

Russia-Ukraine War : The Questions of Democracy and Autocracy

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It has already been a year since Putin launched a blitzkrieg against Ukraine in the name of a “special military operation.” In this war, intertwined variables of two different dimensions are at work. The first dimension is Russia’s resistance to NATO’s eastward expansion, namely the dimension of geopolitical competition and security conflict, which was the direct cause of the war. The second dimension concerns the questions of democracy and autocracy. Regarding the latter, it is worth noting a complex historical context, which includes the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact Alliance, the post-communist transition, Russia’s return to autocracy, and the wave of autocratization after the new millennium. The complex interplay among different variables of these two dimensions unfolds not only in terms of the background of the war but also in terms of the possibility and conditions for ending the war. On top of that, the clash between the political realism of great powers and the idealism of equal sovereignty has developed across the two dimensions. Ultimately, this war poses a critical question: how would liberal democracy cope with a powerful dictatorship with nuclear weapons which seeks to limit the sovereignty of its neighboring countries?

A Delayed Tragedy

Last year marked the 100th anniversary of the creation of the Soviet Union, also known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R). At the end of the year 2021, which marked the 30th anniversary of the Soviet Union’s collapse, Putin’s preparations for a war were in full swing, with war propaganda and military deployment. As irony would have it, Russia, Ukraine, and

Belarus played a key role in the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, only to now be at war with each other.

In contrast to the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation, the collapse of the Soviet Union progressed relatively peacefully. Despite the question of diaspora communities across the republics, the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union could be formally recognized by the international community because they agreed to have full respect for the territorial boundaries and sovereignty of each newly independent state. On that basis, the post-soviet independent states, such as Ukraine and Kazakhstan, dismantled their nuclear weapons. In this respect, Putin has been overturning the geopolitical climate across Eurasia which was mostly peaceful over the past three decades. Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 already nullified the 1994 Budapest Memorandum signed to respect the independence, sovereignty, and the existing borders of Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus in exchange for abandoning nuclear weapons. It nullified the 1997 Ukraine–Russia Friendship Treaty as well.

In 2008, by backing the pro-Russian separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia invaded Georgia when Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili implemented pro-Western policies including attempts to attain NATO membership. Similarly, the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war clearly reveals Putin's intention not to respect the territorial integrity or sovereignty of the independent states of the former Soviet Union. In July 2021, in his essay, Putin oversimplified the history of Russia and Ukraine and unilaterally emphasized the historical unity of Russian and Ukrainian people.¹⁾ Stating that Ukraine is merely a political sub-group created by the Bolsheviks, he denied Ukraine's independent statehood, which is a common view shared by the majority of Russians. On June 9th, 2022, at an event commemorating the 350th anniversary of Peter the Great's birth, Putin explicitly reiterated his goal of winning back the lost Russian lands, referring to the Great Northern War led by Peter the Great.

Thus, Putin has clearly shown his intention to restore the former Soviet Union's sphere of influence. In 1968, the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia, one of its allies, by mobilizing other

1) Владимир Путин, "Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев (On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians), <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/articles/66181>.

Warsaw Pact member countries, proclaiming the doctrine of limited sovereignty, also called the Brezhnev Doctrine, to protect the international interests of socialism. By the same token, Russia is now ruthlessly bruising a “brother nation” as it tries to escape from Russia’s sphere of influence. As Timothy Ash points out, Putin dreams of returning to the 1945 Yalta Conference model, which divided spheres of influence among great powers.²⁾ This effectively means denying the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which recognized the equality of sovereign states, respected their territorial integrity and the right to choose alliances, and committed to resolving all disputes by peaceful means.

Autocratization and War

As the war continues, democracy is expected to be promoted in war-torn Ukraine while dictatorship is being strengthened further in aggressor Russia. In fact, before the outbreak of the war, Ukraine was a country that belonged to the category of a transitional “hybrid system” rather than a democracy. Last year Economist’s Democracy Index ranked Ukraine 86th among countries in the world, with a political system comparable to Mexico or Senegal. Corruption and cronyism were serious enough for Ukraine to be called a microcosm of Russia. In addition, due to the Russian diaspora in the eastern provinces and the growing influence of Ukrainian nationalism, it was difficult to achieve national integration. But, despite these problems, Ukraine has followed a very different path from Russia, Belarus, and the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. Despite many twists and turns over the past 30 years, peaceful regime change has continued and six presidents have been elected so far through competitive elections in Ukraine. Compare this with Russia’s “managed” elections and Lukashenko’s 29-year dictatorship in Belarus!

