



Voices of Ukraine: #1 What is Ukraine fighting for?

Edwin Bendyk

Today the whole world is talking about Ukraine and the war there caused by the Russian aggression. Meanwhile, the war has been underway for eight years and has now entered a phase of greater intensity and brutality. In the debate about Ukraine and its future – but also about the world after the war – it is important to listen to and understand experts, analysts, publicists, politicians, academics and cultural figures from Ukraine. We need to understand how they think about what is happening, their aspirations, what they are fighting for, and what future they imagine for their country and the world, as members of the European and global community.

We will invite distinguished guests to speak so that we can hear directly what the Ukrainians think about the situation unfolding before our eyes and enter into dialogue with them.

The *Voices of Ukraine* series of debates organised by the Batory Foundation ideaForum and the weekly news magazine *Polityka*.

The Russian aggression and the war in Ukraine have dominated media coverage in recent weeks. With great suspense, we follow the news from the battlefield each day. We watch in horror as cities are bombed and civilians suffer. The news and the sight of people fleeing war arouse sympathy, resulting in gestures of unprecedented solidarity.

Given the abundance of news and information, the voices of the Ukrainian people often get lost. What makes the Ukrainian resistance so effective, and why is the Ukrainian society so resilient? What goals have the Ukrainians set for themselves in their armed resistance against the Russian aggression? What are the

At the start of April 2022, Dmitry Medvedev, a former president of Russia who is currently deputy head of the Russian Federation's Security Council, published a post on the Telegram messaging app explaining Russia's objectives regarding Ukraine and, in reality, the world. Medvedev reiterated the objectives presented by Vladimir Putin: the denazification and demilitarisation of Ukraine. He also developed these intentions, writing that the objective is not only to conduct a "special operation" – the Russians' term for the war – but also to transform the Ukrainians' consciousness. In response, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated unambiguously in an interview with the Ukrainian press that the Ukrainian side is not broaching ideas such as denazification and demilitarisation at all during the negotiation process.

A few weeks ago, Dmitry Bykov, a well-known Russian liberal poet and publicist associated with the *Novaya Gazeta* journal, said that Putin has *de facto* lost, as the Russian leadership of the Slavic world has ended and the time of Ukrainian leadership has come. In the clash with Russia, Ukraine has demonstrated a new social model for the 21st century and a new type of political leadership. Volodymyr Zelensky was presented as a trickster, the optimal figure for the 21st century. Professor Yaroslav Hrytsak responded to Dmitry Bykov's idea quite brutally, rejecting the idea that Ukraine aspires to lead the Slavic world. If that is not the desired outcome of this confrontation then what is Ukraine fighting for?

Yaroslav Hrytsak

This thesis was repeated by Yulia Latynina, a well-known anti-Putin Russian intellectual. According to her, the time of Muscovite Russia is ending and the time of Kievan Rus' is beginning. In my opinion, the time of every kind of Russia is ending, because as Ukrainians we do not have the ambition to become a leader of some kind community with a composition similar to the Russian one. Belarusians, Ukrainians and Russians are not the only Slavs – Poles, Czechs and Croats are also Slavs and have found their place in the European Union. We wish to find that place in the European Union, too. The idea of Rus' is not a full equivalent of the European Union. We are looking for our path to the European Union, as part of European integration. The war in Ukraine began with this.

Edwin Bendyk

Bykov and Latynina's ideas come from the start of the war in Ukraine. And, unfortunately, the war has continued. To what extent is the course of the war changing the mindset in Ukraine? To what extent is the aspiration to integrate with the EU growing, and to what extent do these proposals have to be

limitations of a peace agreement? What do the Ukrainians want with regard to the European Union, NATO, and other alliances? What is the reconstruction of the country following the war supposed to look like? What will the relations between Ukraine and its neighbouring countries be like?

These are just some of the questions we are going to ask Ukrainian experts, journalists, artists, and politicians. There is no doubt that the future is now being shaped in Ukraine, and, to a great extent, its final form will depend on the men and women of Ukraine. Let's hear what they have to say!

