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War in Ukraine

Why Russia's Political Capitalists Went to War - and How the War Could End Their Rule

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Russia's political capitalists waged war in order to survive as a class, to continue accumulating wealth through the exploitation of the state - says Volodymyr Ishchenko, a research associate at the Institute of East European Studies, Freie Universität Berlin. However, this war, depending on what happens on the battlefield, may equally bring about a fall or a radical transformation of the whole post-Soviet order. Interview by MaBgorzata Kulbaczewska-Figat.

By the end of February, [you claimed in one of your articles](#) that the Russian invasion of Ukraine could destabilize Russia's social order. What are your thoughts now, after five months of the war?

I think we see that Russia indeed may go through fundamental changes while trying to win, or at least end this war in a non-humiliating settlement. Also, we realise that the kind of order that existed in post-Soviet Russia and post-Soviet societies, in general, is simply not sustainable in the long term. It requires fundamental changes; otherwise, it may just fall apart.

Post-Soviet politics has been cynical, pragmatic, and non-ideological, without massive movements or mobilization parties, with the patron-client relations dominating the elite. The same model was applied to the relations between the elite and society. The authoritarian regimes relied on depoliticized masses. This may come to an end as a result of this war.

For the Russian ruling clique, this war is an opportunity to push forward the changes in the political regime, economy, society, and ideology.

What comes now is fundamentally different from what they relied on upon in recent years. In politics, the regime becomes more repressive against some groups but at the same time is trying to mobilize active political involvement of other groups in support of the war and the government. They are also consolidating the political elite around the Kremlin.

There is also an economic dimension. At some point, it would be clear that the Russian ruling class cannot rely simply on repressive measures, and they would need to start buying the loyalty of the regular citizens via some redistributionist policies. There are rising voices in support of this in the Russian expert circles.

Besides, the regime would be turning more ideological. The support for the war in Russia now is rather passive and apolitical than active, ideological, and enthusiastic. This means it may last only so far as the war does not touch the everyday lives, so far as there are not so many casualties and the impact of the sanctions has not yet cumulated to the critical point when everyday people in their everyday life feel it. But later, they would need to explain much better what for they started this war. They would need to explain why so many Russian soldiers died in this war, why they killed so many Ukrainians, and why the regular Russian citizens are suffering from the sanctions.

Yes, they tell the Russian citizens that the West is trying to destroy Russia as a whole. The indiscriminate attacks on anything Russian, and the discussions of dismantling or weakening Russia are, of course, feeding into Kremlin's propaganda. But it has not worked so far in turning rather passive support for the invasion into a massive pro-war mobilization in Russia. Most Russian citizens do not really feel the existential threat that Kremlin tries to project to them. That would require a more articulated and coherent ideology that Putin did not actually need by this moment.

You said that Putin's elite would have to explain to society somehow what is happening, that they will be forced, perhaps, to start some change from above. What if this change process gets out of control?

So far, what Putin was saying about the goals of the war could be interpreted in multiple ways. For example, what is "denazification"? It can mean practically everything, from the complete destruction of the Ukrainian state to eliminating Ukrainian identity. Some of the Russian voices indeed go to this extreme. But, depending on the war's outcome, the achievement of "denazification" could be presented by Putin as some legislation in defense of the Russian language in Ukraine - the interpretation that has also been discussed in the media. The spectrum of possibilities is just extremely wide, but in the long term, it would require the Russian leaders to start being more articulated. Not just giving empty signifiers like "denazification" but offering some substantive answers to what for it is all.

This is related to the post-Soviet ideology crisis. This is a reason, by the way, why Russia relies so much on Soviet symbolism now - the red flags, returning the "decommunized" Lenin statues in the captured cities. Since 30 years of the post-Soviet collapse, they still do not have any more meaningful and powerful symbols, even though they are far from the beliefs of the Russian elite. They did not even need them for the depoliticized society and patronage politics. But they need to develop new symbols and a meaningful ideology now.

