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DEMOCRACY

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RUSSIAN MILITARY AGGRESSION AS A CATALYST FOR DEMOCRACY TRANSFORMATION: GLOBAL AND LOCAL DIMENSIONS

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This article aims to highlight the consequences Russia's invasion of Ukraine may have for democracy in the world. It also addresses the issues of the completely different paradigms of social development in Ukraine, where society has shown striking self-organising abilities to repel the enemy and provide assistance and support to those who have got into deep trouble as a result of aggression, and in Russia, where society has actually supported the aggression, being gripped by feelings of resentment, imperial revanchism, and rejection of the rules of the game in a democratic society.

Introduction

The Russian military aggression against Ukraine did not start in February 2022, but much earlier, in March, 2014, with the occupation of Crimea and the establishment of quasi-republics in the Donbas. Many people have been viewing this aggression as a regional conflict involving two post-Soviet republics; and there have already been quite a few such conflicts across the globe. However, the 2014 developments were also an ideological conflict, an asymmetrical response to the previous developments in Ukraine referred to as the Revolution of Dignity from November 2013 to February of the following year, when the Ukrainian society's protests against the anti-democratic, in some respects autocratic and overtly pro-Russian President Yanukovich's regime, resulted in its collapse.

Both then and now, we are dealing with the unfolding of a conflict between what we might call 'liberal democratic values' with the corresponding rules of the game, and values based on the so-called 'right to use force', when possession of nuclear weapons determines a country's role and influence in the world, while sovereignty, state independence, and a society-backed system of values are irrelevant.

What is behind Russia's Military Aggression in Ukraine?

Since Russia began a new stage in the military aggression against Ukraine, we have repeatedly heard former and current world leaders, well-known experts, recognising the fallacy in the West's previous policy towards both Ukraine and Russia. In particular, the 42nd U.S. President Bill Clinton said that he regretted forcing

Ukraine to give up nuclear weapons¹. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier admitted the failure of the project to create a pan-European home, with the participation of the Russian Federation, and regretted his commitment to the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline².

This may indicate a certain reassessment of views and recognition of mistakes, but should we forget that in 1993 the democratically elected Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation was fired at in Moscow, which happened during the first term of the democratically elected President Yeltsin, and with the open support of the democratic world? Should we forget that Russia has never been punished for the wars it waged against Georgia in 1992 and 2008, or for the barbaric wars against Chechnya in the 1990s?

Aggression against Ukraine was preceded by the Russian leadership's purposeful policy, aimed at restoring Moscow's decisive influence in the former Soviet republics, both during Yeltsin's term of office, and even more so during Putin's presidency. Parts of this hybrid expansion included both the use of 'soft power' – cultural, informational, religious influence, as well as political and economic pressure, and the actual use of force.

It is notable that Putin not only declared that the collapse of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century, but also perceived the events of the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity of late 2013 – early 2014 in Ukraine as a personal defeat. Both Ukrainian revolutions emerged from mass

public protests against the anti-democratic practices of the then political leadership, fully supported by Moscow.

The course of Ukraine's further socio-political development was obvious: despite all the contradictory actions of the political leadership, every year Ukrainian society gave more and more support to the democratic way of government. It is worth mentioning that every presidential and parliamentary election in Ukraine was held in dramatic circumstances, but democratically, based on electoral pluralism and political competition.

The period between the beginning of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine in 2014, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 22, 2022 was no exception. Despite the stress in the society caused by the tragic events of the Revolution of Dignity, and despite Russia's occupation of Crimea, and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, Ukraine held presidential and parliamentary elections in a free and democratic manner in both 2014 and 2019.