This war against Westernizing Ukraine is a consequence of autocratization that has evolved for nearly two decades in Russia. The history of Russia has been characterized by vicious cycles of autocracy and ‘*Smuta*’ (Time of Troubles). After the collapse of communism, a window of new opportunities was open to Russia for a while, but Russia eventually returned to the tradition of autocracy. Putin’s autocratization has progressed consistently in the name of making Russia a “powerful state,” both domestically and internationally.

2) Timothy Garton Ash, “Putin knows exactly what he wants in eastern Europe – unlike the west,” *Guardian* (February 1, 2022).

Putin's autocratization has been carried out through constitutional and legal procedures, which exemplifies so-called "stealth" autocratization. Putinism is quite different from the dictatorship of 'fear' in the 20th century. Becoming a model for what's known as a "spin" dictator, he uses his popularity to consolidate his power and maintains his democratic appearance by censoring and manipulating the mass media, instead of exercising violent repression. Other dictators, such as Turkish President Erdoğan and Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, follow Putin's suit, and even in Western countries, leaders like Trump are jealous of Putin's strongman leadership. In other words, Putin's autocratization model has been promoted as a model of "illiberal democracy" which would be more legitimate, superior, and effective than that of liberal democracy. Through this war, Putin is co-opting far-right nationalist forces, and militarizing Russian society and economy. He now seems to have turned into a "fear" type dictator, raising the level of domestic repression.³⁾

It is Russian people themselves who are eventually liable for Russia's autocratization. However, the West, including the United States, is not completely free from responsibility when it comes to the question, "Who lost Russia?" In the 1990s, contrary to their own rhetoric, Western democracies did not actually provide substantial support for the development of democracy or a market economy in Russia. The West intentionally ignored serious corruption and fake democracy during the Yeltsin administration, only to prevent Russia from returning to communism. Consequently, the Russian people came to firmly believe that what the West wanted was nothing more than to lead Russia to chaos and debilitation and that Western-style democracy was just fiction or conspiracy to destroy Russia. Indeed, Putin consolidated his power by mobilizing the national sentiments that a strong state is more important than Western-style democracy.

Putin became bold and confident that the West would have no choice but to conform to his aggressive move. As a matter of fact, the West paid more attention not to step over the redline set by Russia when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014. In this regard, this war raises the question

3) Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin Dictators* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2022); "Sergei Guriev Says More...", *Project Syndicate* (February 7, 2023).

of “Who has cooperated with the dictator Putin?” Since the fall of communism, the European countries including Germany took full advantage of new economic opportunities created by post-Cold War globalization, with the hope that economic cooperation with Russia could reduce security challenges as well. The European countries have enjoyed economic benefits from Russia’s energy supplies, conniving or even accommodating massive capital flight by Russia’s oligarchs. Not just the leftists in Europe, such as the German Social Democratic Party, who have long been cooperative with both the former Soviet Union and Russia, but also right-wing populist forces have established friendly relations with Putin. Now, the war clearly shows how dangerous the consequences of cooperation with a nuclear-armed dictatorship can be.

“Bad Peace” vs “Just Victory”?

As the war has turned into a war of attrition, neither Russia nor Ukraine are in a position to first propose negotiations on a ceasefire or a peace talk. Ukraine has now regained about half of the territory lost to Russia since the outbreak of the war. For each party, the priority is still to take back more land most advantageous to its own nation.

The war has led to the opposite results of what Putin originally intended. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Putin will rush to end the war. Rather, Putin lays out new strategic responses, carefully re-examining the war situation. In general, a dictator can endure longer war if he does not face challenges from domestic opposition. Moreover, Western sanctions has not choked off the Russian economy even though Russia is likely to fall into a swamp of another “Afghanistan.” Since his goals like regime change in Ukraine or the occupation of Kiev came to be difficult to achieve anyway, Putin now seems to seek a kind of “compromise peace” while prolonging but not escalating the war. The Russian military has recently launched a focused attack on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure before Ukraine starts its spring offensive. At least, Russia appears to have no intention of giving up the newly annexed Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia.

