists and embittered opponents of a socialist movement in the Ukrainian and international working class.

The first people’s governor of the Donets People’s Republic from March 3 to November 4, 2014, was Pavel Gubarev, a leader of the pro-Russian movement in Ukraine with a right-wing extremist background. He was a member of the neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic organisation Russian National Unity and was leader of the New Russia Party (PN). The PN was founded in Donets on May 13, 2014, and has supporters among representatives of Russian fascism and the far-right, like Alexander Prochanov and Alexander Dugin.

The current leaders of the Donets People’s Republic are cut from the same cloth as Gubarev. Their economic and political rise is directly bound up with the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy 30 years ago, and they generally enjoy close ties to government institutions and intelligence agencies within the capitalist Putin regime in Moscow.

The current interim president of the VRD is Dennis Pushilin, leader of the Russian nationalist party Donets Republic. Prior to his political career, he volunteered for the notorious shareholder company MMM, which created one of the biggest Ponzi schemes in Russia in the early 1990s and stole the deposits of an estimated 10 to 15 million people.

Vladimir Pashkov, the current Prime Minister of the Donets People’s Republic, served in the Russian navy until 1993 and was regional minister.
for development in Irkutsk oblast in 2008. He went on to become deputy

Governor of the same administrative region between 2012 and 2015.

Reports indicate that Pashkov worked closely with the Ukrainian

oligarch Sergei Kurchenko and was involved with his company

Vneshtorgservis. Pashkov also owns a company that is part of the Russian

Rosneft network. Rosneft is controlled by Igor Setshin, one of Russia’s

richest oligarchs and a close confidante of Putin.

Pushilin’s predecessor, Alexander Sacharchenko, who lost his life in a

bomb attack on August 31, 2018, was a Great Russian nationalist who

commented on this “opportunist horse-

— reported in 2015 that Sacharchenko told a

Manuel Ochsenreiter. He is currently

( to International, and the significance of history as a whole. For Michael-

the historically-rooted programme and principles of the Fourth

International, and the significance of history as a whole. For Michael-

Mattas and Co., questions like the Stalinist terror, which cost the lives of

hundreds of thousands of Marxists, including Trotsky, have no

significance because they stand in the way of their corrupt political

alliances. They operate according to the maxim: the only thing that counts

is short-term political agreements in the here and now.

The World Socialist Web Site commented on this “opportunist horse-

trading” by the CRFI in a previous article, noting that if it “can be applied to

Stalinist parties whose histories are steeped in betrayals and crimes,

why can’t it be applied to all organizations—including those of the

nationalistic, and even fascist, right?”

This assessment is confirmed by Michael-Matsas’ glorification of the

VRD. Donets is a concrete example of how the CRFI’s conception of

history lays the groundwork for coalitions that unite pseudo-left

organisations with fascist forces in the interests of the bourgeoisie.

The Donets People’s Republic is a prime example of such “red-brown

alliances.” After the fascist-led coup in Ukraine in February 2014, the

Stalinists in eastern Ukraine played a decisive role in retaining control of

the resistance among workers and young people to the imperialist

offensive by leading it into a nationalist blind alley.

For example, the leader of the Communist Party of the Donetsk

People’s Republic (KPDPN), Boris Litvinov, was one of the coauthors of

the VRD’s declaration of independence. He was chair of the VRD’s

council of ministers between May 16 and July 29, 2014, and of the

supreme council of the VRD from July 23 to November 14, 2014. In the

elections in Donbass on November 2, 2014, the KPDPN supported the

candidacy of Sacharchenko and joined the parliamentary group of his

Donetsk Republic party. They remain members of this parliamentary

group to this day, and are thus an integral part of the current government

under Pushilin.