The country carried out important reforms and conducted changes, which among others included:

- 1) strengthening the processes of political competition through expansion of parliamentary powers and a return to a parliamentary-presidential republic; this strengthened the dispersion of power, which corresponds to the social psychology of Ukrainians;
- 2) introduction of the electronic declaration system for members of parliament,

1 Clinton Regrets Persuading Ukraine to Give Up Nuclear Weapons, RTE, 4.04.2023, <https://www.rte.ie/news/primetime/2023/0404/1374162-clinton-ukraine/>

2 German President Steinmeier Admits 'Bitter Failure' of Policy on Russia. Financial Times, 28.10.2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/612262dd-b0e4-4136-90ab-8065f5cd563f>

members of local authorities, civil servants, officials, etc., which is a factor that somewhat narrows the space for political corruption;

3) decentralisation of finances and administrative-territorial reform, which stimulates the development of regions, and creates grounds for increased political competition through the diffusion of power;

4) introduction of a proportional representation electoral system, with regional lists and preferential voting (in accordance with the new Electoral Code adopted in 2019) to the parliament; if implemented, this is a tool to stimulate the renewal of political parties and a new quality of political representation;

5) introduction of the public funding of political parties, which reduces their dependence on oligarchic capital;

6) civil service reform, the main idea of which is to incorporate the philosophy of a service-centred state, and the formation of anti-corruption bodies;

7) significant strengthening of civil society organisations and transformation of the value system, and changes in foreign policy priorities towards European values; here the 'law of communicating vessels' also works in society;


8) strengthening of interpersonal and institutional trust, which has been observed since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, and is the basis for the development of social capital;

9) the policy of de-oligarchisation, which failed to be implemented due to the war, but exposed the problem of the 'privatised state' which never used to be mentioned openly,

hiding behind the facade of democracy, but which emasculated those positive institutional changes that were introduced under the pressure of society and international institutions (EU, IMF, World Bank, etc.);

10) creation of a network of anti-corruption bodies, capable of reducing political corruption in the country.

These transformations, although often implemented in a contradictory way, based on sometimes imperfect legislation, and using outdated practices, were in direct conflict with the interests of Russia, which kept considering Ukraine, firstly, as within its sphere of influence, and secondly, as the basis of its national (imperial) myth.



more than 90 per cent of Ukrainians in different regions support democracy as a form of government. This indicates the direct influence of the war unleashed by Russia on society's perception of a particular system of values

It is noteworthy that a significant part of these transformations was implemented under direct pressure from civil society, which was strengthened markedly after the Revolution of Dignity and subsequent developments. Since that time, Ukrainian society as a whole, and civil society as its most active part, have become the most important factors in the country's further development. This proves the strengthening of horizontal ties in society and gradual levelling up of its once traditional regional and socio-cultural divisions, the strengthening of which were among Russia's major expectations.

War and Democratisation

It is obvious that the legal regime of martial law considerably restricts civil rights and freedoms that are traditionally regarded as criteria for a democratic society. This is primarily about freedom of speech, participatory democracy, electoral democracy, and political pluralism. Therefore, the question arises: what kind of democratisation can we talk about at this time, and what are the reasons for this? Therefore, there are sound foundations for optimism, because an unprecedented consolidation of society has been taking place since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The emergence of new, and the strengthening of existing horizontal social ties in Ukrainian society is playing a key role.

However, it should be noted that the consolidation of society occurs not around a particular person or group of people, but around the idea of building a modern, prosperous and comfortable country, the very existence of which is now endangered. It is about the interaction between various social groups, the goal of which is the victory of Ukraine. And this means not only a military victory, which will result in the liberation of the territories captured by the invader, but also the country's successful integration into the European political space, where the main governing criteria are the rule of law and democratic choice.

According to the available data³, more than 90 per cent of Ukrainians in different regions support democracy as a form of government. This indicates the direct influence of the war unleashed by Russia on society's perception of a particular system of values. Starting from February 24, 2022, a significant section

of Ukrainians began to experience not only Russian military occupation, but also the impact of Russian political values.

Despite all the circumstances, Ukraine has a democratically elected state power structure – the Presidency and the Verkhovna Rada, bodies which feel pressure from society every day. Civil society organisations, communities, and expert institutions initiate discussions on the development of the system and the post-war recovery programmes. The issues of determining the key vectors of the country's future will be discussed on the national level, which also indicates that a time of war is not necessarily incompatible with the continuation of democracy.

