

The moral foundations of rebuilding Ukraine

Dóra Gyórfy

As the world eagerly awaits the outcome of the Ukrainian counter-offensive, it is imperative to envision what happens after the war. Writing from Hungary it might be counterintuitive what I could add to this discussion – apart from expressing a deep sense of shame and sorrow over the actions of the Hungarian government. Despite its 170-year anti-Russian tradition, Hungary has collaborated with Russia¹ before and during the war, while its political system is steadily growing in resemblance to the Russian regime. While this is an extreme case of democratic decline, the threats of authoritarianism, malign foreign influence and widespread disinformation are far from unique, and other Western countries have proven vulnerable to it including the US and the UK. Blindness to the dangers of Russian imperialism, efforts of appeasement fueled by fear and corruption² contributed to the largest war in Europe since World War II.

Learning the lessons from the pre-2022 period cannot be avoided for the post-war reconstruction of the European security order. In this paper I will argue that thinking about the moral foundations of the West and contrasting it with Russian nihilism must play an essential role during reconstruction.

As argued by Nicolas Tenzer, Putin did not simply attack Ukraine in February 2022 – he attacked the West and everything it represents: freedom, reason, morality, and the very idea of humanity³. Timothy Snyder published a brilliant essay in *Foreign Affairs* explaining the logic behind Russian nihilistic thinking. Nihilism has a centuries-long tradition in Russia, Snyder ties it to the sadistic thinking of KGB operators, and summarizes it as follows: “nothing is true. nothing is worthy of sacrifice, everything is a joke and everyone is for sale. Might makes right, only a fool would believe otherwise, and they should suffer for being fools.”⁴ In admitting this

¹ See European Values Center for Security Policy (2021): *Orban’s Hungary: A Russia and China Proxy Weakening Europe*. Available: https://europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/ORBANS_HUNGARY_A_RUSSIA_AND_CHINA_PROXY_WEAKENING_EUROPE.pdf

² See Belton, Catherine (2020): *Putin’s People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West*. London: Williams Collins.

³ Tenzer, Nicolas (2022): *Russian Mass Crimes in Ukraine: A deliberate political will*. Available: <https://tenzerstrategics.substack.com/p/russian-mass-crimes-in-ukraine-a?s=r>

⁴ Snyder, Timothy (2022): *Ukraine Holds the Future: The War Between Democracy and Nihilism*. *Foreign Affairs*, 101(5): 134

honestly, they insist that the Russian system is superior to the hypocrisy of the West. Since there is no truth, lies are acceptable for power or for any other purpose – in fact, as Snyder argues, deliberate, false propaganda aims “to make grotesque lying seem normal and to wear down the human capacity to make distinctions and check emotions.”⁵ Such thinking is far from limited to Russia. This is the dominant discourse in Hungary⁶, while other Western countries have also proven to be vulnerable due to the shaken belief in the existence of truth. The relativistic idea that all opinions are of the same value, and need to be presented as such reflects the problem.

What are the main tasks?

First, we must recognize and acknowledge the enormity of human suffering that Russian aggression meant for the Ukrainian people. In the nihilist discourse all wars require sacrifices, and all parties commit atrocities. During a war it is impossible for one side taking all the blame, both sides are guilty, and we should not even try to adjudicate. A pragmatic peace is needed based on the distribution of power, and outside forces should not intervene as it just prolongs the war. There is no need to talk about atrocities, which might make peace more difficult. This is in a nutshell what the Hungarian public hears every day about the war in Ukraine. In truth, Russia attacked Ukraine to commit genocide: 13 million people have been displaced, thousands of children were abducted, women raped, men tortured, castrated, and killed. As Nicholas Tenzer argues, apart from the support, which is still inadequate for a decisive victory in the war, Ukrainians experience a tragic emotional and cognitive distance from their Western partners when they see “the marginalization of crime ... in the thinking of democratic leaders.”⁷ Placing these crimes in the center of our understanding of the war requires both the total defeat of Russia and the need to hold perpetrators of these crimes into account via an international tribunal. There is broad Western support for such a special tribunal including France, Germany and 13 other EU member states, the UK, the US, the European Parliament, and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. Providing justice asserts truth and reinforces values thus sending the message that might does not make right.

