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Of War and Revolution: Ukraine

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“The main enemy is at home!” The slogan is the title of a pamphlet of 1915 by Karl Liebknecht, written to condemn German imperialism. Italy’s engagement in WWI on the side of the side of Britain, France and Russia, its abandonment of the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria, is the context of the tract, and against the nationalism that fed war, Liebknecht calls for international working class struggle against all of the instigators of capitalist imperialism.

To then interpret this text, today, in the context of Russia’s war on Ukraine, as a call to oppose the armed resistance of Ukrainians against the invasion, verges on the foolish, or the grotesque.

To say that “the ongoing war is not a regional war – a particularly fascinating variation on the clash between David and Goliath –, but on the contrary the theatre of a new and much broader confrontation between NATO and the Eastern Block” (Lundi Matin #354, 27/06/2022) is to be blinded by the abstract altitudes of geopolitics. No local or regional struggle, conflict, war – today, more than ever – can remain isolated. There is none that will not tempt the ambitious of rapacious States from endeavouring to influence events, indirectly or directly. This does not however reduce these struggles to mere proxy wars of larger State interests. These latter may of course shape, even determine, outcomes – very often, tragically –, but even in such instances, they cannot even begin to capture all of the desires, hopes, actions, forms of resistance and struggle, of those who directly participate in events.

How many revolts, insurrections, wars of “national liberation”, and so on, expressed passions of freedom, only to be subsequently captured by State forms of control? Should they then all have been dismissed and/or decried? Were the struggles of so many wrong, merely delusional, vain? Only ideological purity can answer this last pair of questions positively. This is however the purity of “beautiful souls”, souls so full of moral grace that they are not of this world.

changes in Belarus are rather based on the ideas of expanding individual and collective freedoms in the economy and politics, than on nationalist myths.

4. It is also important to prepare for war on the territory of the European Union by developing knowledge and skills that increase the autonomy of individuals and collectives during emergencies.

— The Group of Belarusian Anarchists in Warsaw

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We stand in solidarity with such actions and initiatives and believe that the contribution to the victory of Ukraine is likely a contribution to our victory over the Lukashenka's regime.

Key political struggle areas in the context of war

In the context of the war, the main task is the comprehensive support of the Ukrainian people. In addition, some specific goals are important for us as part of the Belarusian diaspora in Poland:

1. Under the massive resistance and unrest of the peoples of Russia and Belarus and with the growth of economic losses, the Kremlin can stop the invasion. Therefore, it is important to support the anti-war resistance and anarchist movements in these countries. It is also necessary to direct efforts to ensure that the Belarusian army does not enter the war at all or for as long as possible. This requires active campaigning among people of military age and assistance in leaving the country for those who do not want to participate in the war on the side of the aggressor.
2. We also see sense in criticizing nationalisms that cause the growth of xenophobia throughout the region. Awareness-raising campaigns are needed to explain the difference between society and the State, especially in the conditions of autocracies and regimes with increasing elements of fascism.
3. Among our diaspora, we observe uncritical support for the Belarusian battalions, so it is important to widely spread anarchist ideas as opposed to the right-wing currents that are raising their heads. This is important so that future political

To argue "that today, when we have been living, for a long time, in the era of globalisation, any form of defence of the borders of the fatherland, any war, any "resistance", of an inter-classist nature, under the direct control of political and economic national and transnational power, is absolutely dubious" (Lundi Matin #354, 27/06/2022), is to pretend to read events with a clarity that is not possible. That such wars are problematic for all kinds of reasons, no one would deny. The Ukrainian government is by no means angelic and war is inevitably a stage for human barbarism.

But to affirm that all wars, even wars of "resistance", are "absolutely dubious" in an age of globalisation is a sweeping condemnation that can find no justification on the ground.