The Zelensky government, on its part, sets “victory” as its goal of war. The question, however, is “What does ‘Ukraine’s victory’ mean?” Ukraine’s victory would mean either restoring its territory back to the status quo ante bellum (namely, “small win”) or back to the pre-2014

status quo ante (“big win”). If Ukraine ends up with a “small win,” it could not even be called a victory for Ukraine. Zelensky repeatedly confirms that he will continue the war until Ukraine recovers the pre-2014 territorial integrity.

On this note, realists have been insisting from the very start that the Western governments, including the United States, should refrain from further escalation and the Ukrainian government should cede to reality. Henry Kissinger recommended at the Davos Forum in last May that “returning to the status quo ante” should mean that Ukraine give up its territorial sovereignty over eastern Donbas and the Crimea Peninsula, which were seized by Russia in 2014. In addition, The New York Times and other news media outlets also suggested that Ukraine should acknowledge its own limits in reality and that the U.S. government should not stir up the Ukrainian government. Realists, such as John Mearsheimer, argue that not delivering a humiliating defeat to Russia will eventually help stabilize Europe and keep China in check.⁴⁾ Similar to the realists, Noam Chomsky, who has constantly criticized U.S. imperialism, points out that the United States should be liable for provoking the war, and accept Putin’s demands, instead of pursuing Russia’s ultimate defeat, in order for Ukraine not to have further sacrifices.⁵⁾

In contrast, others like George Soros and Francis Fukuyama emphasize that defeating Russia as soon as possible is the only way to prevent World War III and keep liberalism’s civilization safe.⁶⁾ Slavoj Žižek harshly criticizes the logic of left-wing pacifists like Chomsky; he argues that their logic is almost equivalent to the claims of “anti-imperialism pacifists” who recommended not to actively resist the Nazi’s invasion in 1940.⁷⁾ Likewise, Snyder argues that peace is possible only when a resolute victory against tyranny is achieved, reminding of the catastrophe which resulted from the West’s easily abandoning Czechoslovakia invaded by the Nazis in 1938.⁸⁾

4) John Mearsheimer, “Playing with Fire in Ukraine: The Underappreciated Risks of Catastrophic Escalation,” *Foreign Affairs* (August 17, 2022).

5) <https://chomsky.info/interviews/>.

6) Russia Matters, “Debate: Kissinger vs. Soros on Russia’s War in Ukraine,” <https://www.russiamatters.org/node/27728>; Francis Fukuyama, “Putin’s War on the Liberal Order,” *Financial Times*, March 4, 2022.

7) Slavoj Žižek, “The Betrayal of the Left,” *Project-Syndicate*, July 11, 2022.

8) Timothy Snyder, “Ukraine Holds the Future: The War Between Democracy and Nihilism,” *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2022).

Advocates of peace through Ukrainian territorial concessions may also posit the case of post-World War II Germany, which maintained stability after territorial division. But, once accepted, it will be even more difficult for Ukraine to cope with Russia's additional demands after the war; furthermore, it would be harder to expect support from other countries in the future. If the Russian military takes over as far as Odessa and establishes a land corridor leading to Moldova's Transdniestria, Ukraine's access to the Black Sea will be completely cut off. Although this scenario has become difficult to materialize, Russia still can effectively block Ukraine's foreign trade routes. On top of that, if Ukraine were to accept Putin's demand for 'de-militarization,' Ukraine will eventually have no choice but to walk the path of a "failed state."

Zelensky repeatedly claims "just peace" when it comes to recapturing Crimea. With more than 80 percent of Ukrainians opposed to giving up their territory, it is almost impossible for the Zelensky government to accept that it should make concessions to end the war to avoid greater sacrifices. With "regaining the Crimea Peninsula" as its ultimate goal, Ukraine has made remarkable progress in driving Russian troops out of the northeastern front since last September. Nevertheless, it is hardly conceivable for Russia to give up Crimea.

