Ukraine's Resistance and the Future of Democracy

Remarks by Carl Gershman at the Estoril Political Forum

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I doubt that there's anyone among us today who's not aware that the world has changed drastically in the past few months as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24 and the unexpectedly fierce Ukrainian resistance. The invasion came at a moment of deep and widespread pessimism about the future of democracy. In an article published in the *Journal of Democracy* just a month before the invasion, Larry Diamond warned that "This is the darkest moment for freedom in half a century," with democracy imperiled by a "global resurgence of authoritarianism" and increased collaboration to advance authoritarian norms and interests. This apprehension peaked on February 4 when Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping signed a Joint Statement that formally established a "no limits" strategic partnership between Russia and China to expand their global influence in what they called - ironically, as it would soon turn out - "a new era…of profound transformation." They had no way of knowing, of course, that the invasion of Ukraine, which Putin delayed launching as a favor to Xi until immediately after conclusion of the Beijing Olympics, would give the idea of a new era a very different meaning than the one they had intended.

And so it did. As Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky told a joint session of the U.S. Congress in March, Russia's aggression unleashed "a terror that Europe has not seen for 80 years." The invasion transformed the geopolitics of Europe. It revitalized the NATO alliance, whose defensive *raison d'etre* had been questioned since the end of the Cold War. It united the United States and its European allies on an agenda of aiding Ukraine, imposing sweeping financial and economic sanctions on Russia, and ending Western dependence on Russian oil and gas. And it impelled Germany to break with almost seven decades of military diffidence and perpetual rapprochement with the Soviet Union - and later with Putin's Russia - by dramatically increasing its defense spending and agreeing to provide Ukraine with heavy weapons and other military equipment. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called the invasion a *Zeitenwende*, a watershed moment that signified the turning of an era.

If the Russian invasion signaled the beginning of a new era of greater vigilance in defending Western security, Ukraine's courageous resistance to the invasion had the effect of reviving democratic morale after an extended period of democratic crisis and seemingly inexorable authoritarian advance. Instead of appeasement and backsliding, which had been the standard response to authoritarian bullying and aggression until now, the Ukrainian people stood up and fought back, with far more courage, resilience, and success than anyone had expected. Just two weeks into the war, Francis Fukuyama boldly, if perhaps a bit prematurely, predicted that Ukraine would win the war, and that "a Russian defeat will make possible a 'new birth of freedom' and get us out of our funk about the declining state of democracy. The spirit of 1989 will live on," he said, "thanks to a bunch of brave Ukrainians." Larry Diamond, who was more cautious but also far more hopeful than he had been earlier, said that if the United States and other democracies provided Ukraine with sufficient support and took certain other steps to strengthen their democracy and security, the present moment "could represent a possible hinge of history" as significant as 1989 and "launch a new wave of democratic progress." And Lucan Way, writing in the *Journal of Democracy*, proclaimed that the invasion and resistance had given the world's democrats renewed unity, purpose, and resolve and "could ultimately strengthen the liberal world order." The renewed hopefulness was such that Alexander Cooley took to the pages of *Foreign Affairs* to warn against a new "irrational exuberance" that overlooked many continuing obstacles to liberal change.

Ukraine's Zelensky quickly emerged as the most powerful and eloquent voice linking Ukraine's struggle for survival to the defense of universal democratic values. "This is not a war of two armies," he said. "This is a war of two worldviews." He has spoken about this war in universal terms, telling the U.S. Congress that "the Ukrainian people are defending not only Ukraine; we are fighting for the values of Europe and the world, sacrificing our lives in the name of the future."

I think that Ralf Dahrendorf would have strongly supported Ukraine's struggle against dictatorship and aggression, and he would have appreciated its universal significance. He was sent by the Nazis to a German concentration camp in Poland when he was just 15 years old for having engaged in anti-Nazi

activities. As a young sociologist, he was torn between scholarly detachment and political engagement, but Dahrensorf eventually resolved that modern sociologists had both the theoretical task of considering "how a modern, open, civilized society should look and what paths lead to it," as well as the moral responsibility "to take part in the processes of transforming reality." I believe that he not only would have strongly supported Ukraine's resistance but would also have understood the relationship between its success on the battlefield, such as it has been until now, and its commitment to democracy and an open society.