Rosa Luxemburg made a very similar argument in her criticism of the collapse of German Social Democracy before its embracing of German patriotism during WWI. Though she spoke not of globalisation, but of "imperialism", the conclusion was identical. "In the present imperialistic milieu there can be no wars of national self-defence. Every socialist policy that depends upon this determining historic milieu, that is willing to fix its policies in the world whirlpool from the point of view of a single nation, is built upon a foundation of sand." (The Junius Pamphlet: The Crisis in the German Social Democracy, 1915)

Lenin's criticism of the The Junius Pamphlet is germane here, not only in reference to Luxemburg's pamphlet, but also in relation to some "Left" inspired criticism of support for the Ukrainian armed resistance against the Russian invasion, including anarchist:

"Junius is quite right in emphasising the decisive influence of the "imperialist background" of the present war, when he says that behind Serbia there is Russia, "behind Serbian nationalism there is Russian imperialism"; that even if a country like Holland took part in the present war, she too would be waging an imperialist war, because, firstly, Holland would be defending her colonies, and, secondly, she would be an ally of one of the imperialist coalitions. This is indisputable in relation to the present war. And when Junius

lays particular emphasis on what to him is the most important point: the struggle against the “phantom of national war, which at present dominates Social-Democratic policy”, we cannot but agree that his reasoning is correct and quite appropriate.

But it would be a mistake to exaggerate this truth; to depart from the Marxian rule to be concrete; to apply the appraisal of the present war to all wars that are possible under imperialism; to lose sight of the national movements against imperialism. The only argument that can be used in defence of the thesis: “there can be no more national wars” is that the world has been divided up among a handful of “Great” imperialist powers, and, therefore, every war, even if it starts as a national war, is transformed into an imperialist war and affects the interests of one of the imperialist Powers or coalitions (p. 81 of Junius’ pamphlet).

The fallacy of this argument is obvious. Of course, the fundamental proposition of Marxian dialectics is that all boundaries in nature and society are conventional and mobile, that there is not a single phenomenon which cannot under certain conditions be transformed into its opposite. A national war can be transformed into an imperialist war, and vice versa. For example, the wars of the Great French Revolution started as national wars and were such. They were revolutionary wars because they were waged in defence of the Great Revolution against a coalition of counter-revolutionary monarchies. But after Napoleon had created the French Empire by subjugating a number of large, virile, long established national states of Europe, the French national wars became imperialist wars, which in their turn engendered wars for national liberation against Napoleon’s imperialism.

Only a sophist would deny that there is a difference between imperialist war and national war on the grounds that one can be transformed into the other. More than once, even in the history of Greek philosophy, dialectics have served as a bridge to sophistry. We, however, remain dialecticians and combat sophistry, not by a sweeping denial of the possibility of transformation in general, but

Belarus and the war in Ukraine

Despite the “anti-Nazi” rhetoric of the Belarusian regime, the state is developing increasingly fascist features:

- the cult of crude force and the transformation of physical violence into the only pillar of statehood, an overarching discourse about the external enemy;
- militarization of state institutions: security forces are in key positions, for example, in the Security Council that is created to take the power in case Lukashenka dies;
- regular military exercises accompanied by aggressive rhetoric, purchase of new weapons, increase in the army size;
- merging of big capital and the state;
- a discourse about the fusion of the state and society, where the latter is impossible without the former;
- state control over the cultural and media sphere.

Given the nature of the regime and Lukashenka’s dependence on the Kremlin, his support for Russian aggression looks natural.

At the same time, anti-war sentiments are strong in Belarusian society. Even given the power of the repressive apparatus, people have launched widespread activity: sabotage on the railway, publication of intelligence and de-anonymization of the military, protests on the referendum day, and numerous symbolic actions with posters, leaflets, and graffiti. Many Belarusians have become volunteers in the Ukrainian army. Belarusian diasporas have actively joined the international volunteer support network of the Ukrainian people.

By participating in this war, anarchists are resisting the imperialist invasion and related war crimes and manifestations of genocide. That is, the most disgusting and violent forms of power.

We understand that joining state structures is a departure from the anarchist tradition, but we support the decision of our comrades. This is the only possible way at this stage to offer armed resistance to the invasion and advance in achieving the strategic goals of anarchism in the region. Whenever possible, we help such fighters and encourage others to do so. We also support other, non-military, ways of resisting Russian aggression.

If the anarchists decided to act as an autonomous armed unit on the territory of Ukraine, they would simply be destroyed. Especially at the beginning of the war, when there were many raiding forces operating in the cities, there were frequent cases of friendly fire from the Ukrainian army. An unregistered group under an unknown symbol would definitely fall into this trap. Moreover, at the time of the outbreak of the war, the anarchists did not have the necessary skills, material support, and weapons to form an autonomous force.