Among the challenges Ukraine is facing are the following:

- The possible temptation for political elites to continue the current, war-induced level of consolidation of power around the presidency in the future;
- Possible further postponement of fundamental reforms of the court and law enforcement agencies;
- The possibility of controlling authorities putting more pressure on business;
- The temptation to negate some achievements of the decentralisation reform;
- The temptation to continue controlling the information space after the war;
- The inherent weakness of political parties, which amid the actual cessation of political competition during martial law may lead to monopolisation of political activities.

3 Socio-political orientations of Ukrainian citizens (May, 2023). Razumkov Center, 22.06.2023, <https://razumkov.org.ua/en/sociology/press-releases/socio-political-orientations-of-ukrainian-citizens-may-2023>

As in previous periods of the country's development, civil society which has proved its strengths and capabilities will act as a safeguard. Therefore, a window of opportunity for fundamental changes is likely to form in Ukraine, and Ukrainian society can act as the main driving force. Qualitative changes in Ukrainian society during the time of war have come at an extremely high cost: the lives of thousands of people. Understanding the price paid will also have long-term consequences for the country.

Political scientists have metaphorically compared the development trajectory of societies in transit, like that of Ukraine, to the turning of a square wheel (according to Brazilian historian Nelson Werneck Sodré), when a very strong push is needed to make it roll to a new facet. The maidan protests constituted such firm pushes for Ukraine. Now an equally strong impetus has been given by the war, incomparable in strength with the maidans, since it is about the very survival of the country and the people, in principle. In terms of influence on the state, political participation, and maidans (mass, often violent, protest actions) are an unconventional form. Such forms of influence (the 'politics of the streets') are characteristic of immature democracies.

On the other hand, the presence of such protest actions indicates a fairly high level of civil society development. Even unconventional forms of political participation are evidence of certain progress in the development of democratisation processes. Russian military aggression became the trigger that, despite all the tragedy, prompted

qualitative changes in the consciousness of Ukrainians. What used to take decades to happen is now changing within months or even weeks. Ukraine turned out to be much stronger than it seemed. Moreover, the national resilience of Ukrainians, as the war showed, is based, above all, on their ability to self-organise. This is the social capital that is almost impossible to construct through social engineering methods.

Instead of Conclusions

In conclusion, I will present the data provided by one of the leading Ukrainian think-tanks, the Razumkov Centre, regarding the state of democracy in Ukraine⁴. The integral index of democracy in Ukraine improved significantly over the period covered, changing from 4.61 points in 2017 to 3.39 in 2021.

Over the past six years, the assessment by citizens of Ukraine of the level of democracy in the governance of the country has been growing — from 3.8 to 6.2 on a 10-point scale (Razumkov Centre, May, 2023). The average score characterising how democratically our country is governed (on a 10-point scale, where 1 means 'not at all democratic,' 10 means 'absolutely democratic') increased from 3.8 in 2017, to 5.1 in 2020 and to 6.2 in 2023. Two-thirds of the respondents believe that Ukraine is not yet a fully democratic state but is moving towards democracy (the share of such has increased from 54% to 67% compared to 2010)⁵.

As for the global dimension, it is worth noting that, thanks to the clearly determined vector of social development in Ukraine, Russia is no longer considered a factor of stability in the space often

4 Share of those who consider themselves free in Ukraine up to 84% — poll, Razumkov Center, 23.06.2023, <https://razumkov.org.ua/en/comments/share-of-those-who-consider-themselves-free-in-ukraine-up-to-84-poll>

5 Share of those who consider themselves free in Ukraine up to 84% — poll, Razumkov Center, 23.06.2023, <https://razumkov.org.ua/en/comments/share-of-those-who-consider-themselves-free-in-ukraine-up-to-84-poll>

and mistakenly considered post-Soviet. The NATO strategy adopted in June 2022 states that the Russian Federation is “the most significant and direct threat to the security of allies and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area.” At the same time, it should be stressed that the global dimension is primarily focused on the war between the force of law and the law of force, where Ukraine is on the front lines today. Its success will largely influence the shaping of a new global agenda, which, we hope, will be based on the observance of fundamental human rights, guaranteeing the peaceful democratic development of every individual and every country.

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