But here's the dialectics.

Turning to a more substantial ideology, the Russian ruling clique enters a dangerous game. The subaltern classes may start to take the ideology more seriously and demand from the elite to live up to their promises. For example, they would recall that the Soviet actually meant something very different from the current Russian policies.

The Russian ruling clique may be now sowing the seeds of the more conscious, massive, rooted in the subaltern classes, and far more dangerous opposition than any post-Soviet country has ever had, including any of the post-Soviet revolutions or quite narrowly supported Russian opposition mobilizations inspired by Navalny. In this sense, as you said, it may get out of control.

So, in the short-term, the consequences of the war may go against the interests of some Russian "oligarchs" who lose their property in the West. In the mid-term, the Russian ruling clique is consolidating its rule and transforming the political regime into a more stable entity. In the long run, they are creating conditions for their own demise.

You said you did not expect the war - just like many other observers, including me, did not. Can we now say why the Russian ruling class decided to go into this war and what they hoped to achieve - apart from the consolidation of rule in Russia?

To be more precise, I thought the full-scale invasion was unlikely but I did expect that the failure of Russian coercive diplomacy may lead to the military escalation that would be first limited to Donbass, and, then, to slower, gradual, "hybrid" attempts to destabilize, dismantle, and overtake parts of Ukraine - the so-called salami-slicing tactics. As even the Ukrainian government and, I guess, most social scientists specializing in the post-Soviet region expected [something like this](#) too.

In about a month after the start, the offensive turned slow, gradual, and limited to Donbass because Kremlin did not gather the forces for a successful larger-scale operation against Ukraine and did not prepare the Russian society for a massive mobilization. Now we know that the crucial factor in Putin's decision to risk the full-scale invasion was the really-really poor Russian intelligence work - both in analysis of the Ukrainian society and in recruitment of Ukrainian

traitors who were supposed to switch sides on the day of the invasion and guarantee virtually zero resistance to the limited Russian forces.

We should ask more questions about the analytical bets and goals of those people who made outlandish predictions about the Russian capacity to capture Kiev and occupy most of Ukraine in about a few days or weeks.

In any case, the war in this or a different form is in the interests of the Russian ruling class. So far, I do not agree with the people who try to explain it by some Russian ruling clique's fanatical commitment to an imperialistic ideology. That kind of politics has been extremely rare among the post-Soviet ruling classes so far.

It is a war in the rational collective interests of the Russian ruling class. This is a struggle for survival for them. They try to present the war as a fight for Russia's survival. But in essence, the stake is the survival of this very specific faction of the capitalist class - the political capitalists. Their main competitive advantage is the state's selective, often informal, benefits (many people call it "corruption") but, for example, not a technological innovation or very cheap labor force.

The post-Soviet political capitalists emerged in the process of the Soviet state collapse, and that's how they became immensely rich - by stealing the state. This is why they are so much obsessed with sovereignty. They fundamentally require a monopoly control over the state that should not be shared with any other factions of domestic, let alone transnational capital.

Recall that the so-called "anti-corruption" has been a crucial, if not the most important, part of the Western institutions' agenda for the post-Soviet countries and of the pro-Western soft power in post-Soviet region, embodied by NGO-ized "civil societies". Check the requirements of the EU candidate status for Ukraine; they are virtually all about "corruption." "Anti-corruption" means the elimination of political capitalists "as a class." "Transparency" are the rules benefiting the stronger transnational capital over the domestic capital. There was no way that the post-Soviet political capitalists could be incorporated into the global elite without being "tamed," forced to accept the rules of the game and their inferior position, or just deprived of their major competitive advantage.