An example of this relationship is the importance that Ukraine's military attaches to the principle of subsidiarity, which Dahrendorf considered to be an essential feature of an open society. Subsidiarity means that the central authority should perform only those tasks that cannot be performed at a more local level – essentially, it's decentralization. In the military context, this principle translates into training soldiers to think for themselves so that they can adapt quickly to the situation on the ground. It also involves noncommissioned officers serving as links between commanders and ground forces, as well as something called mission command, where the senior officers set combat goals and then devolve tactical decisions as far down the chain of command as possible.

This principle is established doctrine in Western militaries, and as *The Wall Street Journal* reported recently, eight NATO countries have introduced this principle into Ukraine's military by training 10,000 Ukrainian troops annually since the first phase of the war began in 2014 with Russia's intervention in the Donbas in the aftermath of the Euromaidan uprising and Putin's seizure of Crimea. The frontline battle experience of the Ukrainians, according to the *Journal* report, made them "sponges for NATO training," and the result was that Ukraine's military was transformed over the last eight years from a rigid, top-down, Soviet-styled army, where the troops at the bottom are treated as cannon fodder just taking orders from above, into an agile force that has been able to out-maneuver the Russian aggressors. The Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokhii, whom you will hear from tomorrow, called this transformation "the miracle on the Dneiper" that produced "an army that no one ever knew existed fighting the most feared army in the world and winning."

It's now more than four months into the war, and we need to ask if Ukraine is, in fact, winning, and if it will be able to expel the Russian aggressor over the

longer term. It's widely agreed that Ukraine didn't just win the first three months of the war but that Russia lost it in what Anders Aslund called "one of the most spectacular failures in contemporary military history." A searing briefing on the war in *The Economist* called the invasion "a disaster for Russia's armed forces," which lost 15,000 troops in the first two months of the war, according to British intelligence, as many as were lost in Afghanistan over an entire decade. Describing "just how rotten" the Russian army has been," *The Economist* noted that much of Russia's large defense budget is "squandered or stolen," that senior army officers were kept in the dark about Putin's invasion plans "reflecting a crippling lack of trust," that "disaffected troops…have deserted their vehicles," that "units have tortured, raped and murdered only to be honored by the Kremlin," and that Russia's frustrated generals, "wallowing in corruption" and "unable to foster initiative or learn from their mistakes," have fallen back on the barbaric practice of "flattening cities and terrorizing civilians." This report didn't even mention that twelve of these generals have been killed – an unheard of number - because they didn't, like the Ukrainians, have a noncommissioned officers corps and therefore had to deploy to the frontlines to command their troops. It is this inept and criminal war that led the Russian diplomat Boris Bondarev to resign his post last month, saying that he had never been "so ashamed" of his country, and that Putin's aggressive war "is not only a crime against the Ukrainian people, but also…against the people of Russia."

With the Russians having failed to take Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Mykolaiv, which blocked their path to Odessa, Putin decided to change course in April. He gave the reins of military operations in Ukraine to Aleksandr Dvornikov, A.K.A. the "butcher of Aleppo" who had been involved earlier in razing the Chechen capital of Grozny; and he regrouped his tired and battered forces by concentrating them in the east with the goal of occupying the entire Donbas region. Such a definitive if more limited victory, it was hoped, would reverse the momentum of the war, send the message that Russia had recovered its strength, and break the will of the Ukrainian resistance and its Western backers. But this gambit has also failed.

The New York Times reported last month that senior U.S. officials believe that "The Russian military, beaten down and demoralized after three months of war, is making the same mistakes in its campaign to capture a swath of eastern Ukraine that forced it to abandon its push to take the entire country." Despite having an overwhelming advantage in

artillery that they used to level Severodonetsk and pummel its Ukrainian defenders, the Russians never succeeded after more than two months of fighting of encircling the Ukrainians, and whatever success they've had in pushing them back has cost the Russians dearly. According to former U.S. general and CIA director David Petraeus, Russian losses every day in the Donbas have been greater than the U.S. and all the coalition forces suffered during the worst month of the siege in Iraq. Brookings military specialist Pavel Baev has said that Russian tactical gains may actually "bring strategic defeat closer," a view shared by Petraeus who predicted on CNN recently that Ukraine would launch a counter-offensive after Russia had spent its forces in the Donbas, and that Ukraine would ultimately win the war. In May Putin dismissed Dvornikov amid reports of his excessive drinking and lack of trust among Russian forces, in addition to the ongoing dysfunction in the Kremlin's conduct of the war.