The Camp of Liberal Democracy at the Crossroads

What is at stake now is whether the democratic countries will continue to unite to support Ukraine. So far differences between Western countries have not become serious. But, among European countries, there are critical views on the United States taking the initiative over the European security order; at the same time, there exist pro-Russian factions within each European country, regardless of whether they are left-wing or right-wing. With the prolonged war of attrition, these groups of Europeans will likely demand the war be ended early as the economic loss and pain worsen. Indeed, there exist clear differences of opinion between the countries in Eastern Europe, such as the three Baltic states, Poland, and Finland, and the rest of the European countries. Countries like Italy and Hungary, which were reluctant to support Ukraine, will be more likely to raise their voice against this prolonged war.

Attention should be paid to the fact that this war took place when authoritarian right-wing populism was expanding their influence in advanced democracies. Since the outbreak of the war, the influence of right-wing populism in Europe has weakened somewhat, and the relations between the ruling right-wing parties are not as close as they were. While there's less expressed, sympathy and support for Putin's Russia exist in some European countries, especially with stronger right-wing populist factions, such as Hungary, Serbia, Italy, and France. Within the United States, Trump supporters raise criticism of the Biden administration's so called "conspiracy" and mistakes. Indeed, there are cases that Western right-wing populists and Russia cooperate with each other in disseminating disinformation about the war.

This war has also been perceived by Third World countries as another example of the "hypocrisy" of the West. For those who remember the religious and racial discrimination that the Syrian refugees faced, this war only reaffirms the double standards of the Western countries of White race and Christianity. This makes it difficult for the United States and Britain to turn this war into a confrontation between democracy and autocracy.

In contrast, China and Russia continue to stay strong in a "no limit" strategic partnership though China does not actively respond to Russia's arms support request. And some influential big countries, such as Turkey, India, Brazil, and Indonesia, explicitly pursue their practical advantages, not liberal democratic values. The West is in a position to seek help from the "less bad" dictatorships, such as Saudi Arabia and Venezuela. However, it is unlikely that these dictatorships or "illiberal democracies" will come under the Western flags at the expense of their immediate geopolitical and economic gains.

If the camp of liberal democracy is not able to maintain the current level of solidarity, the war is likely to end up being where Putin expected. This will send out very wrong signals to China as well, leading to a vicious cycle of damaging the will and capacity of liberal democracy to restrain the threat of dangerous dictators.

No Exit in Sight

At this point, no country is in a position to dramatically change the situation and open a window for peaceful negotiations. Within the United States, not only among Trump's supporters but also among Democrats, there has been an urge to end this war. But, so far the Biden administration is demonstrating American leadership by actively supporting Ukraine while taking care not to escalate the war. It is unlikely that the Biden administration would take a shift that significantly damages the U.S. leadership. Entering the new year, the West's arms support for Ukraine has been strengthened, but the West's support is to prevent Ukraine from being defeated, not to seek a decisive victory for Ukraine. European leaders, including French President Macron, are still skeptical of inflicting a humiliating defeat on Russia. Putin, on his part, intends to prolong the war, while not switching to total mobilization. A complete retreat of Russia from Crimea seems highly unlikely. In the end, the war of attrition confined to Ukrainian territory continues to increase the already astronomical damages inflicted upon Ukraine.

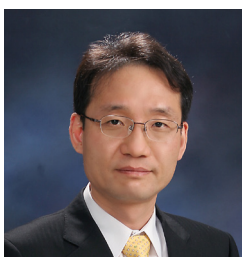
With no plausible path to a "just peace" in sight, a very disappointing deal is likely to evolve at some point. But the US foreign policy establishment is not realistically prepared for such a scenario.⁹⁾ It is extremely hard to fathom now when Ukraine's suffering will come to an end, seeing the country desperate for a "victory of justice" but trapped in a whirlwind of hegemonic competition among great powers. Ukraine's journey toward democracy also will be long and bumpy depending on how this war ends.

9) Stephen Walt, "The Perpetually Irrational Ukraine Debate," *Foreign Policy* (November 29, 2022).

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