The main question of the first discussion in the series was: What is Ukraine fighting for? It took place on April 6, 2022 with the participation of Yevhen Hlibovitsky, Natalia Humeniuk, Yaroslav Hrytsak, Maria Zolkina and Edwin Bendyk as the interviewer.

corrected in the face of current events? Polls measuring social sentiment, conducted by Rating Group¹ every week, show that over 90% of Ukrainians are in favour of Ukraine joining the EU. They are convinced that this will happen quickly, within the next few years.

Yaroslav Hrytsak

There are no major changes here; just intensification. Ukraine's turn towards Europe is old already: for the past 10–15 years, the European option has been beating the others. After the annexation of Crimea and the war, Ukrainians' aspiration to join the European Union is obvious. The biggest change concerns their desire to join NATO. Earlier, some of the Ukrainian elite imagined that one can join the European Union without the North Atlantic Treaty. We saw the example of the accession of Poland and Czechia, which joined the European Union via NATO. We believed that our path will be different, but now we see that there is no other path. This is a direct response to the war: for us, the existential choice is the most natural one. We cannot exist with a neutral status, as it constitutes a threat and does not solve anything. Moreover, as experts say, a neutral status is much more costly than the status of a NATO member. We want security and to escape from this borderland, and the only way is to seek protection under the umbrella of European integration.

Will we manage? It depends on the outcome of the war. This is not a war over culture or language; it concerns the strategic choice of Ukraine's place in the future world.

Edwin Bendyk

I would like to move on to the question of security, as an aspect associated with aspirations to join NATO. When we look at Ukraine's negotiations with Russia, we see that this question has been suspended. In his public statements, President Zelensky uses a formula that indicates that Ukraine is not abandoning its aspirations, but that NATO is not ready to take in Ukraine. It is as if Zelensky were opening a gate and sending Russia a signal that NATO membership is the subject of negotiations, in exchange for rather enigmatically thought-out security guarantees. What is Ukraine building its security guarantees on?

Maria Zolkina

The security dilemma facing Ukraine does not concern NATO. Simply abandoning its move towards the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation will not create a friendly environment around Ukraine or make our relations with the Russian Federation safe. Russia's point is not to make Ukraine give up on NATO membership. The Russian Federation is demanding that the Ukrainian army, and the Ukrainian defence system overall, be incapable of repelling a direct or hybrid attack by Russia, which we will live with in the coming years, just as we do now. Not necessarily in the same order. In the next few years, Russia will not be a friendly or less friendly state when it comes to Ukraine.

In terms of the conditions being set by the Russian Federation, the matter is not limited to being oriented towards joining NATO. I am in favour of Ukraine's full accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and believe that there are currently no alternatives to NATO on the European continent when it comes to security. It must be emphasised: for now, Russia has not tested how strong NATO is. Now member states have been pondering weapon deliveries, air defence for Ukraine, and so on.

¹ See: <https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/>.

Russia understands that, in the case of an aggression against a NATO member, the response could be completely different, and it faces this obstacle for now.

If Ukraine were to decide to abandon its move towards NATO membership, it should have an adequate alternative. At present, this could be a defence partnership analogous to NATO, “a miniature NATO” with individual countries that are NATO or just EU members, sharing interests with Ukraine and facing shared challenges. I am speaking primarily about Eastern Europe, including Poland, but also Britain, which is far from the European Union’s and NATO’s eastern borders, but shares our interests in opposing Russia and aims to increase the European continent’s security. These kinds of alliances can be an adequate response and compromise.

Yet the Russian Federation does not want to sign any agreement with us if, beyond that agreement, Ukraine will have the right to common defence and a common security policy in some different format, not necessarily NATO. Russia needs a Ukraine that cannot defend itself; it is not accidental that the Russian Federation assigns so much importance to Ukraine being outside any kind of bloc. This is not necessarily about Ukraine having to give up on weapons or not being able to cooperate with other countries on defence.

We are seeing the following response to the current situation: we are speaking about security guarantees for Ukraine – it is unclear who would provide them and what they might be like. Diplomats are urging us to wait because “the negotiation process is underway”. Since 2014, I have been dealing with the negotiations with the Russian Federation regarding the Donbas and I know that none of our Western partners – including Poland, Britain and the United States, which are currently Ukraine’s top partners – will provide us with security guarantees that would be a real alternative to NATO. None of the countries mentioned will provide us with these kinds of guarantees for the same reason that we are *de facto* not being accepted into NATO: they fear that it will provoke Russian aggression against the individual countries mentioned.

