

‘DIDN’T WE EXPERIENCE THE SAME?’

The original article was written in Ukrainian

As of the date of writing this text [18 April 2024], russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has entered its third year, despite the original intent to complete the offensive within days or weeks. The ‘mission’, or ‘special military operation’, initially intended to look like an ‘external coup’, a ‘second Budapest of 1956’ or a ‘Prague of 1968’. The imperialist neighbour sought to overthrow the ‘Kyiv regime’ in order to install its puppets and drag the country into a new era of semi-totalitarianism, neo-oligarchisation and control over public life. The aggressor’s scheme envisioned that the people of Ukraine would welcome with flowers the neo-Soviet ‘saviour’ who would rescue them from the temptations of the ‘collective West’ and bring them back into russia’s arms.

However, the ‘special military operation’ (because Ukrainians, in the minds of those in the kremlin, do not deserve the word ‘war’), appropriated by the imagination of pan-russian nationalists, failed due to something that, until then, seemed perhaps unbelievable: the total resurgence of a democratic nation and its political mobilisation. It is not the first time this has happened in world history. Robespierre once said: ‘The most extravagant idea that can be born in the head of a political thinker is to believe that it suffices for people to enter, weapons in hand, among a foreign people and expect to have its laws and constitution embraced. No one loves armed missionaries; the first lesson of nature and prudence is to repulse them as enemies.’¹

Through military mobilisation, sacrifices, internal solidarity, and numerous social movements, Ukraine has once again manifested itself to the world. More dynamically this time than, for example, in a period between 1917 and 1921. But most importantly, it has rediscovered itself. Facing the brutality of a much stronger opponent, Ukraine has countered it with a national-democratic perspective and a new political identity. The one that peacefully (in 1991) or revolutionarily (in 2004 and 2014) defines a renewed social contract and embraces all those who share dreams about their country, trust in state institutions, and a vision of a common future. The kind of identity that developed through ideological confrontations and political actions — such a political nation has already made a mark in its history.

¹ Robespierre, M. (1792) *Discours de Maximilien Robespierre sur la guerre*. Paris: Société des amis de la constitution, p. 18.

Instead, Russian imperialist rhetoric has turned into rage and genocidal intentions. The message of demilitarisation and denazification quickly deteriorated into war crimes and crimes against humanity, deportations of adults and children, torture, and massive attacks on energy infrastructure. The war ultimately developed into a confrontation between two systems: one that sees the world as static and divided, being hierarchical and authoritarian with social changes coming only from above; and the other that perceives the world as integrated, dynamic, and egalitarian, and expects changes to occur through spontaneous political and open evolution.

Of course, the question arises: how should the global community respond to the above? A few years ago, in an attempt to describe the human incapability to predict certain phenomena, Lebanese intellectual Nassim Taleb developed the 'black swan' theory. According to him, this phenomenon has three main features: 'rarity, extreme impact and retrospective (but not prospective) predictability'². The logic of the black swan makes what we do not know much more relevant than what we already know.

In our situation, the black swan was not the Russian attack but Ukraine's resistance. Many people did not expect Ukraine to be so resilient and the struggle to last for a third year instead of three days. Successful counteraction to a stronger enemy is a *rarity*. Our unwavering 'realism' alleged the opposite as well. However, the Ukrainian resistance turned the tide along with the narrative at home and abroad: nearly 50 countries decided to help Ukraine, and the geopolitical map changed. And the war, which those who planned it expected to be local, has become global in scope. In other words, it has had an *extraordinary impact*. Moreover, nowadays, we are trying to comprehend the political and cultural roots of the mentality of the entire nation in order to explain its resistance — this is where the black swan *predictability is retrospective but not prospective*. Unfortunately, we only began to explore this more during the war.

Resisting a much more numerous and powerful enemy is already a glorious legacy in the country's history, and I am sure that many more golden pages about other victories will be written thanks to the ingenuity, heroism and cohesion of the Ukrainian people. Today, we face a remarkably critical moment. The world, in which such a great war is taking place, is changing, and in many respects precisely due to the war. For our part, we have no right to tell Ukraine how to use these new dynamics in the new political and geopolitical environment, where it will certainly be a major player. The political nature of the reborn nation and its reliance on human values secure sufficient protection against undemocratic risks. But this is clearly not enough to ultimately win the battlefield, since, as we know, a large share of the battle is being fought with foreign support, which is not in fact equivalent to the struggle and sacrifices of the Ukrainian people.

² Taleb, N. N. (2008) *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. Harlow, England: Penguin Books, p. 17.

Last but not least, I would like to explain the title of this text. This is a phrase from an article by a Greek columnist who, back in 1877, analysing the history of the Cossacks (!), wrote that ‘the reappearance of the Ukrainian nation on the European political landscape is one of the ethnological imperatives of our time. Didn’t we experience the same?’³ He was referring to the nine-year war of independence of the Greek people against the Ottoman Empire in the early 19th century. These words, surprisingly spoken back then in a country like Greece, are becoming truly prophetic. Perhaps next time, if we look more closely, we might find elements that would make Ukraine’s ‘black swan’ less unpredictable.

At this point, it is difficult and irresponsible to predict how the Russian-Ukrainian war will end. One thing is certain: Ukraine’s position in the world has changed and advanced to a new stage. Because this country is not just making its way back home, it is making the home a better place by reminding us what is worth fighting for. This is this state’s choice, and we shall bring it to fruition.

³ Οικονόμου, Α. (1877) ‘Ρωσική Εθνογραφία’, *Οικονομική Επιθεώρησης*, 51(5), σ.123.