Besides, another threat has been looming on the horizon - the crisis of post-Soviet Bonapartist regimes. The personalistic authoritarian rule is fundamentally fragile. When the leaders get too old, the problem of succession arises, for which there are no clear rules to transfer power, no articulated ideology the new leader must adhere to, no ideological party or movement where the new leader could have been socialized. The succession problem creates the point of vulnerability. The internal conflicts within the elite may dangerously escalate, and the uprisings from below are probable, like those that erupted recently in Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Neither of the post-Soviet, so-called maidan, revolutions presented a popular social threat to the post-Soviet political capitalists as a class. They rather only swapped the factions of the same class in power and, with this, only intensified the crisis of political representation. At the same time, they also weakened the state and made the post-Soviet political capitalists more vulnerable to the pressure of the transnational capital both directly and indirectly via the pro-Western NGO-ized civil society, as it happened in Ukraine after the Euromaidan revolution of 2014.

The post-Soviet condition for 30 years has been a condition of the permanent crisis. No stable political institutions have emerged. The post-Soviet crisis may be coming now to a terminal end. It is either change or death - destruction of the very post-Soviet space.

With the war, the Russian political capitalists try to eliminate some existential threats with military force and exploit the opportunity to consolidate their rule in a more ideologically-articulated and mobilizationist political regime. What is

at stake now is the existence of a sovereign center of capital accumulation in the post-Soviet space. The other outcome is its disintegration and realignment of the post-Soviet elites with the EU, US, and Chinese centers of power.

And what can we say about the Ukrainian ruling class? Of whom is the class composed? What stands behind the term "Ukrainian oligarchs" and what is the key class interest of these people?

Ukrainian oligarchs are the same kind of political capitalists that emerged during the post-Soviet collapse. In the early 1990s, the Soviet Ukrainian elite (so-called nomenklatura) entered a temporary alliance with the Ukrainian nationalist intelligentsia to legitimate their claims for a part of the disintegrating Soviet state. This alliance proved fragile as the latter would not be satisfied with the only symbolic national decoration of the rule of the post-Soviet elites.

At the same time, the emerging political capitalists in independent Ukraine failed to fill the Ukrainian statehood with their own meaning and national development project under their political leadership that would be distinct from the dominant ideologies in the nationalist-neoliberal civil society. In this sense, Ukraine shared the post-Soviet crisis of hegemony with other fragments of the USSR.

However, unlike in Russia, Ukrainian political capitalists also failed to consolidate their own Bonapartist regime capable of pursuing autonomous politics in the interests of the ruling class as a whole that may not coincide with the interests of individual "oligarchs." Instead, Ukraine experienced three revolutions in the life of one generation.

The most recent of them - the Euromaidan revolution in 2014 - highlighted two factions of the Ukrainian ruling class. They formed much earlier, but Euromaidan sharpened their political strategies.

One of the factions took an openly confrontationist position against the threat of the transnational capital aggravated by the weakening of the Ukrainian state and increased dependence and influence of the Western powers. They tried to mobilize public opinion against Western-funded NGOs and their so-called "anti-corruption" agenda. The nationalist civil society typically attacked this part of Ukrainian oligarchy as "pro-Russian", even though they rather appealed to restoring Ukraine's sovereignty in attempt to legitimate pursuit of their distinct interests, while balancing between the Western and Russian ruling classes - the foreign policy that Ukraine used to stick most of the time before Euromaidan.

Noteworthy, and to the shame of many Western analysts and journalists taking at face value their labeling as "pro-Russian" by Ukrainian nationalists and media, virtually no major figure in this camp welcomed the Russian invasion. And this is not a surprise. The lion's share of their assets is in Ukraine and the West. Their voters are in Ukraine. They have always been not "pro-Russian" but "pro-themselves" and tried to claim representation of a large part of Ukrainian society. These Ukrainians had many good reasons to be skeptical about the nationalist and neoliberal ideologies of the middle-class civil society. And they are understandably not happy now about their lives and homes destroyed by the invasion. There are collaborationists, but apart from the very few exceptions, they are rather marginal figures.