As Ukraine, we find ourselves in a vicious circle. Why should we officially abandon efforts to join NATO and speak about some kind of illusory security guarantees if we will ultimately be alone anyway?

I will give you an example. Imagine the worst security scenario for Ukraine when it signs something. This will not happen tomorrow, as Russia is not ready this year; it will first try to occupy part of Ukraine’s territory, at least in the Donbas and in southern Ukraine, to take hold in the Kherson or Zaporizhia region. Only later will the Russian Federation attempt to start negotiations with Ukraine, to temporarily take a break before further aggression.

The Ukrainian side agrees to remain outside blocs and some countries are our security guarantees. In Istanbul, we heard a list of various countries, from Israel, which currently has an unfriendly stance towards Ukraine, to China, which also has an unfriendly stance towards us, or Britain, which is one of our key partners. Can all these partners be added to a single list concerning Ukraine’s security? And what would these guarantees look like? If different states subscribe to this, it means that there will be no guarantees at all, because Britain and Poland, one the on hand, cannot promise the same help that cannot be promised or even politically announced in Israel or China, not even at the level of declarations. This means a promise that cannot be delivered and will lead to the same thing we had in the Budapest Memorandum after 1994. The difference is that after 1994 the Ukrainian state was not restricted in its aspirations to join some defence alliance. The current proposals include the possibility of forbidding Ukraine, as a neutral state, from aspiring to join not only NATO, but also any other

alliances. This is the worst trap that we could fall into. I hope that Ukrainian diplomats will conduct negotiations in order to organise humanitarian corridors, evacuate the population, and prevent real acts of genocide in Ukraine's temporarily occupied cities. Yet the i's will be dotted and the t's crossed when the Ukrainian armed forces halt the Russian army's attacks beyond northern Ukraine – not through diplomacy, but through war.

The Ukrainian army is not only fighting for itself. Ukraine is not only fighting for its own existence. We are fighting to be a separate, sovereign Ukraine, and to constitute a community. We do not want the world to see us as Russia's younger brother. From my point of view, we are fighting for European countries and the Western democratic world to stop viewing Russia as a holy cow that is untouchable and needs to be consulted about every matter. Of course, great politics foresees the balancing of interests, but it does not foresee a big country with influence on other countries' economy, being able to violate the foundations of distinct sovereign states' coexistence after the Second World War.

Edwin Bendyk

Thank you for reminding us of the main question: what is Ukraine fighting for? I would like us to try to examine and explain this phenomenon that fascinates the world. I am referring to Ukrainian society's attitude, visible in the polls cited above. According to Rating Group's research, Ukrainians' level of optimism is growing. It is getting higher every week: 95% of people are convinced that the war will be won and 78% claim that things are going in the right direction. Right before the war, in February 2022, just 25% of respondents said so. This war has changed the social mood completely – but that is just a statistic.

What does this look like from specific Ukrainians' perspective? What is happening in Ukrainian society? To what extent is something new being created, and to what extent is it a continuation of what we observed on the Maidan in 2013–2014?

Natalia Humeniuk

I am joining you from Kyiv, which is defending itself and slowly returning to life. For now, it is difficult to understand the deep meaning of what is happening, at a historical level. I am referring to what I would call in-depth, real democracy for the whole world. We have conducted masses of polls, we studied civil society and Ukrainian democracy, but in my opinion, now, during these cruel and important events, people are showing who they really are and how they are changing. Today, we are seeing Ukrainian civic identity in full.

I recently spent time in twelve of Ukraine's regions – with the exception of the Chernihiv region, *de facto* in all the regions where there is warfare; in the east and south, in small towns and big cities. A multitude of processes is taking place there and I spoke to many people. I spoke to members of a transgender community from Odesa. A twenty-year-old girl from the group said: "NATO are cowards, our army knows how to fight". I also spoke to soldiers. They do not criticise; they are genuinely grateful to the West for its support, but they believe that, when it comes to security, Ukraine can primarily count on itself now. Is some kind of compromise possible here – not just territorial? Some kind of arrangement?

