

# Arguments for a “left agenda” faced with the war in Ukraine

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**“At the start of the invasion, citizens from all walks of life lined up in front of the recruitment centres. Nearly two years later, that is no longer the case. (...) But for people to risk their lives, they must be sure that it is right [...]. We must offer them the opportunity to participate in defining the future of the country.” [1]**

Member of the Ukrainian organization Sotsialnyi Rukh, [2] Oleksandr Kyselov first of all reminds us of an essential characteristic ignored by many left-wing movements: what the massive popular mobilization was in the face of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Faced with the difficulty of maintaining this level of mobilization in the context of a murderous war which continues and of the social attacks from the Zelensky regime, Kyselov then underlines a double question at stake, democratic and social. This is the substance of what he describes as an “agenda for the left” which we must understand, by listening to what the Ukrainian left and the organizations of this society directly affected by this war are expressing.

This has been and remains the orientation of the network created in the spring of 2022, the European Network in Solidarity with Ukraine (ENSU) [3]: its platform expresses support for Ukrainian popular resistance against the Russian invasion, in rejection of all colonialism and on bases independent of all governments. This orientation was distinct from various other anti-war agendas of currents claiming to be on the left, in particular those which put Ukraine and Russia on the same level, as countries where oligarchic capitalism dominated, because their internationalism was blind to the relations of neocolonial and imperial domination of Russia. We criticized the postures that ignored the essential dimension of the national liberation struggle of Ukraine against Russian occupation. Which also led them to ignore or denigrate the key role of Ukraine’s armed and unarmed resistance, considered as a simple “proxy” for the interests of Western powers. They could certainly feel sorry for the fate of the Ukrainian population doomed to being nothing but cannon fodder for a foreign cause (the aims of Western imperialism), a passive victim in whose name they arrogated to themselves the right to decree that they had to stop fighting. Two variants were grafted onto this position: if the existence of Russian imperialism was recognized, the war was denounced as “inter-imperialist”, with the United States and NATO competing with Russia for control of Ukraine. But other currents considered the Russian arguments justified (even if they found the invasion abusive): they then made NATO the cause of a war launched by Russia to protect itself, also taking up the vision of the fall of Ukrainian President Yanukovich, said to be pro-Russian, in 2014, as “a fascist coup”, anti-Russian and supported by NATO [4] for this reason, while obviously sharing support for Russian pacifist feminists. In criticism of this Manifesto, the ENSU feminist workshop contacted Ukrainian women and supported [“The right to resist.” A feminist manifesto](#) [5]. This was the first international action illustrating the left-wing agenda that was defended, for an independent and democratic Ukraine, also expressed by numerous fundraising initiatives and union convoys connecting directly with Ukrainian civil society organizations.

**MAKE VISIBLE THE CAUSES OF THE WAR AND UKRAINIAN RESISTANCE**

Various characteristics of this war explain - without justifying - the dominant tendency on the left to obscure Ukraine and its popular resistance to a Russian imperial invasion. We can put them down to the difficulty of existing "on the left" in Ukraine itself, having to fight on several fronts [6]: dissociating ourselves from the Stalinist past praised by Putin; opposing the invasion and the desire for Great Russian domination while contesting the social attacks of Zelensky's neoliberal regime and its ideological positions, all the more apologetic for the "values" of the West as the country had a vital need for its financial and military aid in the face of Russian power; the fact that the war consolidated NATO and favoured the militarization of budgets.

But we must add to these difficulties an essential ideological and political factor in the positioning on the left on this war: how were "national questions" in general [7], and the Ukrainian question in particular, among Marxists and more broadly within orientations defining themselves as movements of emancipation? Was the defence of Ukrainianness "reactionary" or "petty-bourgeois" in essence? On the eve of the February 2022 invasion, Putin claimed to be Stalin against Lenin, who allegedly "invented" Ukraine - a narrative that Hanna Perekhoda forcefully contests. [8] Ukraine, on the other hand, was undoubtedly for the evolution of Lenin's thinking what Ireland had been for Marx [9] in the rejection of a pseudo-proletarian universalism calling itself Marxist, blind to the relationships of domination and oppression combining with class relationships. The recognition of the right of peoples to self-determination, therefore of the reality of a national liberation struggle, was essential, and remains deeply relevant against the Russian imperial invasion of Ukraine. [10]

