

Ukraine's Universal Struggle Against a Geopolitical Prison

On 8 August 2008, I was on holiday with my wife near the Shatsky lakes in Western Ukraine. My wife was pregnant with our first daughter, Daryna (now we have three, and Daryna is 15); both of us were carefully swimming in the lake waters; she was careful because of her pregnancy; I was gradually recovering from light leg surgery. At that time, four years had passed since Ukraine's Orange Revolution and five years since Georgia's Rose Revolution.

I received a call from my friend Andriy saying that Russia had invaded Georgia. The tanks were just a few dozen kilometers from Tbilisi. I remember my legs going weak as my body reacted to events 2,000 kilometers away because we all knew this directly concerned us. Imperial history had come back in its ugliest forms. I was worried for Georgia, and I knew Ukraine would be next.

In a few days, we watched Nicolas Sarkozy, the then-French President and the President of the EU Council, saying that his mediation achieved “la

fin de guerre” - the end of a war. He could not have been more wrong. August 2008 was not the end, but a beginning. Ukraine and Syria, as places for massive Russian war crimes against civilians, and dozens of other countries suffering from Russian hybrid attacks would come next.

The conditions for this long Russian war of reconquest can be found earlier in 2008 when the NATO summit in Bucharest failed to give Ukraine and Georgia clear membership action plans. Countries that blocked this prospect, mainly Germany and France, misread history. They thought they would stop the next Russian war through appeasement. But by showing their fear of provoking Russia, they, in fact, provoked Russia. They opened the doors for new wars in Europe.

In 2008, many Eastern Europeans said Russia would not stop in Georgia. In 2014, we said it would not stop in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Now, we say it will not stop in Ukraine.



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In 2008, many Eastern Europeans said Russia would not stop in Georgia. In 2014, we said it would not stop in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Now, we say it will not stop in Ukraine. In all these cases, the voices from Eastern Europe and the Caucasus should have been heard. They were not.

Russia justified its acts of aggression by claiming that it was defending itself against NATO expansion. The truth is, however, that NATO enlarged in the 1990s and the 2000s, not because it wanted to attack Russia but because countries in Eastern Europe did not want to be attacked by Russia. NATO was a fortress, not a tank, for them. They were thinking about defense, not offense.

Paradoxically, this gave NATO an anti-imperial dimension. In their histories, Central and Eastern European countries were primarily colonies, not empires. Their 20th-century histories had much more in common with decolonization movements in Africa, Asia, or Latin America than with the colonial history of France, Britain, or Spain. The presence of these nations was making NATO look more like a bloc of nations cooperating against a new possible imperial conquest. Those who criticize (rightly or not) America or Europe for their imperialisms often fail to notice how much the enlargements to Central and Eastern Europe have transformed the West.

In the past decades, the West has been thinking of its imperial past mostly with remorse, while Russia has been thinking of it mostly with nostalgia. While the West is searching for ways of decolonization — and is blamed for hypocrisy for not doing enough — Russia is searching for ways of recolonization. Russia's stance is probably more coherent but also more immoral and cynical. The West can be blamed for not following its own good principles, but Russia should be blamed for following intrinsically bad principles.

NATO's "expansion" was moving to the empty

space—people were welcoming it—while Russia's "enlargement" was happening against the will of those it invades. Therefore, it uses wars, not "accession negotiations," to expand.

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There is another difference. The West is thinking in terms of decreasing risks; Russia is thinking in terms of increasing risks. Russian rulers are good students of Carl Schmitt, a German Nazi philosopher and lawyer. As Schmitt believed, a sovereign is a ruler who is not afraid of increasing risks for himself and his opponents. By increasing risks, he creates the space of uncertainty, the Machiavellian space of *Fortuna* - the unpredictable twists of destiny when you can be a ruler today and a jailed criminal tomorrow. In this world of created uncertainty, a sovereign has to become a Machiavellian *il principe* - a man or a woman who conquers the unpredictability of time, navigates through it and is able to react fast and make unexpected moves. A Schmittian-Putinist sovereign is someone who aspires to win in an unpredictable and risky environment. He seeks power during the accelerated time. He creates storms in the sea.

The West today is different. Its key value is predictability. Its role model is an insurance company. It wants to make life predictable and wants risks to be mitigated. It cherishes a future that will be the same as the present in 30 years - when you are finally ready to pay off your debt. Its institutions are well behind the flow of history. It does not see history as a sea with potential storms but only as a smooth river imprisoned by stone banks.

Facing *il principe*, the West is doomed to fail unless it creates an antidote.

However, there is another element: technology. Today, technologies produce storm after storm.

They accelerate time. They are much faster than institutions. And they are faster than dictators. The West is schizophrenic: its technologies are fast, but its institutions are slow.

The third element is China. China is trying to control technologies. It wants to predict the unpredictable. If the power of a sovereign is to create unpredictable risks for its enemies, then China wants to conquer the unpredictable and take control over it. By predicting the unpredictable for itself and unleashing the unpredictable for others - that is, by being ahead of technological revolutions that will change the lives of others - China wants to rule the world. It hopes to rule the world by ruling time, controlling both the long-term horizon and the short-term technological twists.