Participation in military operations allows you to master the necessary resources and skills for future organizing, and participation in national resistance gives additional influence to anarchists to promote the interests of the oppressed strata of society and resist negative trends.

An alternative tactic could be flight and we support those who used it. At the same time, many men, the poor, or people that can't leave behind sick relatives or animals are deprived of such a privilege. For them not to resist means to live under occupation. For political activists and especially anarchists, occupation means guaranteed prison or death.

In addition, we, as refugees from Belarus, consider a flight to be the worst option, not the best. War is not a natural disaster from which one can only escape. So if there is an opportunity to continue to resist, it is better to do it where you are.

by concretely analysing a given phenomenon in the circumstances that surround it and in its development.

It is highly improbable that this imperialist war of 1914–16 will be transformed into a national war, because the class that represents progress is the proletariat, which, objectively, is striving to transform this war into civil war against the bourgeoisie; and also because the strength of both coalitions is almost equally balanced, while international finance capital has everywhere created a reactionary bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that such a transformation is impossible: if the European proletariat were to remain impotent for another twenty years; if the present war were to end in victories similar to those achieved by Napoleon, in the subjugation of a number of virile national states; if imperialism outside of Europe (primarily American and Japanese) were to remain in power for another twenty years without a transition to socialism, say, as a result of a Japanese-American war, then a great national war in Europe would be possible. This means that Europe would be thrown back for several decades. This is improbable. But it is not impossible, for to picture world history as advancing smoothly and steadily without sometimes taking gigantic strides backward is undialectical, unscientific and theoretically wrong.

Further, national wars waged by colonial, and semi-colonial countries are not only possible but inevitable in the epoch of imperialism. The colonies and semi-colonies (China, Turkey, Persia) have a population of nearly one billion, i.e., more than half the population of the earth. In these countries the movements for national liberation are either very strong already or are growing and maturing. Every war is a continuation of politics by other means. The national liberation politics of the colonies will inevitably be continued by national wars of the colonies against imperialism. Such wars may lead to an imperialist war between the present "Great" imperialist Powers or they may not; that depends on many circumstances.

For example: England and France were engaged in a seven years war for colonies, i.e., they waged an imperialist war (which is as possible on the basis of slavery, or of primitive capitalism, as on the basis of highly developed modern capitalism). France was defeated and lost part of her colonies. Several years later the North American States started a war for national liberation against England alone. Out of enmity towards England, i.e., in conformity with their own imperialist interests, France and Spain, which still held parts of what are now the United States, concluded friendly treaties with the states that had risen against England. The French forces together with the American defeated the English. Here we have a war for national liberation in which imperialist rivalry is a contributory element of no great importance, which is the opposite of what we have in the war of 1914–16 (in which the national element in the Austro-Serbian war is of no great importance compared with the all determining imperialist rivalry). This shows how absurd it would be to employ the term imperialism in a stereotyped fashion by deducing from it that national wars are “impossible.” A war for national liberation waged, for example, by an alliance of Persia, India and China against certain imperialist Powers is quite possible and probable, for it follows logically from the national liberation movements now going on in those countries. Whether such a war will be transformed into an imperialist war among the present imperialist Powers will depend on a great many concrete circumstances, and it would be ridiculous to guarantee that these circumstances will arise.

Thirdly, national wars must not be regarded as impossible in the epoch of imperialism even in Europe. The “epoch of imperialism” made the present war an imperialist war; it inevitably engenders (until the advent of socialism) new imperialist war; it transformed the policies of the present Great Powers into thoroughly imperialist policies. But this “epoch” by no means precludes the possibility of national wars, waged, for example, by small (let us assume, annexed or nationally oppressed) states against the im-

2. If it doesn't escalate, we will witness a new Iron Curtain. Authoritarianism in our region will strengthen for decades, and the peoples of Belarus, Russia, and the occupied part of Ukraine will be doomed to poverty and police terror. We have lived in Belarus and know what a dictatorship is, what a mass violent suppression of discontent is. We do not wish such a fate on anyone and support those who resist it.