The left-wing agenda defended here therefore has an essential task: to verify/demonstrate the reality of Ukrainian popular resistance to the war. Laurent Vogel, member of the Belgian ENSU collective, underlines "how global the resistance is: on the front against the occupier, at the rear for a more equal and democratic society. In a certain number of small businesses, forms of self-management have appeared [...]. For all essential activities such as health, education, transport, the creativity of work groups had to improvise emergency solutions which demonstrated greater efficiency than what was proposed by management". [11]

The fragilities of the popular resistance are real after two years, analyses Oksana Dutchak, member of the editorial board of the Ukrainian journal *Common*. [12] She evokes a feeling of "injustice in relation to the mobilization process, where questions of wealth and/or corruption lead to the mobilization of the majority (but not exclusively) of the popular classes, which goes against the ideal image of the "people's war" in which the whole of society participates. [...] [T]his does not mean that society as a whole has decided to refrain from fighting Russian aggression, quite the contrary: most understand the bleak prospects that would be imposed by an occupation or frozen conflict, which could intensify with [Russia's] renewed efforts. While the majority opposes and may even dislike many of the government's actions (a traditional attitude in Ukraine's political reality for decades), opposition to the Russian invasion and distrust of any possible "peace" agreement with the Russian government (which has violated and continues to violate everything from bilateral agreements to international law and international humanitarian law) are stronger and there is very little chance this will change in the future. However, a socially just view of wartime policies and post-war reconstruction is a prerequisite for channelling individual struggles for survival into a conscious effort of communal and social struggle - against invasion, for socio-economic justice."

## **THE STRUGGLE ON SEVERAL FRONTS, AGAINST ALL CAMPISMS**

It is such a struggle on several fronts that gives our left agenda avenues for social and trade-union action to help the Ukrainian resistance. But it is also with this logic that we must address in a concrete manner the question of the enlargement of the EU to Ukraine and support for the Ukrainian armed struggle, sources of the main differences. [13] This should help to overcome various "campisms" or choice of a "main enemy" leading to supporting the "enemy of my enemy" by

keeping silent about its own reactionary policies. [14]

We are not only confronted with Western, historical imperialism, notably embodied by the United States and NATO. In Eastern Europe, the aggressor or direct threat is Putin's Russian imperialism [15]. The impact of its propaganda on the left or on populations far from Russia lies in its denunciation of the hegemonist pretensions of Western imperialism; this also applies to the other reactionary autocrats at the head of BRICS+. What they actually reject from the West is not the politics of imperialist domination but the Western monopoly on such relations. What they denounce from the West is not everything that obscures the gaps between recognized freedoms and rights (for women, LGBT+, etc. ) and realities, it is these rights themselves..

But we must also challenge an "anti-Russian" campism, apologetic of the West. This is not the logic of the ENSU platform. On the other hand, broad fronts of solidarity with Ukraine can include - and this is important - an "anti-Russian" Ukrainian immigration supporting neoliberal policies like those of Zelensky, and uncritical of the EU and NATO. It is essential to work towards respecting pluralism within these fronts, allowing the autonomy of expression of ENSU and trade-union movements. But we must also push forward the debates within left-wing currents on how to advance an alternative to the practical "solutions" offered to the Ukrainian population to protect themselves from Great-Russian threats.

## **FROM THE EU TO NATO, WHAT EGALITARIAN AND SOLIDARITY-BASED EUROPE?**

The concrete, solidarity-based responses from below to the attacks suffered by Ukrainian society are often supplanted on the left by pseudo-orientations which are reduced to describing the EU and NATO as capitalist and accusing any adhesion of Ukraine to these institutions as "pro" (pro-EU or pro-NATO). However, the same left-wing currents are for the most part in member countries of these institutions, and we do not hear them leading campaigns to leave them anytime soon. Which does not mean that they have given up analysing and fighting them. But how to do it?

Regardless of the war in Ukraine and its effects, the anti-capitalist left has in fact, for decades, been confronted with the necessity of a critical analysis of these institutions, without it being possible or effective to campaign to "leave", independently of a context of crises affecting them.

On the EU side, Brexit is far from having embodied or enabled a convincing left-wing orientation, any more than Tsipras's capitulation to the diktats of the European Commission. We must build a logic of propaganda and struggle within/against/outside the EU [16], with its "transitional" tactical dimensions, to be updated in variable contexts. The EU is facing contradictions, which have become even more acute in the face of the Covid crisis, environmental emergencies and the war in Ukraine: let's analyse them and debate them concretely. Instead of refusing Ukraine's membership, as Jean-Luc Mélenchon dramatically expresses it, we must put forward at the European level the same battles as those waged by the Ukrainian left: for social and environmental justice, for democracy and solidarity in the management of the "commons", and the defeat of any relationship of neocolonial domination.