Similarly to Maria Zolkina, I joined various stages of the negotiations, including those regarding the Donbas, with the Russian side's participation. My contact with those people is currently poor.

Sometimes they write that they saw me on CNN. And they state unequivocally that, for now, nothing except defence and military action on Ukrainian territory will influence the Kremlin. No sanctions, only Ukraine's military victory influences what the Kremlin does. Full stop.

For me, that was a relevant comment and a good introduction to our conversation. What is Ukraine fighting for? We often talk about multiculturalism. I travel a lot and have met Bulgarians, Greeks, Roma, Armenians, Abkhazians, Georgians, Azerbaijanis, Jews, Ukrainian Russians. A Greek who was born in Greece, but has been living here for 20 years, says "this is my country". An Armenian born in a village outside Zaporizhia is now helping in that village with his religious community. He says "in our place, in Ukraine" and then tells us something about Armenia right afterwards. A builder from Georgia helping his friend from Zaporizhia rebuild a damaged house says "in our place, here, in Ukraine, and over there at my place in Georgia". Really, a large part of what is happening with Ukraine reflects this.

Ukraine is fighting for the value of human life, for a world with rules. Ukrainians believe that a world without any rules is not worthy of life. I was full of admiration when the mayor of the town of Okhtyrka said honestly that his town is a bridgehead for the rule of law in the world and for the law to exist. He believes that his town is fighting for this very thing. I spoke to one of the chief rabbis in Dnipro, who grew up in Brooklyn. He told me: "I am from America, I have lived here for 30 years and thought that democracy is simply a better life than in – let's say – the Soviet Union. My family, who had left during the Soviet era, taught me this. Yet here we are fighting for a different democracy; finally, after 30 years in Ukraine, I have understood what that means. It is the right to make a choice."

I spoke to a Russian-speaking woman who grew up in Odesa, has worked there her whole life and is now the deputy mayor. In response to my question, she replied that we are fighting for peace. When I asked what exactly peace means, she said: "Peace is when they will not tell us what kind of president to elect". She did not say this as the deputy mayor, but as a woman with a relative fighting in Mariupol whom she has not been able to contact in weeks.

I try to speak to people with various views and positions. This in-depth understanding of democracy as the right to choose, as nobody being able to tell a person what views to hold, appears everywhere, from a grandma in Zaporizhia to an official in the Sumy region, or a volunteer who is not what we might consider a conscious activist. The right to choose is important to the man installing windows from Odesa, to the woman operating the milling machine, and to the transgender girl from Odesa.

In one interview, Zelensky said that he is calling on nations and that, if the state alliances do not work, he will summon people to make alliances themselves. This is a very interesting thought. In Europe and around the world, there are many citizens who see the technocracy and do not identify with the European Union or NATO. We are now calling for real democracy, which takes on a different meaning in crisis conditions and adds taste to the institutions established with peace and freedom in mind, but that have become bureaucratic and technocratic. Ukrainians really feel this, but are fighting so that all these concepts – words of freedom, democracy, human rights – go from being the technocratic language of officials and social organisations to being valued by people around the world and take on a real meaning.

Edwin Bendyk

I would like to ask about the second element that surprised the world as much as Ukrainian society's attitude: the Ukrainian state's resilience. In a lecture marking 30 years of Ukraine's independence,

Yevhen Hlibovitsky² spoke of the delayed war for independence, but also pointed to the sources of Ukraine's problems with governing that result from many years of colonialism, which deprived Ukrainians of the possibility to construct their own state. We have gotten used to viewing Ukraine as a weak state – in this way we were, in a sense, repeating what mattered to Moscow. Meanwhile, Ukraine has turned out to be a very strong state, not just in military terms. How its institutions function during this time of crisis is striking; most of them are operating, including critical infrastructure, and so on. Is it surprising that, in the face of this crisis, the state is resistant to such an unprecedented attack?

