

**27-th World Congress of Political Science,
International Political Science association, 15 - 19 July, 2023,
Buenos-Ayres, Argentina**

Galyna Zelenko,
(zgalina@ukr.net),

Institute of North Eurasia Transformation,
Association of Political Science of Ukraine

**Russian military aggression as a catalyst for democracy
transformation: global and local dimensions**

To begin with, 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 formation of quasi-republics in Donbas. A lot of people have been viewing this aggression as a conflict of a regional nature between two post-Soviet republics, and there have already been quite a few of such conflicts across the globe. However, the 2014 developments were more like an ideological conflict and were primarily an asymmetric response to the previous developments in Ukraine called the Revolution of Dignity, when the Ukrainian society's protest against the anti-democratic, in some respects autocratic and overtly pro-Russian Yanukovich regime resulted in its collapse.

Both then and now, we are dealing with an unfolding conflict between what we might call 'liberal democratic values' with the corresponding rules of the game and values based on the so-called 'right of force' when a country's possession of nuclear weapons determines its role and influence in the world, while sovereignty, state independence, society-backed system of values are irrelevant. In my speech, I am going to analyze the consequences it may have for the world democracy. I will also try to answer the questions mentioned in the announcement of this panel discussion. Besides, there are completely different paradigms of social development in Ukraine', where society has shown striking self-organizing

abilities to repel the enemy and provide assistance and support to those who 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, rejection of the rules of the game in a democratic society. This can be easily proved by analyzing both the rhetoric of the Russian political leadership over the past two decades and the data of public opinion polls over that period, but this is not the subject of this discussion.

What is behind Russia's military aggression in Ukraine?

Since Russia began a new stage of military aggression against Ukraine, we have repeatedly heard former and some current world leaders, well-known experts recognizing the fallacy of 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 weapons. German President Frank-Walter Schteinmeier 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 pipeline.

This may indicate a certain reassessment of views and recognition of mistakes, but should we forget that in 1993 the democratically elected Supreme Soviet was shot in Moscow, which happened during the first term of the democratically elected President Yeltsin and with an 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 methods of force.

Notably, 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 his personal defeat.

Both Ukrainian revolutions were based on 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 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 dramatically, but democratically, based on electoral pluralism and political competition.

The period between the beginning of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 22, 2022 was no exception. Despite the stress in society caused by the tragic events of the Revolution of Dignity, Russia's occupation of Crimea, 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 conducted important transformations for the further development of society. They included:

- 1) strengthening of the processes of political competition through expansion of parliamentary powers and a return to the parliamentary-presidential republic; this strengthened the dispersion of power, which corresponds to the Ukrainian mentality;

2) introduction of electronic declaration for people's deputies, deputies of local representative bodies, civil servants, officials, etc., which is a factor that somewhat narrows the space for political corruption;

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

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

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

7) significant strengthening of civil society organizations and transformation of the value system, change of foreign policy priorities towards European values, and 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 deoligarchization, which failed to be implemented due to the war but exposed the problem of the 'privatized state' no one used to mention 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 system of anti-corruption bodies capable of hypothetically reducing political corruption in the country.

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

It is noteworthy that a significant part of these transformations was implemented under direct pressure of civil society, which strengthened a lot after the Revolution of Dignity and subsequent developments.

We can say that since that time Ukrainian society as a whole and civil society as its most active part have become the most important factor in the country's further development. This proves the strengthening of horizontal ties in society and gradual leveling of its once traditional regional and socio-cultural divisions the strengthening of which were among Russia's major expectations.

War and democratization

It is obvious that the legal regime of martial law considerably restricts the civil rights and freedoms that are traditionally regarded as democratic society criteria. It is primarily about freedom of speech, participatory democracy, electoral democracy, and political pluralism. Therefore, the question arises: what kind of democratization can we talk about at this time, and what are reasons for this?

I believe that there is sound reason for optimism.

Because an unprecedented consolidation of society has been taking place since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The process of the emergence of new and the strengthening of existing horizontal social ties in Ukrainian society will interest more than one researcher in different countries of the world.

However, it should be noted that society consolidates 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 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 liberation of the territories captured by the invader, but also the country's successful integration into the European space, where the main criteria are the rule of law and democratic choice.

According to available data, more than 90 percent of Ukrainians in different regions support democracy as a form of government. This indicates a 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 part of Ukrainians began to experience firsthand the "delights" of not only Russian military occupation, but also of the Russian way of life.

Despite all the circumstances, Ukraine has democratically elected state power – the President and the Verkhovna Rada, which feel pressure from society every day.

Civil society organizations, communities, and expert institutions are starting a discussion on the development of post-war recovery programs. The issues of determining the key vectors of the country's future will be discussed on the national level, which also indicates that war is not necessarily incompatible with democracy.

Among the challenges that Ukraine is facing are the following:

- It might be tempting for political elites to continue the current, war-induced level of consolidation of power around the President's institution in future;
- Further postponement of fundamental reforms of the court and law enforcement agencies is possible;
- It might be tempting for the controlling authorities to put pressure on business;
- The temptation to negate some achievements of the decentralization reform;

- The temptation to continue controlling the information space even after the war.

- The weakness of political parties is also a problematic issue, which amid the actual cessation of political competition during martial law can lead to monopolization of political life.

As in previous periods of the country's development, society that has proved its strength and capabilities will act as a safeguard. Therefore, a window of opportunity for fundamental changes is formed in Ukraine, and Ukrainian society acts as the main driving force.

It should also be noted that qualitative changes in Ukrainian society come at an extremely high cost – at the cost of lives of thousands of people. Realizing this price will also have long-term consequences for the country.

Let's return to the scientific sphere. Political scientists metaphorically compare the development trajectory of transit societies, like the Ukrainian one, with a turning of a square wheel (according to Brazilian historian Nelson Werneck Sodr ), when a very strong push is needed to make it roll to a new facet. Maidans were such pushes for Ukraine. Now such an impetus has been given by the war – incomparable in strength with the Maidans, since it is about the survival of the country and the people in principle. In terms of influence on the state, political participation, 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, and even unconventional forms of political participation are evidence of certain progress in the development of democratization processes. Russian military aggression became the trigger that, despite all the tragedy of the situation, prompted qualitative changes in the

consciousness of Ukrainians. What used to take decades 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-organize. This is the social capital that is almost impossible to construct through social engineering methods.

In conclusion, I will present the data provided by one of the most authoritative think-tanks in Ukraine – the Razumkov Center – regarding the state of democracy in Ukraine¹. The integral index of democracy in Ukraine improved significantly, 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 Center, May, 2023). The average score characterizing 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 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)².

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 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 about the war between the force of

¹ <https://razumkov.org.ua/en/comments/share-of-those-who-consider-themselves-free-in-ukraine-up-to-84-poll>

² <https://razumkov.org.ua/en/comments/share-of-those-who-consider-themselves-free-in-ukraine-up-to-84-poll>

law and the law of force, where Ukraine is on the front line 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.