On the contrary, what will happen if Ukraine wins? Then Putin's regime will be seriously shaken and will pull the authoritarian regimes of neighboring countries down with it. This will open up opportunities for the expansion of political freedoms, and the emergence of new economic forms and ways of political participation. The strengthening of society and the weakening of the state will become a real chance for anti-statist transformations in the region.

Thus, we do not support pragmatic “lesser evil” tactics or any other form of realpolitik. We profess a values policy. In this case, we put the value of life and the physical safety of people at the forefront. This choice leads us to support Ukraine. We cannot accept tens of thousands of dead and millions of crippled lives if Russia wins. We know that this victory will reinforce dictatorships in our region and perpetuate for decades the terror that the people of Belarus and Russia suffer daily. Therefore, we want Russia's defeat and Ukraine's victory.

Participation of anarchists in the war

From the first days of the full-scale invasion, anarchists have been involved in the resistance. Some of the comrades formed international mutual assistance initiatives for the material support of anti-authoritarian fighters and civilians affected by the war. The other part operates within Territorial Defense and other units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

needs a powerful ally to be a sad reality of the global inequality system.

We are aware of the economic and military interests of Western elites in our region and unequivocally oppose the expansion of NATO to the east. In other places, NATO acts by military force, but in our region in recent decades, Western countries have been using the method of so-called “soft power”. Russia also uses this strategy, putting neighboring countries in economic dependence and exporting its culture here. But the Kremlin’s main method in the region is brute police and military force. We cannot equate these approaches. In the case of the “soft power” of NATO countries, we remain fooled and impoverished, in the case of the Kremlin’s “brute force”, we find ourselves beaten and thrown into prison or killed by rocket attacks.

In general, we have no illusions about NATO imperialism, but in our region, the main enemy here and now is Russian imperialism.

As anarchists from Belarus, we look at the Russian government as a regional “gendarme of revolutions”. The defeat of the 2020 uprising in our country is largely due to Putin’s support for the Lukashenka’s regime. We see a similar story in Kazakhstan. In such uprisings, the Kremlin sees exclusively the intrigues of the West and does not believe that they can be organized by society in its own interests. In the event of Russia’s military defeat, we hope that Putin’s power will waver and the main pillar of authoritarianism in the region will be destroyed. Why we support Ukraine

What will happen if Ukraine loses? Firstly, Ukraine will not lose. But if something like this happens, the main result will be the genocide of Ukrainian society. In addition, we see two scenarios:

1. The Kremlin’s victory may mean further aggression against Poland and the Baltic states, and possibly the outbreak of a world war and a nuclear clash. If Western countries do not support Ukraine sufficiently, Putin will see this as a weakness, see the success of his strategy, and want to move on.

perialist Powers, any more than it precludes the possibility of big national movements in Eastern Europe. With regard to Austria, for example, Junius shows sound judgment in taking into account not only the “economic,” but also the peculiar political situation, in noting Austria’s “inherent lack of vitality” and admitting that “the Hapsburg monarchy is not a political organisation of a bourgeois state, but only a loosely knit syndicate of several cliques of social parasites,” that “historically, the liquidation of Austria-Hungary is merely the continuation of the disintegration of Turkey and at the same time a demand of the historical process of development.” The situation is no better in certain Balkan states and in Russia. And in the event of the “Great Powers” becoming extremely exhausted in the present war, or in the event of a victorious revolution in Russia, national wars, even victorious ones, are quite possible. On the one hand, intervention by the imperialist powers is not possible under all circumstances. On the other hand, when people argue haphazardly that a war waged by a small state against a giant state is hopeless, we must say that a hopeless war is war nevertheless, and, moreover, certain events within the “giant” states—for example, the beginning of a revolution—may transform a “hopeless” war into a very “hopeful” one.

The fact that the postulate that “there can be no more national wars” is obviously fallacious in theory is not the only reason why we have dealt with this fallacy at length. It would be a very deplorable thing, of course, if the “Lefts” began to be careless in their treatment of Marxian theory, considering that the Third International can be established only on the basis of Marxism, unvulgarised Marxism. But this fallacy is also very harmful in a practical political sense; it gives rise to the stupid propaganda for “disarmament,” as if no other war but reactionary wars are possible; it is the cause of the still more stupid and downright reactionary indifference towards national movements. Such indifference becomes chauvinism when members of “Great” European nations, i.e., nations which oppress a mass of small and colonial peoples, declare