Yevhen Hlibovitsky

The question “What is Ukraine fighting for?” has a concrete answer: Ukraine is fighting to be recognised as a sovereign subject, to be able to live its own life according to Ukrainians' wishes. Moreover, Ukraine is fighting so that all those that could be dominated by strong empires can be subjects. One might ask: will Russia still exist as an empire, will it survive the defeat and take with it a series of imperial behaviours that operate in various countries to this day, not just in Russia?

When we look at certain aspects associated with this war, we often see that the Western approach has a colonial character. For example, a significant share of the Western media and experts did not allow the thought that Ukraine might have enough strength to hold back the Russian army. A small state simply cannot have that much strength; the difference in scale and historical experience is too big, and so on.

What is happening in Ukraine? A gigantic change is taking place in Ukraine. Ukrainians are starting to adapt their own country. Earlier, one of the key indicators in sociological research was the question of Ukrainians' alienation from the state. Over the past 100 years – that is, the time of living historical memory – Ukrainians have dealt with a state that was not much of a subject, that perceived its citizens as a resource, rather than a value. However, we now face an attempt to establish other relations with the state, in which the internal Ukrainian way of seeing things is slightly different to the external one. No other president has ever had the same level of support as President Volodymyr Zelensky, but this does not mean that tomorrow the Ukrainians will be ready to fully trust the state. Besides, if we look at the current situation – in terms of logistics, in terms of resistance – it is not only a matter of statehood, but also of volunteers and businesses. If we look from an internal perspective, we see many situations in which the Ukrainians were unable to make something happen. For example, thousands of Ukrainians buying bulletproof vests entered the European market, which caused prices to skyrocket. If the Ukrainians had acted as a single buyer, they could have bought those vests faster, more effectively and for less money. Yet the Ukrainian Ministry of Economy was unable to become a mediator here, so hundreds of small entities started acting on their own. On the one hand, we see a huge change: an increase in subjectivity.

On the other hand, I do not wish to accelerate here, run too far ahead and be an idealist, because for now we will not be dealing with a state that functions perfectly. Making institutions more efficient will take some time. We are now observing a change in the social contract at the fundamental level. After this war, the Ukrainians will most probably perceive the state as their tool, rather than their master. This is good, but not enough. The road to building institutions will still be difficult and take time.

² Text version: Yevhen Hlibovitsky, *Niepodległość odwleczona w czasie*, <https://www.batory.org.pl/publikacja/niepodleglosc-odwleczona-w-czasie/>.

Edwin Bendyk

We have spoken about security, NATO and the complexity of the problem of security guarantees, which depends on the outcome of the military conflict. How can the peace conditions that the Ukrainians could accept be defined? From research, we know that, in the general consciousness, the condition for real peace is the return of Crimea and the occupied part of the Donbas to within Ukraine's borders. The vast majority sees it this way. We know that, in the negotiation talks, the president's condition is the Russian troops' withdrawal to Ukraine's borders, as they were prior to 24 February 2022. What is the real aim and timeframe here?

Maria Zolkina

It is not worth talking about dates, because if the Ukrainian army manages to give the Russian army a beating in the Donbas, where the most capable combat part of the Ukrainian army is currently located, if this can be done faster than the soldiers hope, we will be happy and thank our defenders. If it takes longer and we need more forces, there is no point in promising anything. When I last spoke to soldiers, they were very optimistic, which pleases me greatly as a citizen and as an analyst. I spoke to various soldiers in various regions of Ukraine and heard the same message: "Everything will be fine. We will manage against the Russian army. Do not worry, if we are not counterattacking, it means that the right moment for this movement has not yet come. We are planning, assessing the situation, not wasting forces and ammunition, not exposing people, if we are not convinced that it will be 100% successful. We plan and work as one should in wartime".

I am hearing this from various people. Both as an analyst and as a citizen, I do not ask about specific dates. I would like to warn you against popular statements by Ukrainian newsmakers along the lines of: "In two weeks, we will push someone out of somewhere, and in a week we will be celebrating victory somewhere". No, we will celebrate victory when the right time comes.

The conditions of peace can be different.