Second, the reconstruction in Ukraine should be an international effort, and primarily financed by Russia. Already in March, 2023 the World Bank estimated the costs of reconstruction at

⁵ Ibid 136

⁶ See the comparison between presenting Putin and Zelensky in a Hungarian government-affiliated outlet in Political Capital (2023): Disinformation wonderland in the Hungarian government-controlled online media: Origo's articles on Putin and Zelensky. Available: https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article_read=1&article_id=3192

⁷ Tenzer, Nicholas (2023): From Ukraine with Love. <https://tenzerstrategics.substack.com/p/from-ukraine-with-love>

USD 411 billion, 2,6 times of Ukrainian annual GDP⁸. As the war rages on, the costs are rising every day. Nihilist thinking denies any responsibility for these costs. In fact, the Hungarian government already tries to make people believe that European transfers are withheld not because of rule of law issues, but because they will be channeled to Ukraine. There are also voices, which question confiscating private or state property and giving it to another country out of fear of damaging the credibility of private property rights. Russia already accuses the West of hypocrisy at the threat of such moves. Still, it is only just that the aggressor must compensate its victims for loss, damages, and injuries. This was confirmed by a UN General Assembly resolution in November 2022 adopted by 94 votes, 73 abstentions and 14 against⁹. Russia left itself vulnerable by parking its money in the West. USD 300 billion Russian central bank reserves have been frozen. There is a further USD 1000 billion dark Russian money in the Western system under layers of shell companies¹⁰, though only a fraction of this money has been found and frozen. Still, close to USD 400 bn Russian assets are available for the reconstruction of Ukraine. As elaborated by Lawrence Summers, Philip Zelikow and Robert Zoellick¹¹, “bank robbers should not expect banks to honor their safe deposit boxes.” Fears about respecting private property rights are clearly misplaced in this context. If authoritarian countries do not feel it safe anymore to park their funds in the West, less opportunity for strategic corruption is not weakening the West, but rather contributes to restoring its moral foundations and cohesion.

The third issue is Ukrainian integration into NATO and the EU. Nihilistic voices deny the right of Ukraine to choose its alliance, and they argue that the expanding West threatens the security of Russia thus provoking World War III. The prolongation of Swedish NATO accession also indicates the political realities in the alliance – resistance by Turkey supported by Hungary has already caused a year delay. Still, it needs to be recognized that Ukraine is already defending Europe from barbaric Russian terror. It now has the most formidable, battle-tested army in the continent. It receives weapons and training from NATO countries, and it has achieved a significant degree of interoperability. It needs security and the European single market for building up its economy. In the longer term anything short of membership in NATO and EU

⁸ World Bank (2023): Updated Ukraine Recovery and Reconstruction Needs Assessment. Available: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/03/23/updated-ukraine-recovery-and-reconstruction-needs-assessment>

⁹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130587>

¹⁰ Aslund, Anders (2023): Preparing for Ukraine’s reconstruction. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2023/06/16/commentary/world-commentary/ukraine-reconstruction-2/>

¹¹ Lawrence, H., Summers, Philip, Zelikow and Robert, B., Zoellick (2023): The Other Counteroffensive to Save Ukraine." *Foreign Affairs*, 15 June. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/other-counteroffensive-save-ukraine>.

endangers its very existence. A weak Ukraine will continue to provoke Russian aggression, which presents a constant security threat to current EU members.

The fourth issue is conditionality during rebuilding and integration. To entrench a system based on truth and values resistant to nihilism, the rule of law, fight against corruption and the limiting of the state in Ukraine are indispensable. Nihilist thinking generally insists that there should be no conditionality for external aid because sovereignty is somehow compromised. However, while such conditionality might be painful, not having it can lead to tragic consequences already in the medium term. In retrospect Hungary would have been much better off with half the transfers and twice the conditionality it has received from EU – an authoritarian system would have been much more difficult to entrench. Building up a strong institutional system based on the rule of law entrenches the freedom, for which Ukrainians are currently dying on the battlefields.

Weakness on the battlefield or in ideology provokes, rather than appeases the aggressor. By standing up for freedom in face of brutal aggression, Ukraine rejected Russian nihilism, and its fight has already revitalized the West. Affirming truth and values during the reconstruction is necessary not only for Ukraine but ultimately for restoring the Western core itself.