The popular aspirations expressed in Ukraine, widely shared by European populations, must serve to question the "governance" of the EU, which is ready to expand, with the objective of advancing a progressive alternative across the whole continent. Let us therefore take stock of the neoliberal policies of fiscal and social dumping which accompanied previous enlargements and which are being imposed in Ukraine: are they capable of making possible the defeat of the Russian invasion as well as an efficient and united functioning of the EU? Or are they a source of disunity, widening gaps, and explosive failures?

Victory against the Russian invasion cannot be simply “military”, but it cannot do without weapons. However, these are sorely lacking to protect civilian populations, the country’s infrastructure, and the possibility of exporting through the Black Sea. But peace is only possible if it is just because it is decolonial, respecting the right of peoples to self-determination, and therefore also the aspirations for equality and dignity. This is why the choice of building a union extended to Ukraine and the other candidate countries can be associated with a radical questioning of policies based on market competition and privatization. Priority public funding must go to the extension of public services (national and European, in transport, education, health), particularly on the basis of “enlargement funds”. They demand another “governance” of the Union and an overhaul of the Treaties to make an enlarged and more heterogeneous Union viable. This must also affect the “exit” from the war.

As regards NATO, the European left missed the moment of a campaign for its dissolution when this was on the agenda, in 1991. But it also locks itself into mythical scenarios. It was not against Russia, but to control German unification and the creation of the EU that the United States maintained NATO. It initially found itself without an “enemy” because it was Yeltsin himself who had dismantled the USSR and launched privatizations; and moreover the Russia of Yeltsin, then of Putin in its early days, was one of the “partners” of NATO, it shared the definition of its new enemy, “Islamism”, in the dirty wars waged in Chechnya...

It is the consolidation of a strong Russian state, both internally and externally, with its fear of “colour revolutions” and the “removal” of autocrats, which strained relations with Russia’s neighbouring countries and Western powers in the second half of the 2000s. These tensions did not eliminate the interdependencies between the EU and Russia on the energy, financial and trade levels, or even on the “security” level. At the same time, after the crises in Belarus and Kazakhstan in 2021-2022, Putin hoped to consolidate the Eurasian Union with Ukraine’s participation in trade with the EU, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, he intended to offer the West the services of the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) after the collapse of the United States and NATO in Afghanistan. NATO, led by the US, was therefore “brain dead” and not threatening on the eve of the Russian invasion. The United States and the Western powers expected, like Putin, a rapid fall of Zelensky .

But if the Ukraine of 2014 was polarized in its exchanges and proximity between the EU and Russia, its invasion radically deepened anti-Russian hatred, including in the most Russian-speaking regions, bombed and occupied: the war gave back a “raison d’être” to NATO and the arms industries, and strengthened the weight of the United States in the EU.

However, nothing is stable: as evidenced by the divergent interests on energy issues as with China, the pressure from the NATO general staff to push Ukraine to stop the war and cede some territories, or even the uncertainties of the elections in the United States... The notion of “New Cold War” used by Gilbert Achcar [17] necessitates debate: if it is certain that the war in Ukraine has provoked a new arms race and that it has globalized effects, it is not a world war. The rise of BRICS+ does not coincide with cohesion without conflicts, including between Russia and China: it marks the end of a historic period of Western domination, but without eliminating the economic and financial interdependencies inherited from post-1989. Dependence on the United States and NATO’s weight in Europe will evolve according to future American elections, and they are not seen in the same way in the south of the EU and in the Central and Eastern European countries that are close to Russia.

## **WHAT ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT?**

The EU has become the largest contributor of financial, military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, ahead of the United States. The largest contributions (1 to 1.5 per cent of the country’s GDP) come from the Baltic, Nordic and Central European countries most directly exposed to the Russian threat.

Can we blame them for that? Certainly, this threat is hypocritically exploited to call into question the ecological and social criteria of European policies and increase military budgets. The way of evaluating contributions, the gap between promises and deliveries, as well as the share of defence budgets actually going to Ukraine, are anything but transparent: to counter the profit logic of the arms industries, this is what an anti-war movement in solidarity with the right of peoples to self-determination must tackle, which could defend aid to Ukraine at the same time as general socialized control over the production and use of armaments. [18]

From Ukraine to Palestine, “occupation is a crime” [19]: this is what we can defend along with our Ukrainian comrades . A left-wing movement “For a Decolonial Peace ” must tackle the commodification of weapons in order to control their use by calling into question the logic of profit blind to the recipients, such as Israel or reactionary autocracies. Likewise, we must concretely engage in a campaign to contest nuclear power and denounce all the nuclear blackmail carried out by Putin.