The problem for this faction of political capitalists now is that they cannot rely on the confrontationist strategy during the war and are losing their political positions so far. A different big segment of the Ukrainian ruling class took an opposite, accommodationist strategy toward the transnational capital. They have been trying to sell themselves as indispensable figures in fighting against Putin. Their game was simple: they kept persuading the West that if you allow destabilization, let's say, of Poroshenko's rule earlier, or if you destabilize Zelensky now, under whatever charges, that would mean destabilization of Ukraine as a whole in other words, playing in favor of Putin. This usually

worked.

Selling this to the Western elite, they could secure at least some ease for them on the "anti-corruption" agenda. Nobody even recalls the Pandora papers published just a few months before the invasion that identified [Zelenskyi's offshore companies](#) and his murky dealings with one of the most notorious Ukrainian oligarchs - Ihor Kolomoisky. Nobody seriously questioned the authoritarian and repressive tendencies, with very dubious legal ground, that developed in Zelenskyi's governance well before the invasion started.

The very important aspect is that the requirements for Ukraine as the EU candidate are primarily about so-called "anti-corruption." Ukraine may get into the EU, or at least this is alleged, but the condition is to remove the domestic ruling class that was dominating the Ukrainian economy in Ukrainian politics. Of course, the newly 'opened space' is meant to be filled by the transnational capital, not by Ukrainian workers.

The transnational capital will likely benefit from the reconstruction of Ukraine, as it happened after many recent wars. It is absolutely clear from the Ukrainian and Western governments plans for Ukraine's recovery discussed recently in Lugano.

At the same time, in case Zelenskyi retains the over the high popular support he enjoys now, he and the loyal factions of Ukrainian ruling class will continue to maneuver and sabotage the "anti-corruption" requirements and try to retain the commanding heights in the remains of Ukrainian economy.

Unlike Russians, Ukrainians have changed their government multiple times. There was a series of revolutions in Ukraine. However, none of these revolutions, even though the leaders of the state were changed, touched the essential capitalist structure of the society. Why, despite all the hatred for oligarchs in Ukrainian society, in the end, every social uprising ended with new oligarchs emerging to the top and not a real change?

It is not only the Ukrainian problem. We have seen many similar deficient revolutions without the revolutionary changes in many other parts of the world in recent decades. According to Mark Beissinger's brilliant recent study, published in the book entitled *The Revolutionary City*, these deficient outcomes of contemporary revolutions are actually very typical.

These revolutions do not bring more social equality. Even more so, they tend to increase inequality. They promise national unity, but they typically exacerbate ethnic conflicts. Neither they lead to more democracy.

They do not lead to a more stable social order. Instead, they weaken the states. At best, they give some temporary liberation from dictatorships and empower the middle-class civil societies, but fail on every other agenda. Typically, the authoritarian and corruption tendencies are back in just a few years, now under the new regime as it happened in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian maidan revolutions are no different. Moreover, they may help us to see the negative consequences of the contemporary urban civic revolutions, as Beissinger calls them, in their sharpest forms. They are fundamentally different processes from the social revolutions of the past. Those had many problems and were more bloody, but they were also major breakthroughs to social equality and modernization.

So what is the explanation for this non-only-Ukrainian series of revolutions that did not revolutionize social relations?

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For Beissinger, the explanation is in urbanization. The contemporary urban environment does not allow the social revolutions of the past. I think the main problem with the contemporary deficient revolutions is different. It is a weakness of counter-hegemony, the crisis of political, moral, and intellectual leadership from below that should and could be reconstructed in contemporary urban societies.

However, not yet. Multiple social grievances drive the people who join the revolutions now. These grievances are, however, very poorly articulated. They hide behind some very abstract slogans, a kind of very minimal agenda, like removing a dictator and nothing more. Any further discussion on what we actually want to achieve after the revolution usually does not even happen on a massive scale.

The revolutions of our time are loosely organized and poorly structured. This allows the revolution to be hijacked by the political forces that do not represent the majority of the participants of the movement.

