

Ukraine's Resistance and Future of Democracy: Lessons Learned

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What the advocates of democracy have learned or should learn from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the latter's resistance, and the larger international response to it?

First of all, Ukrainians have reminded us that democracy and freedom are something you are supposed to fight for, something that requires passion and readiness to sacrifice.

Obviously, this is not a new idea. However, in the last decades, we have got used to seeing the spread of democracy as something more rational, more cerebral, if you wish. Democratization, the spread of democracy could be presented as a rationally designed process, as a set of "reforms" implemented by reasonable people following well-tested models.

However paradoxical this may sound, one might link this to the worldwide decline of democracy, including in the countries where institutions of democracy appeared to have been firmly entrenched. There are many different attempts to explain why that happened but none of them are satisfactory. I may propose an additional explanation: democracy was taken for granted. It was seen as a default system, something you don't need to fight for.

I don't intend to deliver another punch at Francis Fukuyama's much-derided (often, unfairly) idea of the "end of history", but in a way, this vision did contribute to this excessively rationalistic view that from now on, liberal democracy is the only political system that reasonable people may be expected to support. This did not imply that democracy would thrive everywhere, but it was implied, that democracy could only be resisted by atavistic forces of nationalism and religion or held back due to general underdevelopment. One might infer from this that democrats had reason and the power of persuasion on their side, while it were enemies of democracy who were motivated by passions. There was no real need for the passion for democracy: you cannot be passionate about something that is taken for granted.

However, without passion, the spirit of democracy decayed. Democracy was reduced to a set of mechanisms and techniques. It became something boring, and boring is not appreciated in our culture. For people who look for change and innovation, democracy did not have much to offer.

The Ukrainians show passion, and readiness to sacrifice, and this somehow reignited emotional support for the moral foundations of democracy among Europeans and Americans. We don't know how long this will last, and what will the enduring effects of this moment be (if any). But some momentum for the strengthening international solidarity for democracy has been created, and it is not unreasonable to hope that something good will come out of it in the longer term as well.

Secondly, it is important to note that the passion for democracy is combined with the passion of patriotism, or civic nationalism, whatever you call it. There is nothing new about this as well: Historically, democracy has been successful where it is underpinned by patriotic passion, and vice versa, where patriotic passion declines, democracy declines too.

Ukrainians fight for their country, for their country's right to exist, something that Putin denies. But at the same time, this is a fight for democracy, because Ukraine is only viable as a democracy, or it was democracy that made the Ukrainian nation viable. To be sure, it has been a very imperfect democracy, but imperfection is endemic to democracies. Ukrainians do not distinguish between these two, nationhood and democracy. It was similar when Britons had to resist the attacks from the Nazis: they defended the freedom of their island, but they also defended their free institutions, and there is no way to distinguish between these two aims.

Currently, the interrelation between values of liberal democracy and those of civic patriotism happens to be one of the hottest topics in western democracies. This is a complex problem, and there are no simple recipes for how to combine civic patriotism and the ethnocultural diversity of contemporary democracies. But without finding some way to combine these two, further decline of democracy is unavoidable. One cannot have passionate support for democracy without civic patriotism.

Thirdly, there is an issue of interrelation between soft and hard power. Apparently, for the reasons mentioned above, all champions of democracy, but especially those living in the West, overestimated the soft power of democracy. The advantages of democracy appear so obvious that few countries would dare to openly go against democracy as such, even though governments in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian countries will cheat on the rules and try at least to keep some democratic appearances. Somehow, at the end of the day, the obvious attraction of democracy should win people over.

This overestimation worked on both sides of the Atlantic, though it was even stronger in Europe. We remember that fifteen or twenty years ago people referred to Europe (meaning the European Union) as the "normative empire", a qualitatively new kind of polity that somehow believed its soft power to be irresistible, so expected everybody else to willingly transform themselves in its image. These years of European triumphalism and overconfidence are long gone, but there was residual thinking that the soft power radiated from the European norms and institutions would somehow be sufficient for that continent to survive. To be sure, there was an increasing awareness of numerous problems and challenges, but none of the kind that would have to be handled through the old-fashioned hard power. Some people wanted to achieve Europe's "strategic autonomy", whatever that means, but without significant new investments into hard power.