Firstly, Ukrainian society definitely will not accept any new loss of territory. Moreover, at least part of society now sees the situation in the occupied Donbas as an opportunity to liberate the entire Donetsk and Luhansk regions. At the top diplomatic level, we are not hearing these kinds of official declarations. Even if the state leadership has, or will have, those kinds of military and political plans, I am convinced that it will not announce it. If a counterattack enables the parts of the Donbas occupied earlier to be liberated, we will see this *post factum*. Nobody will interrupt diplomatic negotiations with the Russian Federation now with declarations about how we will fight all the way to the borders of 2014 or 1991, but the Ukrainian state – or, more precisely, Ukrainian society – will not accept new losses.

Secondly, Ukrainian society will not accept a lack of security guarantees. Our society is pluralistic and democratic; an internal discussion is taking place within it at a very serious level. If we were offered a Budapest Memorandum No. 2, the proposal would be unequivocally criticised, and an essential part of society would see it as surrendering our strategic positions. The replacement of certain alliances with others is likely, the only question is: what will that give us? Is it a new arrangement that nobody will adhere to, or a real arrangement supported by NATO, which we will not give up on? Might these arrangements temporarily replace NATO for us? This is a matter for discussion, but these guarantees definitely need to ensure that Ukraine has the possibility to develop its army after the Russian troops leave. These guarantees should not restrict Ukraine's defence cooperation with any kind of partners

or our right to form any new defence alliances, as that would mean that Ukrainian sovereignty is being restricted and our defence steered from the outside.

If we rule out these three unacceptable things when it comes to security guarantees, even foreseeing the level of help that we currently have, plus the theoretical possibility of using contingents of other forces on Ukraine's territory if there is a new case of aggression, we can discuss it then.

Data from sociological studies on the Donbas conducted in 2014–2021 is very telling. Every time the Russian Federation attempted to force Ukraine – whether by military means (as in the case of the cities of Debaltseve or Svetlodarsk) or through diplomatic pressure – to agree to unacceptable conditions, a compromise with Russia's position that actually harmed Ukraine's interests, public opinion reacted in the opposite way. The more pressure Russia exerted, the more society was against it. Nine out of ten Ukrainians are convinced that we can win.

A while ago, I published an article in *The Guardian*³ which primarily sought to tell Western readers: “Friends – including my fellow analysts – you are assessing various scenarios for how this war could unfold, but we never see a scenario on how to help Ukraine win and rebuild its own territorial unity”. I think that we need to focus our military and diplomatic efforts on this: providing the army with additional weapons, rather than opting for diplomatic compromises that will weaken Ukraine's position.

Edwin Bendyk

You mentioned pluralistic society and its mechanisms: how it is working right now, its meaning for democracy, and the feeling of being able to make choices. We see this in who is fighting, in who is reaching for weapons. There are anarchist divisions and LGBT soldiers joining the fighting; on the other hand, there is the “Azov” regiment, which is fighting in Mariupol. Can the model of such ideological breadth be maintained after the war? Will this kind of political model work out? We know that there were major tensions before the war, such as the conservative approach to LGBT milieus and problems when organising gay rights parades in Kyiv. This was changing over time. Could the current events speed up the institutionalisation of pluralism as a normal feature of society?

Natalia Humeniuk

One researcher studying far-right movements said that “Azov” is now a completely different story to the one earlier – it is a subdivision of the Ukrainian army, Ukrainian soldiers who have nothing to do with the battalion that existed briefly in 2014, where founder Andriy Biletsky played an important role. These are completely different people who have nothing to do with the earlier ideology. The subject of the LGBT rights parade in Kyiv is relevant because the event was defended by the state police, and primarily attacked by religious and conservative people.

Every war is toxic for society and every society struggles to emerge from war. Yet I will add one interesting thing to do justice to President Zelensky. This can be explained in sociological terms, but when it comes to the majority of people, he understands perfectly what the majority is feeling, and really broadcasts on the same wave as the majority. If we are discussing agreements, I will add that there are or will be people in cabinets, in posts, who will criticise them. I remember well a conversation

³ M. Zolkina, *Ukraine will not surrender one inch of land to Russia – the West must understand this*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/25/ukraine-west-russia-kyiv-russian-offensive>. Footnote by the editors.

with a staunch supporter of Yulia Tymoshenko, who said that she did not support Zelensky due to the strong privatisation and earlier would never have agreed to a compromise, but who now understands that there are complicated choices and that Zelensky cannot close the sky alone. If we could close the sky, we would win on land. But he cannot do this alone. This stance impresses me.