In the Ukrainian case, specifically the revolution of 2014, the hijackers were the factions of oligarchs like Poroshenko who ultimately came to power. Also, the pro-Western NGO-ized civil society became empowered. So were radical nationalists and, finally, the Western powers. They got the opportunity to push forward with their own agendas and interests, even though these agendas and interests had very little to do with the interests of the majority of the revolution participants. In this way, this kind of revolution only intensified the very crisis that they were a response to.

Do you see a chance for a revolution that actually leads to social equality in Ukraine?

Or what is the main reason behind the lack of strong leadership that could prevent the hijacking of a revolutionary process? Does Eastern Europe lack socialist leaders because the very word 'socialism' has become infamous? Or are there deeper, more complex reasons?

I would say that it is a quite superficial and misleading explanation. An explanation that reproduces the agenda of the minority of the society. [If you look at the polls, 30-40% of Ukrainians just a year ago regretted the Soviet Union collapse and believed the USSR was rather a good thing.](#) Despite all the decommunization efforts after the Euromaidan, this number remained stable. Before Euromaidan, this pro-Soviet attitude was even stronger. In addition, the 30-40% I am talking about concerns only the territory controlled by the Ukrainian government before February 24, without Donbass and Crimea, which have been much more pro-Soviet.

Saying that people are disappointed even with the word 'socialism,' let alone the historical political system, is an interpretation of the middle-class civil society, which is strongly anti-communist in Eastern Europe. But they do not represent our societies.

Look at the revival of the neo-Soviet identity in Russia, the booming Marxist reading groups organizing thousands of young people and YouTube-channels with millions of followers. Most of them did not live in the Soviet Union even a single day of their lives. This is not the old people's nostalgia.

The international left remains largely ignorant about these developments in the left movement in our part of the world because of the language barrier and weak connections to the West of the less privileged groups forming the basis of the neo-Soviet revival. But also because of the affinity bias of the international left, when they search for people similar to them and find them only in very small groups of the marginal left-liberal wing of the middle-class civil societies.

And the problem is that the left is not really in good form in many other countries, too. We all remember Occupy Wall

Street, but what are the outcomes of the movement? There were people on the left very close to taking power, like Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom or Bernie Sanders in his two campaigns. But again - they failed. [SYRIZA did take power in Greece, and then they surrendered.](#)

Of course, Ukraine is a much more extreme case, as the local left has been under repression since the Euromaidan, which intensified even more with the invasion. On the other hand, we can barely be proud of any major political victories on the left in recent years in other parts of the world. The loosely structured "left populism" with poorly articulated ideologies actually has many significant similarities with the maidan revolutions. And, like them, it has been typically a political failure.

For sure, the fundamental cause of the left decline is the transformation of the class structure and its socio-political organization since the 1970s but also the end of the Cold War. Beissinger, too, noted the end of the Cold War as a very important factor of the social revolutions decline since 1980s. The current crisis of counter-hegemony is certainly the result of the hegemony crisis, which is global process even though it reaches its sharpest form in the post-Soviet region. But the crisis of mass politics and ideologies, degradation of parties, populism instead of organized political representation of classes are discussed in many parts of the world.

Here lies a reason for which we could actually be optimists about the possibility of social revolutions in the XXI century, despite all the failures of previous years. From a historical perspective, intensifying inter-imperialist struggles - and we are now witnessing one - led to the intensification of the social struggles as well, as sociologist Beverly Silver demonstrated in *Forces of Labour*, the global study of the labour unrest. The states compete against each other and this why they also need to compete with each other for the loyalty of the subaltern classes and nations. Stronger hegemonic politics of the ruling classes creates social and political conditions for the stronger counter-hegemonic alternatives of the subaltern classes.

It is not a coincidence that we had the peak of the social revolutions in Europe after the First World War. Then we had revolutionary changes after the Second World War, including the peak of the decolonization processes in Africa and Asia. Now we are entering a new cycle of inter-imperialist competition.