I still believe that democracies have much greater resources in soft power. The democratic way of life is more attractive to many people who live in autocratic and semi-autocratic countries, and this is proven by the fact that they often vote by their feet trying to

relocate to democracies. However, the Ukraine war forced the West to recognize that soft power is not sufficient, it should be adequately backed up by hard power. It was the combination of western hard and soft power that defeated Communism, and this combination is still the only way to success. If democracies do not have enough hard power and political will to defend the values and institutions of themselves and their friends, they also lose credibility, and lack of credibility is something that undermines their soft power as well.

This issue is directly linked to the motives of Russia, or Putin when he decided to do what he is doing in Ukraine. I will say nothing new if I say that starting from the 2008 invasion of Georgia to the invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and now in 2022, Putin was testing the West, checking how much can he get away with, and each time it escalated its actions. Admittedly, this time Putin has miscalculated, and the western response proved more muscular than before. I hope this will be the lesson learned from the story of the 2022 invasion, and this time Russia will be forced to pay a high enough price so that it will have to change its stance. However, it is still too early to say.

But the perception that the West has effectively given up on hard power – at least when confronting a nuclear state like Russia – and its bluff may be easily called is only one thing that may explain Russia's motives. There may be a deeper one, and it is *ressentiment* regarding its own soft power deficit in comparison with western democracies. There have been many publications on Russia's "soft power", and some authors decided that this is a sign of Russia's normalization: relying on the soft rather than hard power is something that people in the West understand as "normal". In truth, however, Russia suffers from an acute deficit of soft power. And the word "suffers" should be understood in a literary meaning here: Russians are traumatized by the understanding that their country is utterly unpopular, especially in its neighborhood, among people with whom she has long historical ties. This was especially painful that Ukrainians, whom Russians see as their closest kin, are not attracted to Russia, and prefer western models instead. What is often described as Russian soft power is in fact its surrogate, a simulation of the soft power: Chris Walker and Jessica Ludwig aptly called these simulations "sharp power".

The main point here concerning the invasion of Ukraine is that Russia's hopeless deficit of soft power breeds resentment, or *ressentiment*, and this *ressentiment* breeds aggression that goes as far as it remains unpunished. This *ressentiment* is caused by the success of western democracies; western soft power stimulates not just a wish to emulate, but destructive rage as well. In this sense, it is true that the West is responsible for its invasion of Ukraine, but not because it expanded NATO closer to its borders: the West provoked Russia by making its model of development more attractive for Ukrainians (and not only them), and Russia is powerless to do anything about it. The West could not help doing that; however, one might argue whether this creates some moral responsibility to protect those inspired by its own example.

To be sure, there are numerous complexities related to the application of hard power by the West. There is something one might call an Iraq syndrome: a near consensus has been shaped that in Iraq, the United States and its allies miscalculated and overshot; therefore, any muscular activism in support of democracy is declared a wrong thing. I also believe that in the case of Iraq, an important mistake was made and at its root was an over-optimistic assumption that democracy is easy, that it is a default kind of a political regime – something I discussed above. This created an expectation that once you help a people to topple a dictator, the people will almost automatically opt for democracy and develop its institutions rather than anything else. This obviously did not happen, and lessons ought to be learned. However, it is one thing to hope for the institutions of democracy that had no record of making a successful effort to democratize, and a very different one – to support a nation that has already made a choice in favor of democratic institutions, even if rather imperfect, and fights at a great sacrifice to defend them. I think these are radically different situations, and policies and attitudes should be different.

One last point I want to make is a somewhat awkward one. The reactions towards the war in Ukraine brought about a relatively high level of unity of the West, and this is a very welcome development indeed (we many want more, but we should appreciate what has happened). However, unfortunately, it also highlighted deep differences between western democracies (“western” in both geographical and cultural sense) on the one hand and almost everybody else – with Japan and South Korea considered exceptions. The mapping of countries who joined sanctions against Russia, or refused to do so, shows this very clearly. Therefore, it is right to say that the war created a more or less united front of western democracies, rather than democracies in general.

What can one make of this? The most obvious and important inference from this is that it undermines the effectiveness of the sanctions regime. But this is the result; the root cause is that outside the geographical or cultural West, few people share a moral consensus of indignation towards the Russian actions in Ukraine. This issue is not easy to address. Apparently, too many nations still see liberal democracy as some kind of western imposition. This view is wrong and more has to be done to confront it, but the reality is what it is. The only thing I can say is that this should strengthen rather than weaken the resolve of western democracies to defend their values; this is the only way to maintain credibility and respect, as well as strengthen chances for liberty everywhere in the world, not to speak countries of Europe that may be next targets of the Russian *ressentiment*.