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What Latvia can learn from Ukraine

1. National identity

It is said that the identity of a society is most evident in times of crisis. In this war, we see the clash of two competing visions of what constitutes national identity.

The Russian view is based on ethnic and linguistic essentialism. If you are a Russian-speaker, you are part of the “Russian world” — whether you want to be or not. This “Russian world” does not recognize territorial boundaries. Being born with this identity makes you subject to the will of the ruler of the Russian state, who has the authority to “liberate” you irrespective of your own will.

Ukraine embodies an alternative vision — that national identity is something one is free to choose. In today’s Ukraine, we see people whose native tongue is Ukrainian or Russian, whose religion is Orthodox, Ukrainian Greek Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, or no religious affiliation, but who all choose to identify as Ukrainians. Much has been made of the fact that Zelensky’s background is Jewish, but it is also noteworthy that, for instance, the head of the Mykolaiv region, Vitaliy Kim, is of Korean descent or that the head of the Servant of the People party, Davyd Arakhamia, is of Georgian descent.

What is that unifies people of different ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds into a common Ukrainian identity today? An answer that I heard several times— and which many Ukrainians say distinguishes them most from Russians — is the value given to freedom. If the guiding value of post-USSR Russia has been stability and state power, Ukraine has most sought freedom and dignity. As historian Yaroslav Hrytsak has put it, “Putin is not possible in Ukraine and the victorious Maidan is not possible in Russia”.

But what constitutes the freedom that Ukrainians are fighting for? On the one hand, it is respect for basic human rights and democratic self-determination — ideals that are at the heart of modern liberal democracies. However, in the past three months, Ukrainians have also shown that freedom is impossible without the notion of rights being balanced with the idea of duties. And this is one of the things that one most quickly perceives in Ukraine right now. Virtually every person is doing something to support their country. Of course, the most evident example is the widespread desire of people to join the army. In spite of the enormous personal risk — it is estimated that, currently, about 100 Ukrainian soldiers die every day in the battles in the east of the country — there has been such widespread desire to join in the army that new recruits are being put on a waitlist. I have also met several people who have quit their job to fully devote themselves to volunteering and many others who are splitting time between a full-time job and volunteering work. On several occasions when I've struck up a conversation with someone while waiting in line at a gas station, it has turned out that they are transporting military vests or humanitarian aid that they have managed to obtain out of their own initiative. There is a very strong sense of solidarity, which does not stem from an imperative issued by the state but arises from citizens instinctively understanding that this is their obligation to defeat the enemy and preserve their freedom.

A lesson that we can draw from this is that we, too, need to reflect on and articulate what are our most important obligations towards our fellow citizens and our common home. We need to move to the center of public discussion and debate the question of what constitutes our social contract. This social contract is an agreement, subject to continuous evolution, between all the citizens of Latvia about what kind of political community we want to live in and what role each of us is willing to play to make it possible. Being part of this political community should be open to anyone who shares and wants to live by this social contract, irrespective of their ethnic, religious, or racial background.

The example of Ukraine shows that for a society to be healthy it is not enough to only think about rights but also duties. Duties that are not forced upon us by the state but which we set for ourselves out of the recognition that only by living in accordance

with them are we able to maintain our freedom and become the kind of nation that we aspire to be. Once a clearer recognition of our social contract begins to emerge, it must be reflected in practical political steps and become an essential part of our national culture. Here, the educational system would obviously play an important role, but so would the arts, literature, and the others ways that we shape the institutions of the state.

2. Living out our values and freedom is risky

With the second lesson, I want to elaborate further on the importance of culture and what it means not only to cultivate it but to live by it. According to multiple military analysts (for instance, Michael Kofman from the Center for Naval Analyses think tank), the dynamic of the war was largely determined in the first three weeks and, especially, in the first three days of the invasion. The fact that Russia was not able to fulfill its objective of advancing to Kyiv in three days was to a significant extent the result of their own gross unpreparedness and incompetence, which can also to some extent be attributed to this country's military culture, such as widespread corruption and not informing soldiers about the where and for what they would be fighting until the very last moment. But, arguably, the most important reason was the unexpected courage of ordinary Ukrainians and their political elite to remain in the country and fight against an enemy that is much larger and, theoretically, much more powerful militarily. This was something that Russia, and to a large extent the West, did not expect.

In the case of Russia, it seems to have fallen victim to its own propaganda which for years has claimed that Ukraine is not a real nation and, thus, in a case of war, would lack a unified resolve to resist. However, even many countries in the West did not believe that Ukrainians would have the courage to put up a sustained fight against a country with the world's second-largest nuclear arsenal. The timidity that exists in the West towards Russia is still very much evident today. For Germany and France, the de facto goal is to end of the conflict, irrespective of whether or not Ukraine wins and maintains its territorial integrity. Based on the comments of their leaders, the prospect of Russia's defeat and humiliation is something that they are apprehensive to see.

The position of the Baltic countries, Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Romania, is, of course, different. We have stated clearly state that we do not want Ukraine to simply lose but to win in this war and that appeasement of Russia is simply a postponement of the day when it will again attack one of it neighbors Our foreign policy is courageous, but domestically, I think that similar timidity can be seen, which stems fourth from certain remnants of cognitive colonialism that for the past thirty years we have not been willing to face.

