

## Beyond the “End of History”: Nationalism, Liberalism and the War in Ukraine

by Hadas Aron and Emily Holland

During a recent night-time address to the Ukrainian people, president Volodymyr Zelensky proclaimed that Kyiv is now “the capital of global democracy, the capital of the struggle for freedom for all on the European continent”.<sup>1</sup> Zelensky has been a powerful communicator throughout Russia’s war against Ukraine. His speeches paint a stark picture: the darkness of Russian dictatorship marching over Ukraine to extinguish the beacon of liberal democracy.

The world is watching the alliance of liberalism and nationalism in Ukraine’s struggle for survival. These two ideas were the defining ideology of foundational struggles

for liberation from tyranny like the French Revolution and the revolutions of 1989. Yet, nationalism and liberalism have contradictory elements that arise once moments of crisis have passed. After the revolutions of 1989, the West, drunk on the triumph of liberalism, misunderstood the centrality of nationalism and implemented policies that ultimately reinforced exclusionary nationalism and weakened liberalism.

Nationalism, the struggle for sovereignty and self-determination, is not often associated with liberalism, the political philosophy that emphasises protection of individual rights. In recent years in particular, nationalism has come to mean exclusionary nativism. Movements like the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers are anything but liberal: they are white supremacists that try to undermine global liberal democracy. Historically however, liberalism and nationalism were on the same side in certain crucial historical junctures.

<sup>1</sup> Ukrainian Presidency, *Kyiv Is Now the Capital of Global Democracy, the Capital of the Struggle for Freedom for All in Europe - Address by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy*, 6 April 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zaraz-kiyiv-ce-stolicya-globalnoyi-demokratyi-stolicya-boro-74129>.

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As history demonstrates, these forces align when they have a common enemy in tyranny but often become contradictory after the struggle for liberation is achieved. In Europe, until the 1848 revolutions, nationalists like Lafayette, Garibaldi and Mazzini were liberals. They sought to unite their nations under constitutions that would guarantee individual rights. But the liberal revolution failed and after the restoration of monarchies in 1849, the goals of liberals and nationalists diverged.

Liberals sought to preserve their new constitutional rights, whereas nationalists continued to fight for national unity but in an exclusive and conservative form. In Germany, instead of aligning German speaking people under one set of civic liberal ideals, the militant Prussian state united Germans through war and expansion. In France, republicans sought democratic rights and socio-economic equality, while nationalists wanted to restore France to its monarchical glory. These two forces became the defining cleavage of the French political system until at least World War II.

In 1989, the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe took to the streets to demand freedom from Soviet oppression, physically tearing down the walls that separated east from west. Among them was a long-haired, 26 year-old Viktor Orbán, Hungary's controversial prime minister, who was the embodiment of the combination of liberalism and nationalism. In a famous speech he proclaimed that young people were “fighting for the establishment of liberal democracy in

Hungary”.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, beginning in the early 1990s, Orbán, then a member of parliament and the leader of the Fidesz party, took a hard turn towards the right and emphasised nationalism. In recent decades he has become an enemy of liberalism, rewriting the Hungarian constitution, dismantling the courts and limiting independent media and civil society.<sup>3</sup> Today, Hungary is no longer considered a democracy.<sup>4</sup>

In Poland, the liberal nationalist Solidarity, the emblematic movement of 1989, split into liberal and nationalist factions directly after the transition and these remain locked in an existential struggle over the future of Poland.<sup>5</sup> Just prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Poland, like Hungary, was facing severe European Union sanctions for the ruling party's degradation of the rule of

<sup>2</sup> For a translation of the speech see: “Fill in the Blanks”, in *The Orange Files*, 20 June 2013, <https://wp.me/p3vCr9-5i>.

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Wrong Direction on Rights. Assessing the Impact of Hungary's New Constitution and Laws*, 16 May 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/05/16/wrong-direction-rights/assessing-impact-hungarys-new-constitution-and-laws>; Patrick Kingsley, “After Viktor Orbán's Victory, Hungary's Judges Start to Tumble”, in *The New York Times*, 1 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/01/world/europe/hungary-viktor-orban-judges.html>; Krisztián Simon and Tibor Rácz, “Hostile Takeover: How Orbán Is Subjugating the Media in Hungary”, in *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Articles*, 22 August 2017, <https://www.boell.de/en/node/62129>.

