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Post-war Ukraine: embedding liberal democracy

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Summary

A year has passed since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Friends of Europe hosted a debate, entitled 'Post-war Ukraine: embedding liberal democracy, to look beyond the barbarity of the war and consider what might emerge, assuming that Ukraine wins, afterwards.

Experts, diplomats and activists gathered to share their views on how things might go and what should be prioritised once the bombings stop and the nation begins to rebuild.

The debate revealed some surprising insights, particularly about changing attitudes towards minorities within Ukrainian society, as well as one deafening consensus: one year on from the escalated assault on Ukraine, the war must not be normalised.

Many participants called for a change in the narrative of Ukraine's Western allies. "Now let's help Ukraine to win fast. It may be weird to hear this from a human rights defender that we need modern weapons," said **Oleksandra Matviichuk**, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Head of the Centre for Civil Liberties and 2023 European Young Leader (EYL40).

Recommendations:

- We cannot normalise this war

- Switch the narrative in the West to emphasise the need to win the war quickly

- Help build the relationship between Ukraine and the Western Balkans

- Accelerate the EU accession process

- Focus on justice, as well as security and economics

Justice must be seen to be done

Matviichuk shared three key messages supporting one overriding goal: the need for justice. The war is more than a conflict between two states. "It's a war between two systems: authoritarianism and democracy. To respond to this value dimension of the war, we have to demonstrate justice."

Justice is a precondition for peace. War crimes inflicted on the civilian population

must not go unpunished, noting that "there is a culture of violence and impunity. We must break that circle of impunity with the creation of a tribunal to hold Putin, Lukashenko and others accountable."

Crucially, justice must be seen to be done. "There's a demand for justice from millions of people. We can't ignore this demand because if we do, it will be very difficult for Ukraine to pursue the liberal democratic agenda," concluded Matviichuk.

The pull of the West

What will post-war Ukraine look like? How do we bake the principles of fairness, democracy and good governance into a society, including its institutions and ways of working, that is coming out of war? These were among some of the questions posed by moderator and Friends of Europe's Chief Operating Officer, **Dharmendra Kanani**.

Ukraine is knocking on the doors of both NATO and the European Union. The drive towards a Western style of liberal democracy is strong, but it isn't the only view, pointed out Professor **David Rowe**, Fulbright NATO Security Studies Scholar and Visiting Fellow at the German Marshall Fund.

As mere paymasters, the West is not in a position to dictate to a country that has spilled so much blood. It's not like after the Second World War, when cemeteries for all Allied soldiers were built across Europe to remind everyone of the prices paid by all countries.

Diversity on the rise

With a huge displacement of Ukrainians abroad and the likelihood that many won't return, **Roman Waschuk**, Business Ombudsman for Ukraine, pointed out that Ukrainian society will need to welcome the immigration of other nationalities in order to rebuild the country.

Ukraine will become a more diverse population as a result. One of the surprising outcomes of the war is that it has led to Ukrainians becoming more accepting of people from the LGBTQ+ community, said **Edward Reese**, Communications Coordinator at KyivPride, a campaign group for the LGBTQ+ community. "The war has been a great leveller in some ways. Females, queers, people of colour... we all fight for our existence," he said.

But one group that may not feel much empathy are Russian-speaking communities, especially in the east of the country. "We have a lot of Russian speakers in Ukraine because of colonisation. Russia has tried to destroy the Ukrainian language. That's why we have to work on promoting [the] Ukrainian language," said Reese.

Liubov Nepop, Director General of the Political Department at the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that while Ukraine does recognise the rights of minorities, including the rights to speak their own language, this does not amount to any formal recognition of languages such as Russian. "We have individual rights, which are protected, but no collective rights," she said.

Lessons to and from the Western Balkans

Ukraine has joined Western Balkan countries in the line to become members of the European Union. In turn, this has focused minds on countries like Serbia, which has been dragging its EU candidate feet, especially regarding its relations with Kosovo.

"Ukraine has a lot to learn from the Western Balkan countries from their years as candidates, but equally the Western Balkan countries have a lot to learn from Ukraine too," said Waschuk, especially in tackling corruption, which plagues the Balkan region, as well as Ukraine.

"Ukraine has an active civil society. It has the intellectual capacity to also help them all progress faster if they get their act together. So, I think there's a need to build on the Ukraine and Western Balkans relationship," he said.

Some of the countries in the Western Balkans, particularly Serbia, are getting a bit spooked about how they might be leapfrogged by Ukraine in the race to Europe," said **Paul Taylor**, journalist and Senior Fellow of Friends of Europe. "That might have a very salutary, stimulative effect," he added, speculating that this may even be why Serbia took a step forward this week in at least appearing to agree to a normalisation of relations with Kosovo.

Best-case, worst-case scenarios

Rowe outlined what he saw as three outcomes of the conflict, from best to worst.

Best case, the war ends quickly and decisively, meaning that there is sufficient Western aid for Ukraine to prevail on the battlefield, and it's clear to Ukraine that its allies have played an important role. "That would create the space for this idea that there's been a shared effort in bringing about Ukraine's freedom," he said.

Less desirable is if Ukraine gets stuck in a frozen conflict because "the longer that conflict goes on, the more it creates the space for a narrative to emerge where the West just really doesn't care and that this is not really about Ukraine's freedom."

B and large, the worst outcome is a negotiated settlement in which negotiation is seen as pressured by Ukraine's partners to settle the war in a way that implies this is not really Ukraine's war. "We have historical analogies for problematic peace settlements. Negotiations after the end of World War One created the sense in Germany of being stabbed in the back, which destabilised the country and ultimately fuelled the rise of Nazism," Rowe said.

What lessons for Europe?

"What are the broader lessons here about what the EU does to create more Europe around it – a shield around Europe against illiberal democracies?" asked Kanani.

"We need to think about ways of accelerating the EU accession process because you know the longer the countries wait on the periphery, the more frustrations grow and the more that they begin to look for other models," responded Rowe.

"Don't just focus on economic benefits or security issues. You have to also consider justice and human rights as well, and not only in internal policy, but in external policy also," said Matviichuk, pointing to the alleged war crimes that Russia has committed in countries, including Chechnya, Mali, Syria and Libya. By focusing on justice and human rights, "you can help to prevent worse things happening in the future. There will never be sustainable peace without a focus on justice and human rights," she concluded.