

Zelensky rules out elections, as Ukraine's dictatorship jails opponents of the war

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Amid a deepening political crisis triggered by growing popular opposition to the escalating war against Russia, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky went on a tirade over the weekend against free and open elections, declaring that a vote would “destroy the country.”

“Elections right now are a tsunami for the state that will split Ukraine,” Zelensky told journalists in remarks *The Kyiv Independent* published Sunday. “If we want to destroy the country, then during a war like this we can move toward elections.”

Zelensky was responding to former Defense Minister Mykhailo Fedorov, whom he dismissed in July. Fedorov called for wartime elections in a video address on August 18. Ukraine faces a “systemic crisis of governance,” Fedorov said, and must “find a legal, safe and realistic mechanism that will allow Ukraine to renew its full democratic process.” His demand for elections represents no democratic or antiwar alternative.

Zelensky has stated openly what the governments and media of the United States and Europe have spent four and a half years denying. His argument is that the political system he heads can be maintained only so long as the population is prevented from voting and political opposition remains suppressed under martial law.

Zelensky does not say which division he fears, but it is that between the government and the population it is sending to the front. An election would become a referendum on the war itself. Gallup found on June 30 that 66 percent of Ukrainians want a negotiated end to the war as soon as possible, against 24 percent who favor fighting on until victory.

The question of whether Ukrainians may vote is posed in a country where most of the parties they might vote for have already been outlawed. In March 2022, Zelensky suspended 11 opposition parties. A dozen were subsequently banned by court order, including Opposition Platform—For Life, then the largest opposition party in parliament. Virtually every established left-wing party has been outlawed. The Communist Party had already been banned in 2015. The parties prohibited after the invasion include the Socialist Party of Ukraine, the Progressive Socialist Party, Socialists, Left Opposition and the Union of Left Forces.

The standard applied to Russia makes the silence over Ukraine unmistakable. On August 10, Russia's Supreme Court struck Yabloko, the only registered party opposing the war, from next month's Duma elections. On August 17 the court rejected the party's appeal, and the same day Yabloko deputy leader Lev Shlosberg was sentenced to 11 years in a penal colony for his

opposition to the war. The *New York Times* and the American press covered these measures at length and characterized them as the acts of a dictatorship. Not one of them has applied that standard to Ukraine, where a dozen parties are banned and a socialist was sentenced to 15 years on the same day Yabloko was struck from the ballot.

What is exposed is the fraudulence of the entire narrative through which this war has been presented to the populations of the world.

The claim that elections are impossible in wartime is refuted by the history of the imperialist powers now arming Ukraine. The United States held a presidential election in November 1864, in the fourth year of the Civil War, in which Abraham Lincoln faced a Democratic platform demanding an immediate armistice, and Britain removed Herbert Asquith in 1916 and Neville Chamberlain in 1940 in the midst of two world wars.

On Monday, the European powers marked what they call the 35th anniversary of Ukrainian independence. But what they were celebrating was a bureaucratic maneuver. On August 24, 1991, three days after the collapse of the coup in Moscow, the Communist-majority Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR voted 346 to 1 to declare independence, in a session chaired by Leonid Kravchuk, weeks earlier the Ukrainian Communist Party's secretary for ideology. Five months before, 70.5 percent of Ukrainian voters had endorsed preserving the USSR as a renewed federation. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was carried out over the heads of the population by the bureaucracy that had ruled it and was preparing to convert itself into a capitalist ruling class.

The European leaders who gathered in Kiev on Monday to celebrate this event reiterated the lie that Ukraine, a country under martial law, is fighting for “democracy.” European Council President António Costa said that the integration of Ukraine into the European political and military establishment was the means to secure “democratic stability” for the Ukrainian people.

The five-year term for which Zelensky was elected ended in May 2024. Parliamentary elections due in October 2023 and the presidential election due in 2024 were not held. Martial law, introduced after the Russian invasion in February 2022, has been repeatedly extended and legally bars elections.

The press has also been sharply restricted. At the outset of the invasion, the main television channels were consolidated into a single round-the-clock state news broadcast, the “United News” telethon, carried simultaneously on every national channel.