<sup>4</sup> Freedom House, “Hungary”, in *Nations in Transit 2020*, <https://freedomhouse.org/node/3458>.

<sup>5</sup> Krzysztof Jasiewicz, “From Solidarity to Fragmentation”, in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (April 1992), p. 55-69.

law.<sup>6</sup>

In both Poland and Hungary, deep animosity between liberals and nationalists led to a nationalist attack on liberal democracy and worrying democratic decline in the two most promising cases of post-Soviet democratisation.

The past decade has indeed seen a rise of nationalism all over the world, a surprising setback for liberalism. The number of people living in liberal democracies is the lowest it has been since 1989,<sup>7</sup> essentially erasing the advances made since the end of the Cold War. But nationalism did not re-emerge out of thin air: a close historical examination reveals strong nationalist themes in the struggle for freedom from communist rule. In that triumphant liberal moment the West regarded nationalism as a bygone ideology that would no longer shape political outcomes.

### *The end of history?*

Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History?” captured the post-1989 heady sense of victory. According to Fukuyama, liberalism had finally triumphed over all alternative political ideologies – communism, fascism and nationalism were all to be relegated

to the dustbins of history.<sup>8</sup> Though Fukuyama warned of the dangers of populism and rising ethnic and nationalist violence, his central argument became the defining creed of the post-Cold War era, and policy makers relied on it to design the architecture of a “new world order”.

The most prominent policy implication of the triumph of liberalism was the belief that the West can and should export democracy for the benefit of humanity. Democracy promotion became an umbrella for a host of policies including economic reforms in foreign countries, the design of political institutions, investing in civil society and even the expansion of NATO.<sup>9</sup>

But the promise of the end of history did not materialise. In less than a decade Yugoslavia shattered into a series of bloody nationalist wars, and the nascent promise of Russian democracy collapsed into chaos and instability. The democracy promotion agenda was not tailored to the particular history and social contexts of the countries they targeted. Consequentially, even in countries that were already moving towards democracy, like Hungary and Poland, this top down intervention in domestic politics kindled a backlash against liberalism that erupted after the financial crisis of 2008. Voters blamed liberals, who they associated with global neoliberal reforms, for their hardships.

<sup>6</sup> “EU Fines Poland €1 Million per Day over Judicial Reforms”, in *Deutsche Welle*, 27 October 2021, <https://p.dw.com/p/42DrB>.

<sup>7</sup> Vanessa A. Boese et al., *Autocratization Changing Nature? Democracy Report 2022*, Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute, March 2022, [https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr\\_2022.pdf](https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?”, in *The National Interest*, No. 16 (Summer 1989), p. 3-18.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, “Preserving the New Peace. The Case against NATO Expansion”, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 3 (May-June 1995), p. 9-13.

The Clinton administration championed one-size fits all economic reforms, which in some places failed almost immediately. In many post-communist states, the first set of reforms, privatisation, happened quickly, but necessary regulatory reforms lagged. This incentivised corrupt actors to take over services and benefit from partial reform.<sup>10</sup> The collapse of the Russian currency twice in the 1990s followed suit, ultimately supporting the rise of Vladimir Putin as a saviour of the nation from the pains and instability of liberalism.<sup>11</sup> This also happened in Ukraine in the 1990s, creating a powerful class of oligarchs that plundered the state and blocked further reforms.<sup>12</sup>

Anti-corruption efforts have had mixed results and are ongoing. Western actors have also profited from Ukrainian corruption in various ways.<sup>13</sup> Paul Manafort is a shameful example of a political actor who advanced the interests of pro-Russian Ukrainian

oligarchs for personal gain.<sup>14</sup> More broadly, widespread corruption and mercenary exploitation supported the nationalist assertion that Western liberalism was hypocritical window dressing for economic interests. Far more promising than outside reform efforts is increasing pressure from Ukrainian citizens fed up with a corrupt system, which translated to political change.<sup>15</sup>

For people who experienced communism, trust in state institutions was almost non-existent. After the transition, there was no major attempt to convince citizens that liberalism was an important value system. Instead, the rapid imposition of strongly liberal institutions like powerful constitutional courts did not leave room for the development of rule of law norms and eventually sparked a backlash. In Ukraine, the constitutional court is already considered a political actor,<sup>16</sup> though not necessarily a liberal one. Ukraine should practice judicial restraint and understand the limitations of courts in liberalising societies.