with a learned air that “there can be no more national wars!” National wars against the imperialist Powers are not only possible and probable, they are inevitable, they are progressive and revolutionary, although, of course, what is needed for their success is either the combined efforts of an enormous number of the inhabitants of the oppressed countries (hundreds of millions in the example we have taken of India and China), or a particularly favourable combination of circumstances in the international situation (for example, when the intervention of the imperialist Powers is paralysed by exhaustion, by war, by their mutual antagonisms, etc.), or a simultaneous uprising of the proletariat of one of the Great Powers against the bourgeoisie (this latter case stands first in order from the standpoint of what is desirable and advantageous for the victory of the proletariat).” (V. I. Lenin, *The Junius Pamphlet*, 1916)

While Luxemburg’s “revolutionary defeatism” was seemingly categorical (“Is an invasion really the horror of all horrors, before which all class conflict within the country must subside as though spellbound by some supernatural witchcraft?”), defending a principled objection to the war that would have secured the German Social Democratic Party and the German proletariat as “the lighthouse keeper of socialism and of human emancipation”, Lenin’s version of the same was much more nuanced – some might say, opportunistic. (Simon Hannah, “Revolutionary defeatism, yesterday and today”, *Tempest*, 19/05/2022)

And without wishing to linger further on the Marxist debate around war and revolution, anarchists were historically confronted by the very same dilemma. For some, anti-militarism was a categorical imperative – as it remains now – while for others, wars of resistance against domination were an obligation. And if the “theory” seemed to be clear in its opposition, anarchist practice always revealed a more complex political reality.

In the three “great revolutions” of European anarchism – the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Revolution –, anarchists never acted alone. They were always part of broader

that are beyond the control of the Kremlin: Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine before 2022. This tactic was used due to a lack of political strength. With the accumulation of economic resources and the development of the military-industrial complex, Russia has moved to a new tactic of a full-scale aggressive war.

Moreover, the war historically remains a common robbery, and Putin is counting on the seizure of resources and enterprises of the agricultural, energy, and industrial complex of Ukraine. In this sense, the Russian elite is the brainchild of capitalist expansionist logic, equally characteristic of Western political elites.

Imperialism of Russia and NATO

These three points are the initial interest of the Russian government that forms the basis of the war. Its implementation runs up against the imperialist interests of some Western countries. Let us dwell separately on the confrontation between Russia and NATO.

We are aware of the history of bloody conflicts unleashed by NATO countries and do not doubt their criminal intentions today. Moreover, we can see that Western politicians are partially to blame for the war. After all, it was not Putin who came up with the idea of solving issues by force, blackmail, deception, and bribery. In fact, he simply accepts and perpetuates the rules of the game by which politicians around the world operate. Even now we see the continuation of this approach when Western oil and gas companies continue to pump Putin with money, and followers of the “pragmatic” approach suggest that some Ukrainians surrender to occupation. We condemn such a policy based on greed and fear of losing power. At the same time, we hope for the pressure of the European peoples capable of forcing their authorities to provide real military assistance to Ukraine and abandon claims to colonial control over the country. At the same time, we consider the very situation when Ukraine, which opposes Russian imperialism,

to the mass volunteer movement. Moreover, this social cohesion is not the result of military propaganda, but a natural response to an armed invasion, the desire to protect one's life and physical security, as well as political freedoms achieved in previous struggles. In this case, the Ukrainian people dictate the position of the authorities rather than the other way around.

On the causes of the war

The Kremlin sells aggression under the disguise of the fight against Ukrainian Nazism, but this is only an ideological screen. The dominance of the far-right in Ukraine is greatly exaggerated. They had dominated in the streets and were represented in some state bodies, but the overwhelming influence in all state institutions, in the media, and in public opinion has been enjoyed by the liberal democratic forces.

One of the main reasons for the war is the greater number of political freedoms in Ukraine compared to Russia. Ukraine is a regional example of alternative statehood and the successful overthrow of the government. In addition, the ruling elite in Russia understands that when a revolution breaks out in their country and they want to suppress it with armed force, the culturally close Ukraine can become an important military ally of the Russian rebels. Many of our comrades who were forced to flee Russia and Belarus found refuge in Ukraine and viewed it as a place where they could continue the fight against authoritarian regimes in their countries.