And we already see some signs of turning to more hegemonic politics, not just in Russia but also in China and the United States, noted recently by a famous economist Branko Milanovi . Clearly, as one of the possible outcomes, we may expect stronger and much better organized social-revolutionary opposition. Of course, this would happen only if we are lucky to avoid the nuclear apocalypse and catastrophic climate change. If we survive, the left may have a brighter future. At the same time, a stronger anti-imperialist left is crucially important for the survival of humanity.

Suppose post-war Ukraine is indeed to be rebuilt by transnational corporations and the rebuilding is treated solely as a source of profit. Do you expect that the Ukrainian workers may rise up and protest?

Significant workers' protests are possible with the resumption of economic growth, and even a massive socially-driven uprising is not something to be excluded. The next question we should always ask ourselves is how the uprising might be politically organized and who is going to reap political benefits from the uprising. Some left-wing progressive political force, that is nowhere on the horizon in Ukraine? Or is it going to end in another maidan revolution?

Now, we are entering a realm of heavy speculation, because Ukraine's political field after the war fundamentally depends on the outcomes of the war. It is likely, however, that the nationalist forces would lead the discontent with transnational capital. They would double down on the popular narrative of the Western "betrayal" of Ukraine. The remaining political capitalists would also support this criticism to protect their rent-seeking opportunities. If (and this is

a huge if) we can project the current trends in military and political developments to the future, the social discontent with the foreign dependency and transnational capital would rather feed into the nationalist-conservative consolidation, not unlike in Hungary. A left-wing force capable to address this discontent contrary to the mainstream of the middle-class civil society may not even be allowed to exist.

And here we return to the problem of sovereignty, which is indispensable for any social-revolutionary agenda. SYRIZA took power in Greece in 2015 and capitulated in half a year or so under EU pressure.

How could a nation like Ukraine squeezed between Great Powers even try independent progressive politics contradicting their interests? Before Euromaidan, the Ukrainian governments engaged with so-called "multivector" politics and tried to balance the Western and Russian interests winning some space in-between. In the end, unsuccessfully.

If properly implemented, the Minsk accords could restore the regional balance in domestic politics that could create the condition for the sovereign balancing of Ukraine's international politics. They failed too. Now, if, as a result of the war, Russia retains and consolidates control over the parts of Ukrainian territory, the future of progressive change there depends on the prospects of the oppositional social-revolutionary movement in Russia. The prospects of the social-revolutionary movement in the rest of Ukraine will fundamentally depend on the developments in the EU and US politics.

This is why Ukraine would unlikely become a source of inspiration for some progressive breakthrough in the coming years. If it comes, it will come here, likely, from somewhere else.

OK, let us give up futurology. However, the changes in the labour code of Ukraine are not futurology but a very harsh reality: now, under the war conditions, the Ukrainian parliament has already introduced anti-worker and anti-union legislation. They are doing it now when workers are defending the country. How do you see this move from a class point of view?

I think the explanation is quite simple. The ruling class is exploiting the situation of war for the things that they actually wanted for many years. Attempts to revise the labour code in Ukraine started almost 20 years ago, and so far, they had always failed. Now, under the extreme situation of war, it became very easy to push forward the agenda that, under other circumstances, would receive much stronger criticism and counter-mobilization. The ruling class is exploiting an opportunity.

Ukrainian society is now finally getting integrated, and a model of civil patriotism is emerging - this is what we can often hear from the media. Both regional identities and differences and class divisions are supposedly disappearing now in the face of a Russian invasion. How would you comment on this as a Marxist researcher?

There are certain trends. So far we can judge from the polls (which are very imperfect during the war), [the Ukrainian society is considerably united in condemnation of the invasion](#). Also, some Russian speakers are now turning to the Ukrainian language because they see the Russian language as the language of the aggressor. That is true, but I am not sure how far these trends are present beyond the middle-class dominating the public sphere. When the war is still going on, it is difficult to measure the trends and their sustainability.