EU membership is the holy grail for democratising countries. Ukraine's frequent appeals for expedited membership during a deadly war

<sup>10</sup> Joel S. Hellman, “Winners Take All: The Politics of Partial Reform in Postcommunist Transitions”, in *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (January 1998), p. 203-234.

<sup>11</sup> Kristy Ironside, “The Ruble Has Plummeted. It's Not the First Time”, in *The Washington Post*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/02/28/ruble-has-plummeted-its-not-first-time>.

<sup>12</sup> Serhiy Verlanov, “Taming Ukraine's Oligarchs”, in *UkraineAlert*, 19 November 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=322616>.

<sup>13</sup> OECD Anti-corruption Network for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, *Anti-Corruption Reforms in Ukraine: Prevention and Prosecution of Corruption in State-Owned Enterprises. 4th Round of Monitoring of the Istanbul Anti-Corruption Action Plan*, Paris, OECD, 4 July 2018, <https://www.oecd.org/corruption/anti-corruption-reforms-in-ukraine.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Ilya Marritz, “Let's Recall What Paul Manafort and Rudy Giuliani Were Doing in Ukraine”, in *ProPublica*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.propublica.org/article/lets-recall-what-exactly-paul-manafort-and-rudy-giuliani-were-doing-in-ukraine>.

<sup>15</sup> Steven Pifer, “Ukraine: Six Years after the Maidan”, in *Order from Chaos*, 21 February 2020, <https://brook.gs/3bXkGmx>.

<sup>16</sup> Alina Cherviasova, “False Dilemma”, in *Verfassungsblog*, 21 February 2021, <https://verfassungsblog.de/false-dilemma>.

demonstrate that the cultural and economic benefits of membership remain a top priority for prospective states. Central and Eastern Europeans watched enviously as their Western neighbours grew rich and prospered after WWII.

For political elites in Central and Eastern Europe the prospect of joining the EU was so attractive that there was no political discussion about the direction of required reforms. This often means a fundamental transformation of the structure of the state. Going through this transformation without deliberation meant that when European accession did not deliver on its unrealistic promises, domestic liberals were accused of trading the national interest for their own benefit. They became the domestic agents of a demeaning foreign process.

### *Nationalism and liberalism in Ukraine*

Since 1991, Ukrainian politics has been deeply polarised, chaotic, marked by endemic corruption and its development stymied by the penetration of pro-Russian interests. As a result, the Ukrainian political system has been paralysed leading to outrage and two popular revolutions in 2005 and 2014.

Yet, as sociologist Charles Tilly famously theorised, states are consolidated through warfare.<sup>17</sup> Since the Maidan Revolution and the

annexation of Crimea in 2014 Ukraine has been undergoing a process of change.<sup>18</sup> For Ukrainians, a sense of unified national identity has grown stronger. The current war is bound to further solidify Ukrainian national identity that is composed of nationalist and liberal elements because Ukrainian nationalism inherently opposes illiberal Russian imperialism.

The alignment of nationalist and liberal forces also occurred in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s because national identity in the region opposed illiberal Soviet oppression. However, once the threat of Russian invasion diminished, the two forces were torn apart. As long as there is a prominent Russian threat against Ukraine, nationalism may continue to be a liberal force. Hopefully, the current conflict will be resolved soon, but this will hardly remove the geographic and strategic reality of having Russia as its next-door neighbour. Regardless, history demonstrates that there is no guarantee that nationalism will remain liberal.

After the conflict, Ukraine will need significant reconstruction, but it is crucial that this process give space and autonomy for Ukraine to internally resolve the tension between nationalism and liberalism. For the West it is important to support the demand for liberalism in Ukraine – liberalism is a tenet of the Western way of life and its most important discursive tool in its competition with

<sup>17</sup> Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992*, Cambridge, Basil Blackwell, 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Sofiya Kominko, “Ukraine’s Nation-Building Journey and the Legacy of the Euromaidan Revolution”, in *UkraineAlert*, 20 April 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=380204>.

China. At the same time, it is important to avoid outcomes like contemporary Hungary and Poland, where liberalism has lost ground to illiberal exclusionary nationalism. Ukraine has been mired in trouble since independence, but prior to WWII many Western European countries were non-democratic, and in some cases fascist. Ukraine’s history and future development should not be treated as deterministic.

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