Russia's troubles should in no way deflect from Ukraine's almost unimaginable suffering in this war. It has lost thousands of soldiers, many of them the most devoted of its youth who embodied hope for the country's future. Tens of thousands of civilians have also been killed, and many millions of others have become refugees or been internally displaced. The economy, of course, has also been shattered and is expected to contract this year by almost one-half. This has taken a terrible a toll on Ukaraine's military and society, but its will to resist hasn't flagged. It has a 30-day waiting list of people wanting to enter military service and is actually having trouble training all the new recruits. Meanwhile, Putin has been unable to repair his damaged war machine and didn't use his May 9 so-called victory speech to order a general mobilization to replace heavy personnel losses because he knew that such a move would be deeply unpopular in the major cities. There have been dozens of arson and Molotov cocktail attacks on military induction centers, and Russian milbloggers have documented judicial proceedings against soldiers and officers who have deserted or refused orders to fight.

Such severe morale and manpower problems raise questions about Russia's ability to sustain a war of attrition. Though Ukraine is much smaller and has suffered so badly, it can sustain such a war because it is fighting a whole-of-society struggle for national survival. Its frontline troops are backed up by partisan warriors in occupied areas in the south whose acts of sabotage and assassination include even a seemingly friendly old lady in Izyum who (according to an *Economist* report) killed eight Russian soldiers by feeding them

poisoned pies. Ukraine also has a vibrant civil society that is doing everything from documenting war crimes to coordinating humanitarian assistance. Civil society has even been able to work on the front lines, as in the case of one activist early in the Donbas siege, when many wounded Ukrainian soldiers were dying of blood loss, who got ahold of NATO standard first aid kits, taught medics how to use them, and thereby helped reduce Ukrainian losses.

The war could now be reaching a turning point since the Ukrainians have only just received - and been trained to use - the first of twenty multiple-launch rocket systems that will give them the ability that they haven't had until now to target and destroy the artillery that Russia has amassed in fixed positions. It's expected that Ukraine will launch a major counter-offensive sometime this summer with the goal of reversing the gains that Russia has made in the Donbas and liberating the territories that Russia has occupied in the south. They can win this war, but only if the West remains solidly behind them, providing the military aid they need in sufficient quantity and sustained over time that will enable them to regain the momentum that they had in the conflict's initial phase.

Portugal's role has been exemplary. Prime Minister Costa's visit last month to Irpin, which like Bucha suffered unspeakable atrocities, was an important act of moral and political solidarity. He not only condemned what he called "the barbaric Russian invasion" but pledged continued military and humanitarian support and offered to help in the reconstruction of Ukraine's schools and kindergartens. Speaking with emotion, he declared that "Portugal stands for Ukraine" and that Ukraine's European choice must be greeted "with open arms."

That choice has now been affirmed by the European Union, which last week made Ukraine an official candidate to join the block. While it will take years of negotiations before Ukraine becomes a member state of the EU, this is already a major defeat for Russia, which started the war against Ukraine in 2014 because the Revolution of Dignity decisively signaled Ukraine's determination to become part of Europe. By giving Ukraine candidate status, Europe is now tied to that determination as it never was before, and it has a stake in Ukraine's joining not as a broken country crippled by frozen conflicts in Russian-occupied territories, but as a secure, sovereign, and democratic state.

When I attended a conference in Ukraine shortly after the Euromaidan revolution, I was struck when the Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt called Ukraine "the epicenter of the global struggle for democracy." He didn't elaborate on the point, but I've quoted it many times since and think it's even more relevant today than it was then. Ukraine's vote for independence in December 1991 precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union, which Putin famously called "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century." Putin and the current Russian establishment hope to reverse that catastrophe and restore the Russian Empire, even to expand it, which Putin once suggested is his larger aim when he said that "The borders of Russia never end."

The restoration of the Russian and Soviet empire in the post-colonial era seems like an insane goal, especially now that Russia is not only a shrunken power but is politically isolated, economically in decline, militarily far weaker than had been previously assumed, and facing an existential demographic crisis that has been intensified by the flight since February 24 of hundreds of thousands of young people and middle-class professionals. Yet it remains a danger to its neighbors and international security, using its energy resources for political leverage and nuclear bullying to paralyze opposition to its expansion.