At the same time, when the people are united only against something, it does not yet mean that they are united around any positive agenda or the vision of Ukraine. [There is still quite a considerable variation in attitudes about NATO](#). The criticism of so-called "de-Russification" and "de-colonization" is voiced even by some people close to the Presidential Office. This is a totally different question whether these voices will have any policy impact though, as

Zelenskyi earlier often surrendered to the organized nationalist pressure, even if mobilized around unpopular issues in the society at large.

The claim that Putin has unified the Ukrainian society and finally made Ukraine "Ukrainian" is actively exploited in order to repress and silence the very real diversity of political positions, opinions, and cultural practices in Ukraine. Those who have not joined the unity appear to be "anti-Ukrainian" however many of them are actually in Ukraine. We already noticed how the state banned the whole spectrum of so-called pro-Russian parties, which did not represent any serious threat.

The figures with the real political influence in that segment supported Ukraine after the invasion. Other parties were simply too marginal to present any threat to anything at all.

As a result, though, a significant segment of Ukrainian voters, 18% of Ukrainian voters according to the result of the 2019 parliamentary elections, has been deprived of political representation. Like with the labor legislation, the people in power are exploiting the war to clear the political field for themselves from the remaining opposition. Now, some powerful "oligarchs", and even Poroshenko, the leader of the nationalist opposition, all those who could not be blamed for "pro-Russianness" in any meaningful sense, are getting under increasing political pressure.

Switching to the Ukrainian language by the formerly Russian-speakers is not just a spontaneous trend. There is also a set of active measures, policies of the state on the local level and pressure of the Ukrainian civil society as well, to remove Russian language and Russian culture from the public sphere. This includes bans on public reproduction of any Russian-language cultural product imposed in some regions, bans on teaching the Russian language even as an elective in secondary schools in other regions, or removal of the names of Russian poets and scientists from the street names in Ukraine. That is not something that is simply happening "naturally." This is a deliberate policy of certain factions of the Ukrainian elites and the nationalist civil society that want to push forward their own agenda and to reformat Ukraine in the way that they believe it should look like whatever the preferences of the Ukrainian society, which diversity they do not represent. They always wanted to do this, and now they have got a perfect opportunity to exploit the war situation for their agenda when they can act without facing any strong criticism or counter-mobilization.

And now, a large group of Ukrainians, mostly Russian-speaking, but defined more by political attitudes than mother tongue, are squeezed between two nation-building projects of the Ukrainian civil society and Putin's "single people." They fit into neither. Similar to the situation of Ukrainians in the Russian Empire, there will not be discrimination against the Russian-speaking Ukrainians as individuals (hopefully, but there are some worrying signs), but collective claim-making on behalf of this group could be regarded as treacherous and repressive.

If the European integration of Ukraine is accelerated, if Ukraine is making steps towards European integration, can this be the source of no more pro-social legislation, more transparency, and more democratic standards in the public life of Ukraine? Is the European Union genuinely interested in having a democracy in Ukraine?

It looks like European integration could pose certain barriers, and draw a new frame of what is possible and impossible to do. One of the requirements of the European Union towards Ukraine concerns the legislation on languages that the Venice Commission has very harshly criticized. Now Ukraine is supposed to implement those changes. This would be good. Furthermore, I believe the general human rights situation in Ukraine would be better than if Ukraine w0s left outside of the EU after the war.

However, the European Union membership is, of course, not a panacea. We have just seen what happened with Hungary. We have seen what happened in Poland with the anti-abortion legislation. Also, the European Union has

always tolerated quite explicit discrimination of so-called non-citizens in the Baltic states.

Having this in mind, I believe some things would be better with the EU membership, and I think that it should not be underestimated, but it is certainly not something that would automatically fix all the huge problems that Ukraine has now.

Ukraine requires a lot more international attention on human and labor rights in order to prevent some of the probable escalations of the old intensifying problems.

Source [Cross-border Talks](#).

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