Here is the danger: while Russian communism attempted to eradicate natural difference between people, Chinese communism is trying to eliminate natural freedom. It wants to produce the unpredictable for others and control this unpredictable for itself.

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Therefore, the current Russian invasion of Ukraine is a part of a much bigger process. It can possibly end with eradicating freedom and the unpredictability of human will - because dictators are willing to keep the unpredictable only in their hands.

The West is fast in technology but slow in decision-making. It is afraid of taking risks and of producing risks for its enemies. But if you fail to create

risks for your enemies, your enemies will be faster than you, and they will destroy you. Insurance companies will never win against a killer startup.

Technologies are fast, and during war, they become even faster. Technological solutions are like insects: they live a very short life - sometimes three months, sometimes one day. They are remarkably mortal.

Therefore, war technology is a race of speed. You take a field that is fast by itself and try to accelerate it even more. This is the game.

And the problem is that war accelerates time. During a war, time does not wait. Events happen to you before you start to understand what is happening. You are always late.

In this game, the West has to learn how to play fast. Or, rather, it needs to help Ukraine play fast. Ukraine is a player who takes risks and plays fast, but it needs sufficient backup and support.

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If the West does not want to lose the war for freedom to Russia and China, it has to learn again how to be fast and unpredictable for its enemies. It needs to go back to the state of unexpected decisions and risky moves. It needs to show that it is ready to attack - and attack first. It needs to keep its "insurance company" role model for its citizens but engage in a new risky play outside with its enemies. It needs to learn to perform massive cyber-attacks. It needs to make its military production sector flexible and fast and match the Ukrainian needs on the frontline. It needs to use the tools of economic warfare. It should try the moves that can create unpredictable consequenc-

es for the markets - primarily of its enemies.

Last but not least, the West needs to engage in the game of predicting the unpredictable - that is, be dominant in technologies that can unexpectedly disrupt the functioning of the enemies.

But behind this unpredictable tactical play, there should be something bigger. This something bigger is the flow of history, which can express itself in fast moves back and forth in the waves on the sea but for which, finally, these waves are just a surface and where the key question is whether or not the sea will dry up or, on the contrary, be full of water.

The key question, as always, is the question about the future. What will the 21st century look like? Will it be a century of freedom or slavery? A century of decolonization or recolonization?

Which model will the majority of societies on Earth in the 21st century choose? A model in which citizens will be treated as adults who participate in the formation and development of their policies? Or, alternatively, a model in which they will be considered minors who should be ruled by their governors in the same way small children are ruled by their parents-that is, by a mixture of manipulation, punishment, and control-and perhaps a bit of love, too?

The key thing about the Western idea of politics, from Aristotle to John Locke, through even such cynical personalities as Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, was to say that polity is not a family. In other words, polity is an association of subjects who are initially not linked by hierarchical power relations and engage with each other to produce a common thing, *res publica*.

The alternative view - from Western absolutism to religious communities or Chinese Confucianism - claims that the ruler is the father (or mother) of

people and, therefore, should control their will.

The battle today - whether technological or the increasing number of conflicts, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine - is about which model will win: a paternalistic model in which the ruler is the father of kids - millions of kids - who have to be controlled and supervised, or a republican model in which the ruler is the first among equals and aims to develop the capacities of his fellow citizens rather than control them.

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Russia stands for a paternalistic model. Its citizens, however, are not children of their parents but orphans in the orphanage. Citizens are ruled here by the indifference of the system, which can sacrifice them without much remorse because it knows that the more miserable these citizens are, the easier it is to do with them whatever you want.

So, the true question is whether the 21st century will be a century of decolonization or recolonization, whether the demise of Western imperialism will actually lead to less imperialism in the world or be replaced by new power structures from new economic powers (BRICS or others), perhaps more violent than the previous ones. What we see now in the Middle East or Africa confirms the second concern. And this is bad for all of us.

One important element of the liberal order is that it always falls short of what it wants to achieve. Its ideals are so high that they always remain ideals, and the reality is so remote from these ideals that liberalism is blamed for hypocrisy. The idea of liberty for all will always mean that the scope of this particular liberty is too narrow and applied to a limited number of subjects. Therefore, liberalism

is inevitably hypocritical, or idealistic, if you prefer this term.

But what is the alternative? The Russian alternative is “domostroy,” a conservative concept in which the ruler is seen as a father whose authority cannot be denied. In this world, people are only means and not goals in themselves. They are atoms of a big collective body and do not have value on their own. Do we want such a world?

In the Ukrainian tradition, from the 19th century onwards, the word “moskal” meant both a Muscovite - that is, a Russian - and a soldier of the imperial army. To “be turned into a moskal” meant to “be taken, against your will, to the army.” The army service was ten years full of hardships, and most

often, people did not come back, even if they were not killed on the battlefield.

Thus, Muscovy-Russia was perceived not as a state or civil society but as an army and a prison.

The Ukrainian battle today is a battle against the spillover of this geopolitical prison to other nations.

The Ukrainian battle today is a battle against the spillover of this geopolitical prison to other nations. Against turning our future into the future of new slavery. Against turning us all into “moskali” that is slaves without rights and future.

Doesn't it make our fight universal ?