An independent Ukraine has always been the principal obstacle to Russian imperialism. Zbigniew Brzezinski said many times that Russia cannot be an empire without Ukraine, and Putin made clear in his essay last July on "The Historical Unity of Russia and Ukraine" that an independent Ukraine "is comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us," meaning that Russia cannot survive as a country and a civilization if it does not control Ukraine. There is simply no compromise solution to end this war that will last. If Russia is allowed to remain in control of any territories occupied by the invasion, this will defeat the principle that aggression doesn't pay, that might does not make right, and that rules and laws matter. A Russian-controlled grey zone in Ukraine would be a launching pad for future acts of aggression, and not just against Ukraine.

A Russian defeat would also have broad political implications for the future of democracy. It would weaken Russia, which Lilia Shevtsova once called "an advance combat unit of the new global authoritarianism." It would set back, if not cripple, the axis of autocracy between Russia and China. It could possibly set

in motion changes within China itself, where the CCP's performance legitimacy is being eroded by the sharp drop in economic growth, and Xi is coming under criticism in the lead-up to the 20th party congress in November for his "no limits" deal with Putin and harsh isolation procedures of his "zero-COVID" policy. Ukraine's successful resistance could also embolden democrats in other regions, as Anne Applebaum has suggested, and it possibly even reverse the 16-year decline of democracy that has been chartered by Freedom House. Samuel Huntington noted in his famous book on the Third Wave of Democratization that the second wave began in 1943, when the tide of battle in Europe began to change in favor of the Allies. Major wars can have that effect since they shift the political and geopolitical currents in the world that affect the struggle for democracy. This war, as Larry Diamond has said, has the potential to be "a hinge of history."

Aside from Ukraine, no country will be more affected by this war than Russia. At the present time, attitudes toward Russia in Europe are understandably very negative. A new report from the European Council on Foreign Relations, based on a pan-European opinion poll, suggests that the break with Russia is irreversible, according to the report's co-author Ivan Krastev. The pent-up hostility toward Russia in some countries has been vividly expressed by the messages inscribed on munitions provided to Ukraine. Missiles from the Czech Republic. The inscription on the missiles from the Czech Republic reads "For the execution of the Prague Spring of 1968." The Dutch have written "Revenge for MH17" on the shells they've sent. And the Poles have signed ammunition with the bitter rebuke - "For Katyn."

But we have to leave open the possibility that Russia can change and that its traumatic defeat – because this can happen no other way - will lead to a new reckoning with history and the enduring legacy of Russian imperialism, which was made more inhuman when communist totalitarianism separated Russia from its rich cultural, religious, and intellectual traditions that the communists considered the reactionary residue of the country's feudal past. Is it not possible that Russians can come to the realization that stoking the "embers of empire," in the words of Kenya's ambassador to the UN Martin Kimani, will lead to the country's total ruin? Surely Europe and the United States can remember that Russia has produced great writers and heroes like Andrei Sakharov, whose name is enshrined the European Parliament's human rights award, and that dissidents like Alexei Navalny and Vladimir Kara-Murza, whom Putin has poisoned and

imprisoned and who have defined moral courage for a new generation of Russians, can play a role in shaping their country's future?

Such hopeful possibilities, which I know are just possibilities, and the security threat that Russia continues to pose indicate the enormity of the stake that the West has in the outcome of the war. Putin is counting on the resolve of the U.S. and E.U. to weaken in the months ahead as energy prices rise and inflation and food shortages get worse, and Boris Johnson has already warned of "Ukraine fatigue." The danger is real, but given the stakes, and the fact that it is Ukraine, as Zelensky said, that is paying the ultimate price to defend our values and common future, this is a test that the West can and must meet. The alternative, as Johnson correctly said, would be "a disaster."

This nightmare can end. Ukraine can be rebuilt. It must be rebuilt. And Russia, with the example of a democratic Ukraine just across the border, can conceivably become over time a normal country and part of a Europe that is whole and free. This vision can come to pass if we stay the course, and may it show that the suffering and sacrifice of the brave Ukrainian people have served a higher purpose for Ukraine, for Europe, and for the benefit of us all.