

The Existential Value of Ukraine's Freedom

by Nathalie Tocci

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has turned the international spotlight back onto the value of democracy and the contrast between liberal democracies and authoritarian systems. However, it has done so by adding nuance and emotional power to what was previously a rather sterile debate.

When Joe Biden was elected President of the United States, putting an end – at least for the time being – to the traumatic years for US democracy epitomised by Donald Trump's presidency, international politics reacquired a distinctively normative, if not ideological, taste. Powers like Russia and China should be opposed, not "only" because of their aggressive or unfair behaviour – be it in the South China Sea, Taiwan, Ukraine, cyber, energy, technology or trade – but because that malign behaviour, so the argument went, is intrinsically linked to the nature of their political systems: it's democracy versus autocracy, stupid.

Democracies, autocracies – and those in between

Russia's invasion of Ukraine strengthened this narrative while adding nuance to it.

The war and the way countries worldwide have positioned themselves towards it have highlighted the fact that there is no black-and-white dichotomy between democracies and autocracies. True, countries that support Ukraine by providing military assistance to it while sanctioning Russia are all, invariably, democracies, be it in Europe, America or Asia. True too, countries that back the Kremlin are all authoritarian, from North Korea and Iran – which have provided military support for Russia – to China, which, while tiptoeing around military and economic assistance given the risk of secondary sanctions, has politically sided with Moscow.

However, it is also true that the vast majority of countries straddles these

Nathalie Tocci is Director of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Honorary Professor at the University of Tübingen.

divides. Authoritarian countries in the Gulf have maintained, often opportunistically, relations with both Kyiv and Moscow, and democracies have done so too. India, Turkey, Israel, South Africa and Hungary would still qualify as electoral democracies, although they display serious shortcomings when it comes to human rights, rule of law and the separation of powers. These countries have also avoided siding with one side or the other in the war. In some cases, they have simply taken a step back, careful not to get entangled in the dynamics of what they consider to be a European war. In other cases, they have exploited their "neutrality" to trade, send weapons, buy cheap oil and position themselves as mediators, all at the same time. Yes, there is a distinction between democracies and autocracies, but the war has highlighted how blurry that distinction is, and how many shades of grey exist between the two ends of the spectrum.

An imperial rationality

At the same time, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has instilled unprecedented emotional power into the fundamental difference between democracies and autocracies, highlighting the existential nature of that divide. If international politics were shaped exclusively by objective material factors, from geography and demography to a state's economic and military might, the war would have never happened. Given that there was no threat to Russia's security nor plans for NATO enlargement that would have made Russia feel encroached, it made no sense for Russia to embark on an invasion that would

have exposed its military weaknesses, wreaked havoc to its economy and imperilled its lucrative energy business with Europe.

Yet the invasion took place and continues. It would be too easy to dismiss this by finger-pointing Vladimir Putin's irrationality exacerbated by the Covid lockdown. All rationalities stem from an idea, and not all ideas stem from the principles of Enlightenment. Putin's certainly don't. If the dominant idea motivating action is an imperial drive to radically revise the norm of sovereignty and unite the "Russian world" across borders of sovereign states, then time is not playing in Russia's favour. It is precisely Russia's structural economic decline – and Vladimir Putin's biological one too – that explains why the invasion had to happen, and had to happen now. If the ideology permeating the Kremlin is to be taken seriously – and it should –, then the invasion becomes "rational" in its worldview. Just as predictable is the fact that notwithstanding the economic costs and military defeats that Russia might incur in the weeks and months ahead, the war will continue. The war will persist both militarily as well as in energy, food, cyber and propaganda terms, including nuclear sabre-rattling so long as Putin remains in office and Russia is capable of waging war. Tragically, this simply has to be factored in.

The existential value of freedom

Following the same logic, but on the opposite side of the ideational divide, stands Ukraine. The resilience of the Ukrainian people, the heroism



of its soldiers and the courage of its leadership have all underlined the existential value of another idea: that of freedom and democracy. Viewed through a purely material lens, Ukrainian resistance is hard to explain. Faced with Russia's military onslaught, Ukrainians may well have given up, allowing themselves to be occupied and annexed by a dictatorial state to avoid death and destruction. Yet if Ukrainian action stems from a fundamentally different idea – the freedom entailed by living in a democracy – then the resilience, heroism and courage are all perfectly rational, and everything that has happened over the last year, and will continue to happen as Ukrainians continue resisting, becomes not only possible but actually predictable too. The war, and the debate surrounding it, are inevitably focused on trenches, missiles, tanks and jets. However, this is fundamentally a war that pits two diametrically opposite ideas against one another.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has awakened us to a contradiction: there are innumerable shades of grey between the two poles of democracy and authoritarianism; the world is not easily categorisable as being bipolar, tripolar or even multipolar. It is a far messier world than what we may have imagined after the heyday of American hegemony. Yet the power of these ideas and the stark difference between them is existential in nature.

14 February 2023

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Leo Goretti (l.goretti@iai.it)

- 23 | 02 Nathalie Tocci, *The Existential Value of Ukraine's Freedom*
- 23 | 01 Karolina Muti, *Reach for the Stars: Bridging Italy's Potential in Space with Its Foreign and Security Policy*
- 22 | 66 Francesca Lenzi, *The EU vis-à-vis Turmoil in Burkina Faso: Towards Europeanisation?*
- 22 | 65 Francesco Belcastro, *Palestinian Flags and Warm Embraces: Politics and Arabism at the World Cup in Qatar*
- 22 | 64 Pier Paolo Raimondi, *Walking out of the Woods: EU Industrial Policy between the Energy Crisis and Decarbonisation*
- 22 | 63 Maria Giulia Amadio Viceré, *EU Foreign Policy Integration at Times of War: From Short-Term Responses to Long-Term Solutions*
- 22 | 62 Costanza Galetto, *The Ukrainian Conflict and the Energy Crisis: Sustaining the Energy Transition*
- 22 | 61 Silvia Strangis, *Italy's Renewed Interest in the Horn of Africa*
- 22 | 60 Pietro Malesani, *Italian Foreign Policy and the Western Sahara: Balancing Relations with Morocco and Algeria*
- 22 | 59 Anna Magnasco, *The MUOS Ground Station in Niscemi: Legal Aspects and Environmental Sensitivities in US-Italian Relations*