The fact that Ukraine has turned to NATO and the EU to defend its sovereignty does not remove the reality of armed and unarmed popular resistance that must be supported: if Russia withdraws, there will be no more war. If Ukraine does not resist, regardless of the origin of the weapons it uses, there will no longer be an independent Ukraine. And other countries bordering Russia are threatened. The defeat of Russia through the development of popular resistance is a precondition for putting a different kind of European relations on the agenda, a dissolution of all military blocs and the calling into question of any logic of sharing spheres of influence.

What anti-capitalist alternative, what vision of another Europe and another (ecosocialist) world can the left claim to offer if it accepts the Russian invasion and does not help popular resistance?

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## P.S.

International Viewpoint

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8423>

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## Footnotes

[1] [The war in Ukraine: agenda for the left](#)”, Oleksandr Kyselov, Commons, December 12, 2023.

[2] Sotsialnyi Rukh, [“Who are we?”](#) 3 December 2019.

[3] The NPA is a member of this network, in which I have participated from the start

[4] See Daria Saburova, [“Questions on Ukraine \(1\), From the annexation of Crimea to the war in](#)

[Donbass](#)”, *Links*, 8 October 2022; Hanna Perekhoda, [“Thinking about solutions, we must at least not mistake the causes”](#), ESSF, 6 November 2023. See also my articles on the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 on my site, [Désordre mondial](#)].

A feminist manifesto in March 2022 also defended a pacifist posture in the face of the war while ignoring the point of view of Ukrainian feminists: I refused to sign it (Catherine Samary, [“Comments on the ‘Feminist Manifesto Against War’”](#), *International Viewpoint*, 25 March 2022

[5] Published on 7 July 2022 by the Ukrainian review *Commons*

[6] Catherine Samary, “A Ukrainian Left under construction on several fronts”, ESSF, October 15, 2022

[7] Georges Haupt , Michael Löwy , Claudie. Weill, *Les marxistes et la question nationale* L’Harmattan, 1997; Daniel Finn, [“Two centuries of the national question”](#), *Jacobin*, 15 February 2023.

[8] Hanna Perekhoda, “Did Lenin invent Ukraine? Putin and the impasses of the Russian imperial project”, in *L’Invasion de l’Ukraine. Histoires, conflits et résistances populaires*, La Dispute, 2022.

[9] KB Anderson, *Marx aux antipodes. Nations, ethnicité et sociétés non occidentales*, Syllepse , 2015.

[10] [Lenin, [“The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination”](#), 1916; C. Samary , C. Samary, « Le Prisme de l’autodétermination des peuples. L’enjeu ukrainien », dans *L’Invasion de l’Ukraine*, work quoted].

[11] Laurent Vogel, [“Ukraine : le travail et la guerre”](#), Magazine of the European Trade Union Institute n° 28, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 2023.

[12] Oksana Dutchak, [“Ukraine: “Tensions are building... due to the neoliberal policies imposed by the government”](#)”, comments collected by P. Le Tréhondat , Blog Entre les lines entre les mots, 2 March 2024.

[13] See the debates between Gilbert Achcar and Stathis. Kouvélakis on *Contretemps*; Andreu Coll, [“La gauche anticapitaliste et l’Ukraine”](#), *Contretemps*, 1 December 2023; D. Mastracci , [“Should Leftists Support Sending Weapons To Ukraine?”](#), *Passage*, 03/04/23.

[14] Gilbert Achcar [““Their anti-imperialism and ours”](#) *International Viewpoint*, 7 April 2021; Catherine Samary [“What internationalism in the context of the Ukrainian crisis? Eyes wide open against one-eyed ‘campisms’”](#), ESSF January 2016.

[15] ZM Kowalewski , [“La conquête de l’Ukraine et l’histoire de l’impérialisme russe”](#), *Inprecor* , June 2023.

[16] Catherine Samary [“Europe: No “LEXIT” without “Another Europe Possible” - based on struggles in/outside/against the EU](#), CADTM, 23 August 2016.

[17] *The New Cold War*, London, Westbourne Press, 2023.

[18] Pierre Rousset and Mark Johnson [“In this hour of great danger, in solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance, let’s rebuild the international anti-war movement”](#), ESSF 24 March 2022.

[19] [Statement](#) adopted by Sotsialnyi Rukh on 31 January 2024.