Here I do not have in mind simply the controversy surrounding the demolition of the so-called “Victory monument”. The problem, I believe, goes much deeper. Several times when talking to volunteers at Lviv train station, they have said that they often hear from Ukrainian refugees that go to Latvia, that Latvians are very kind and helpful people, that they are very grateful for all that they’ve done to support Ukraine, but that, overall, they do not feel fully safe in the country. It is very sad to hear me and, I think, for all of us to hear this. As much as we would like to tell ourselves that the incidents of Ukrainian flags being torn off cars or people who express a pro-Ukraine stance being thrown out of taxis are simply a few isolated incidents, it is evidently not the case.

There is a great risk that if we do not draw a red line and establish that in this country there will be no tolerance of any form of Russian neo-colonialism and chauvinism, we risk losing the biggest reason behind having a sovereign and independent state — being able to live freely by our values. Because, as this war shows, values are not manifested by words but by actions. We may continue to celebrate our formal freedom as a country and think of ourselves as living in a “free, democratic, independent” country, but, in reality, we continue to be ruled by fear and cognitive colonialism. For colonialism is not simply a military or political phenomenon but also something that deeply affects the mind and culture of the oppressed. We need to look at our history of being colonized not as the source of victimhood but as something over which we need to take responsibility — to not be stuck in the past but to courageously deal with its legacy so that we can move towards the vision of the future that we want to live out. If modern Germany was able to legislate a punishment of up to three years in prison for the display of Nazi symbols and acts that celebrate the darkest period of German history, there is no reason why we cannot take a similar stance

towards actions and symbols that celebrate Russia's imperialist past and its contemporary colonial aspirations. Here, again, it is not a matter of turning against a certain ethnic minority but unequivocally establishing that we will not live in a country where aggression and genocide can be celebrated and where the victims of these crimes are subject to personal attacks.

Ukraine also still has a long way to go in coming to terms with its remnant of cognitive colonialism but its people have finally abandoned fear of Russian and living up to their principles. During my time there, I did not meet a single Ukrainian who supported conceding any part of their country to Russians for the sake of peace. I think we need to understand that preserving our freedom and living out our values is not easy — it entails risk and danger. But if, out of fear, we succumb to compromise and turning a blind eye to something that in the most direct way goes against the kind of society we want to live in, we forfeit our freedom and country without a single shot needing to be fired.

3. Decentralized leadership

Finally, the question must be addressed of who will be the agents who will bring about this change.

An example that many Ukrainians often gave of how Russia has completely misunderstood Ukraine and its culture is their belief that killing or arresting Zelensky in the first days of the war would have made the Ukrainian state collapse. Such an assumption would probably be accurate if applied to Russia, where the structure of power is completely vertical and the elimination of the Tsar would result in a power vacuum.

In Ukraine, on the other hand, one of the key political concepts has been the *hromada,* the self-governing community, which has shaped the political culture towards greater decentralization, with significant power and autonomy given to the heads of regions, cities, and villages. When the war started, the organization of the territorial defense units and humanitarian aid systems to a large extent did not come from the orders of the government in Kyiv but from local self-organization initiatives. Every village quickly formed its own self-defense battalion. It has also been my experience while

traveling through Ukraine that the organization of aid deliveries in different cities and regions is primarily organized on the local level, without people waiting on the central government to do something for them or complaining about its failures.

Hence, according to many local people as well as military experts, if Russia had been able to eliminate Zelensky, it, of course, would have been a great tragedy but it would not have fundamentally altered the course of the war. Someone else would have stepped up to assume responsibility, while the heads of the regions would have continued organizing resistance even in the absence of the orders from the central government. Even the very attitude towards Zelensky seems to be noticeably different in Ukraine and abroad. The people that I've talked to have generally said that he has done a great job during the war and by his example and words have been able to motivate the country, but there isn't a feeling of a leader's cult. Some, especially in Western Ukraine, are even quite critical of his record before the war and see him as a Churchillian figure who is great for wartime but possibly not best suited to lead the country during peace.

The idea that we do not need a Messianic figure who will come and solve our country's problems but that each of us, at every level of power, is responsible for protecting our country and building its future is something that we can learn from Ukrainians. And this, by the way, extends well before the war, as exemplified by the two Maidan revolutions, both of which arose as largely spontaneous self-organized initiatives with a rather horizontal leadership model — an idea that seems incomprehensible to Russia, whose history of political governance has been based on the model of an absolute monarchy or the one-party state. Just as Ukrainians, we, too, have not never had an experience of an indigenous monarchy, which would predispose us towards a highly centralized state rule.

To conclude, the nation is the choices, the commitments, and the actions that we do every day. Now is the time when we must clarify and articulate what is our social contract — what are the rights and the duties towards each other that bind us — and what is the vision of the future that we want to move towards. Knowing who we want to become will orient us about what kind of values and civic virtues we need to cultivate and what are the things that under no circumstances can we accept. We must

recognize that defending our values entails a certain level risk. This is something that each one of us must take on if we want to live in a free country. Because, as this war has shown, it is only if we ourselves are prepared to defend our freedom that we can expect others to come to our aid. The responsibility for our future lies principally with us. Ukraine has bought us time to think about what kind of nation we want to be. We should use this chance wisely.