

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

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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 Yanukovich, 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 polemicised 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 antipode 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 Donetsk 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 Donetsk People's Republic as a bulwark against fascism and war. For example, Michael-Matsas wrote that the "struggle in Donetsk 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 Donetsk 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 Donetsk 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 Donetsk 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 Donetsk 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 Donetsk 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 Donetsk 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 Donetsk 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 gained notoriety for anti-Semitic statements. According to a *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* report, Sacharchenko called in an interview to bring "all territory under control that once belonged to the Russian Empire." Only then would "Russia's golden epoch" begin. The issue was not merely to retake Kiev, "and not even take Berlin." One must "go beyond that and take Britain as a whole. Our great misfortune as Russians are the Anglo-Saxons."

The Austrian daily *Die Presse* reported in 2015 that Sacharchenko told a press conference in early 2015 that those in power in Kiev were "pathetic representatives of the powerful Jewish people" who had no right to stand at the head of the successors of the Cossacks.

The VRD's domestic and foreign policies are in line with these forces. Like the pro-Western regime in Kiev, the separatist-controlled areas in the Donbass are characterized by a dictatorial "law and order" policy. As early as 2014, the death penalty was introduced for offenses such as treason and espionage. The regime systematically oppresses ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. According to media reports, there have been repeated attacks by armed militias on Roma and homosexuals. In 2015, the Deputy Minister of Political Affairs of the Donetsk People's Republic stated, "A culture of homosexuality is spreading... That's why we have to kill anyone who is involved in it."

In contrast to Michael-Matsas' propaganda, the regime in Donetsk cooperates internationally with the most reactionary imperialist forces. The leaders of the Donetsk People's Republic have repeatedly welcomed delegations of far-right and fascist parties over recent years—including the Alternative for Germany, which praises Hitler's Wehrmacht and trivialises the Holocaust and the Nazis' war of annihilation against the Soviet Union.

Another partner of the VRD is the editor of the German far-right monthly magazine *Zuerst!* (*First!*), Manuel Ochsenreiter. He is currently under investigation by, among others, the state prosecutor in Berlin because he allegedly plotted with the Polish fascist organisation "Falange" to carry out a terrorist attack on an institution of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine.

Michael-Matsas' glorification of a capitalist regime that maintains direct relations with fascist forces is no accident. It flows directly from the political orientation of the EEK and the entire CRFI. At an April 2018 Alliance conference, Michael-Matsas and other CRFI leaders explicitly stated that their envisioned "refounding" of the Fourth International would be pursued in alliance with Stalinist forces. Significantly, one of the speakers at the congress was the former representative of the Donetsk People's Republic Foreign Ministry in Moscow, Darya Mitina.

Mitina is a leading member of the pro-Stalinist United Communist Party of Russia (OKP)—a split-off from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF)—and an ardent admirer of Stalin. According to her own statements, she lays flowers at the grave of the dictator twice a year. She recently participated in the inauguration of a new "Stalin centre." A self-published picture shows Mitina in front of a KPRF placard with the slogan "Stalin is with us." Another photo showing her in front of a picture of Stalin was accompanied by the comment, "Him and me."

The alliance of the CRFI with Stalinism is based on its repudiation of the historically-rooted programme and principles of the Fourth International, and the significance of history as a whole. For Michael-

Matsas 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. Donetsk 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 Donetsk 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 (KPDNR), 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 KPDNR 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 EEK 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 ICFI, 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.



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