Freedom House reports that under a 2022 presidential decree, Ukraine's main news channels broadcast only government-approved content. The *World Socialist Web Site* has been banned in Ukraine since June 6, 2024, six weeks after the arrest of Bogdan Syrotiuk, a 27-year-old socialist and leading member of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists, a Trotskyist organization affiliated with the International Committee of the Fourth International. The SBU seized him on April 25, 2024, on a charge of high treason under martial law.

By November 2024, authorities had opened 8,894 criminal proceedings for "collaboration activities" and another 1,388 for assisting an aggressor state. Human Rights Watch examined nearly 2,000 collaboration verdicts and found a conviction rate above 99 percent.

The sentencing of Bogdan Syrotiuk on August 10 exposes the political purpose to which these laws can be put. He was convicted of high treason for his opposition to the war and sentenced to 15 years in prison. No evidence of espionage, sabotage or collaboration with Russian agencies was produced. The case was built around his political writings for the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The verdict attacked his "non-recognition of Ukraine's legitimately elected political leadership and democratic processes," "negative assessments of Ukraine's Armed Forces," "comparisons with fascists and Nazis" and "reinterpretation of national heroes and historical figures." It explicitly identified his "Trotskyism" and communist views as part of the alleged threat.

A socialist has thus been sentenced to 15 years for rejecting Ukraine's supposed "democratic processes," while the president declares that subjecting the government to an election could destroy the state.

The conflict inside the state apparatus is a symptom of the crisis produced by four and a half years of slaughter and forced mobilization. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) estimates that Ukraine has suffered 500,000 to 600,000 casualties, including 140,000 dead, and Russia 1.2 million casualties, including 325,000 dead. In January, Fedorov, then defense minister, told parliament that roughly 200,000 soldiers were absent without leave and some 2 million people were wanted for evading mobilization.

Bogdan gave socialist expression to the opposition to the war. He opposed the Russian invasion but rejected the claim that Ukrainian workers should subordinate themselves to NATO and the Zelensky government. He called for the unity of Ukrainian and Russian workers against both capitalist governments and exposed the state glorification of Stepan Bandera and other leaders of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) who collaborated with Nazi Germany.

The repression is intensifying as the European powers turn the war ever more openly into a European imperialist war against Russia.

On Monday, British Prime Minister Andy Burnham traveled to Kiev, together with Costa, for a meeting of the "Coalition of the Willing." The coalition pledged increased military aid and continued preparations for a multinational military force in Ukraine.

Britain authorized the arms maker MBDA to release classified

data on the British-made components of the Anglo-French cruise missile Storm Shadow, so that Ukraine can assemble it. The European Union announced another €6.1 billion for Ukrainian weapons purchases.

Germany is at the center of this escalation. German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul visited Kiev on Saturday, calling Germany "Ukraine's strongest bilateral donor."

Zelensky's warning against elections and Bogdan's imprisonment have the same source. Escalation abroad requires repression at home. A government confronting mass draft evasion, desertion and growing demands for negotiations cannot permit an independent political movement of the working class against the war.

The war and the repression that sustains it have a common origin in the event the European powers celebrated in Kiev on Monday. The bureaucracy that declared independence on August 24, 1991 proceeded to liquidate the Soviet Union outright. Kravchuk became the first president of capitalist Ukraine and joined Boris Yeltsin, president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, and Belarusian parliamentary Chairman Stanislav Shushkevich in formally dissolving the USSR that December.

The result was rival capitalist oligarchies. In Ukraine, the oligarchy tied itself to US and European imperialism and rehabilitated the traditions of extreme Ukrainian nationalism. In Russia, capitalist restoration produced the oligarchic regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin and its Great Russian nationalism. Putin's reactionary invasion has divided Russian and Ukrainian workers and handed NATO the pretext for an enormous military buildup.

Bogdan represents the opposite perspective: the international unity of workers against both nationalist regimes and against the imperialist powers escalating the war.

His imprisonment and Zelensky's declaration on elections expose the fraud of the "war for democracy." Democratic rights cannot be defended through the continuation of a war that requires their increasingly violent suppression. The fight to free Bogdan is inseparable from building an international socialist movement of the working class against the war.



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