The right-wing capitalist character of the VRD corresponds with the

Stalinists’ political programme. In an interview in July 2014, Litvinov

spoke in favour of “the building of a people’s democratic state” that

“respects the right to private property.” He even boasted that he had held

talks with Rinat Akhmetov, the richest oligarch in Ukraine. He

“understands the concerns of business” and “the politicians should ideally

not intervene into business structures,” according to Litvinov. They are

also ready to “maintain economic relations with the government in Kiev.

We are there for them.” “Ignoring” the VRD’s products would be “silly.”

They do not carry the imprint “of being left-wing or right-wing.”

The political relations between Michael-Matsas and right-wing Stalinist

forces stretch back over more than three decades. Already in the 1980s,

Michael-Matsas lauded Mikhail Gorbachev as the leader of the political

revolution in the Soviet Union, even though his policies of perestroika and

glasnost aimed at restoring capitalist private property in the Soviet Union

and reintegrating it into the structures of world imperialism. Ever since, he

and the EEEK have maintained close ties with the CPSU and its successor

organisations.

Michael-Matsas has been in close contact with Mitina for over a decade.

At the EEK’s invitation, the Stalinist spoke in 2007 at an event to mark 90

years of the October Revolution. Michael-Matsas is also a regular guest at

conferences organised by Stalinist forces in Russia. Last year, he

participated in an online conference to celebrate the VRD’s independence

day.

Michael-Matsas’ politics have always been characterized by painting

nationalist forces in bright colors. Already as leader of the Workers

International League, the former Greek section of the ICFL, he trampled

on the principles of socialist internationalism and glorified reactionary

regimes like the Khomeini government in Iran. Since supporting the

opportunist and nationalist course of the British Workers Revolutionary

Party (WRP) in the 1985–86 split, he has openly forged alliances with

nationalist and pro-capitalist parties.

In Greece, Michael-Matsas and the EEK have repeatedly supported
alliances with the social-democratic PASOK, the Stalinist Communist Party, and the pseudo-left Syriza. Before the January 2015 elections, EEK supported Syriza and promoted a “powerful united front of all workers and popular organizations … from KKE, Syriza, Antarsya to EEK, the other left organizations, the anarchist and anti-authoritarian movements.” After the elections, the “united front” extended to the far-right Independent Greeks (ANEL), which Syriza leader and later Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras brought into the government to impose the EU austerity dictate against the workers.

One of Michael-Matsas’ closest personal friends and political collaborators is Alex Steiner, who left the Workers League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party) in 1978 and abandoned the fight for socialism. As he was later to write, Steiner quite deliberately opted for a comfortable middle class life. He briefly contemplated a return to political involvement, but the SEP—recognizing that Steiner’s political conceptions had drifted substantially to the right during his long absence from the socialist movement—rejected his application for membership. This assessment was substantiated when, in the aftermath of the events of 2001, Steiner became increasingly unstable and became a bitter opponent of the International Committee. Significantly, Steiner gave his stamp of approval to the Kiev regime in 2014 and 2015 and attacked the International Committee for its opposition to the imperialist offensive.

In an article published on Steiner’s blog on May 20, 2014, it was stated, “Marxists should oppose the dismemberment of Ukraine. That means opposing any and all annexations, whether by Russia or by other ‘players’ like Poland and its imperialist partners in NATO.”

These lines were written after Washington and Berlin had organised a coup based on fascist forces in Kiev that in effect amounted to the annexation of Ukraine by the imperialist powers. When Steiner rails against annexations, however, he means the integration of Crimea into the Russian Federation after a referendum. By contrast, he defended the pro-imperialist regime in Kiev with the statement that it emerged from “a mass movement that toppled a regime.”

The reactionary collaboration between Steiner and Michael-Matsas has not been hindered in the least by their differing political lines on Ukraine. The basis for the reactionary nationalist politics of these pseudo-left charlatans is not political principles, but extreme opportunism and pragmatism. In the case of Steiner, this is combined with a pathological personal hatred of all those who were once his comrades in the Trotskyist movement and who have continued the struggle he abandoned decades ago.