The second reason for the aggression is imperialist and revanchist logic. The Russian elite considers all territories that have ever been part of Russia or the USSR to be their own patrimony or a zone where satellite countries should be created. Russia has conducted military operations before, using the tactics of creating "hotbeds" that hinder the development of neighboring countries

fronts of actors who did not share the anarchist vision, but which by itself did not prevent them from engaging militarily. But then this was the failure of the anarchists, some contend; a judgement whose soundness rests only on the clarity of ideology and hindsight.

Anarchists would also participate in the many European armed resistance movements to Nazi occupation during WWII and post-WWII national liberation movements. (Periodico Diagonal, El Salto Diario, Paris-Luttes Info, Libcom.org) Was this too a failure? This is not an apology for armed revolution. The form of destituent politics that we believe lies at the heart of the anarchist tradition fits uncomfortably into virile celebrations of the "taking of power". However, the acceleration and unpredictability of events in moments of generalised revolt render it impossible to morally plan all possible political actions in such circumstances. Against royal absolutism, 20th century fascism, anti-colonialism, and more, anarchists have engaged violently and militarily against oppression, and they have done so rarely alone and therefore rarely masters of the historical stage. Allies would turn against them, newly emergent constituent institutions appropriate their efforts, and they would be banished in turn. Were they mistaken in initiating and/or joining these struggles? We cannot see how such questions can be answered by a confident yes, if no other reason that moments of rebellion are unpredictable, that even State "led" conflicts very often, or always, escape government control, that people feel, think and act beyond the State edicts (The Guardian, 01/07/2022), and that against violent oppression, outside of retreat, what remains as an ethical posture but resistance?

This is not an argument against pacifism; it is rather an argument for an ethics of revolt, for a way of being in the world that while it cannot dictate any specific action in any and all circumstances, is formed by habits of freedom and equality.

Karl Liebknecht's pamphlet of 1915 repeats, like a refrain, the statement: "Learn everything, don't forget anything!" From a dis-

tance, and minimally, it is this that we should take from the the events of war and revolution. And Rosa Luxemburg began her pamphlet with the following words: “The scene has changed fundamentally. The six weeks’ march to Paris has grown into a world drama. Mass slaughter has become the tiresome and monotonous business of the day and the end is no closer. Bourgeois statecraft is held fast in its own vise. The spirits summoned up can no longer be exorcised.” May these spirits be yet unleashed.

*Listen,
whatever you do,
you cannot hide a corpse.*

— Vladimir Mayakovsky, *The Backbone Flute* (1915)

We share a statement by a group of Belarusian anarchists on the war in Ukraine, published by Pramen (01/07/2022)¹

The Position of the Group of Belarusian Anarchists in Warsaw on the War in Ukraine

After February 24, among ourselves and with comrades from different countries, we often discuss the situation Europe found itself in. Why did the war start? How has it changed the political prospects of the region and, in particular, Belarus? How do we feel about NATO? Is it possible, while remaining anarchists, to serve in the state armed forces? Finally, what should we do in the context

¹ Available on lib.edist.ro at <https://edist.ro/warsaw>

of the war, being part of the diaspora in Poland? We have come up with a collective position on these and other issues, which are outlined in the following text.

General perspective on the situation

We think it is a mistake to talk about the conflict as a proxy war between Russia and NATO. At this stage, it is the Ukrainian people’s war against the invasion of Russia. This vision is substantiated by two arguments:

1. The idea of a proxy war implies that the Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian people are only “puppets of the West.” In fact, Ukraine has its agency. Apart from the fact that we, as anarchists, always strive to see the will of the weak and oppressed, this agency has been proven in practice. Today, we know that at the very beginning of the war, Western political leaders were confident of Russia’s imminent success. Therefore, for example, there were no serious arms supplies, and Biden offered Zelensky evacuation. “The Great of the World” decided everything in advance, but the will of the Ukrainian people broke their plans.
2. The active participation of the population is the second component of the “people’s war” concept. On the part of Russia, it is a professional military who are fighting with the passive support of the majority of the population. On the part of Ukraine, the whole society has banded together and is actively participating in the resistance. This is confirmed by many studies and facts: from the rise of donations to funds for the needs of the military and huge queues to join the militia