This exists among governors, too. I have returned from the Donbas, which is very painful. We understand the Ukrainians' military strength, but Russia is gathering its forces, too. I left the Donbas with a sense of tragedy: that people will die there, that they will scorch the earth there and that the Ukrainians will defend it. The governor of the Donetsk region said that, repeating words often said by Zelensky: "We are not only fighting so that the graves of soldiers whom we will decorate with medals afterwards can be here". Zelensky said that he does not wish to be the "president of three hundred Spartans". Ukraine faces a tragic choice that can be avoided through assistance: between the price of human life and the price of freedom. In my opinion, Ukrainian society is much more moderate. Soldiers often understand this too, as they know that human life has a value. There will always be people who say "freedom for the price of death". This is normal, but the Ukrainians understand perfectly that there is a need to make complicated choices.

When it comes democratic society, a major development compared to the Maidan period is the institutionalisation of the state. This is not about volunteers replacing the state. We see how this works in the case of challenges like these now: people who were elected – such as the president, governor or mayor – and those who were appointed – such as the chairman of the regional council – can be on various terms, but they are consonant now. As an example, I will share a unique story from the Dnipropetrovsk region. The president was in conflict with the leader of the opposition party in his native Kryvyi Rih and the mayor of Dnipro. Now they are working together, because each of them understands that his is responsible for his own place. Three well-known people with their own groupings and internal conflicts. It works: an anti-corruption activist in Zaporizhia critical of the authorities remains critical, but is cooperating with the authorities to ensure people's safety. In my opinion, this works thanks to the institutions of the state and the bureaucracy. Ukrainian volunteers will never replace the bureaucracy, the Ministry of Health, the army, or the municipal services, electricity or waterworks. The business sector will not replace the Ukrainian railways – and the trains are running.

In discussions between experts, we often slide over subjects of cooperation between volunteers, the business sector and the authorities – and now I see that we are moving forwards. I see the prospect of society becoming consonant thanks to these calls to appreciate the value of human life. When Zelensky addresses citizens or soldiers, processing his own, difficult emotions, he encourages us to focus on mutual care and concern – rather than on hatred for the other. The leader's stance becomes an example. Every war is toxic and I worry about how difficult it will be to emerge from it. Yet the potential linked to people's behaviour and attitude is an incredible humanist stance, beyond any kind of politics. This is saving us and could save us.

Edwin Bendyk

The foreign media are writing a lot about Ukraine. What have they failed to understand? What in the complexity of the social or political process has the global opinion failed to grasp? Where is the biggest deficit? What is our problem, as people observing what is happening in Ukraine? What should be explained in a better way?

Yaroslav Hrytsak

Let's put it provocatively: everything you know about Ukraine, everything you imagine, is not true. For a long time, we did not understand Ukraine ourselves, and are only starting to understand it now. In 2000, Andrew Wilson's book entitled *The Ukrainians. Unexpected Nation* was published.⁴ How can an unexpected nation exist, if it has 40 million members? Who did not expect this nation? The West did not understand that the Ukrainian nation exists. It was said that this is a nation for 10 days, perhaps 10 years, that will later disappear. Meanwhile, the Ukrainian nation does not want to disappear. We were supposed to lose the war within two days, but we did not lose it. They accuse us of speaking in an exalted, rhetorical way of values being meaningless. Yet values *do* have meaning: the value of dignity comes from the value of security.

You do not know this about us, but you also forget about this about yourselves: this idea of in-depth democracy, which can be learnt in Ukraine.

There was once an interesting text on the Maidan by a theologian of the Moscow patriarchate. He said that if all the Churches want to learn what the true Christian church really is, they should go to the Maidan. Now, if someone in the world would like to understand what real democracy is, he must go to Ukraine and learn about it. Not only because we fight more effectively than NATO – we simply have “that thing” now. Not because we are better, but because the existential threat is much higher than where you are, and these things become more visible in times of crisis. We would not want you to live through this kind of crisis, but be ready for it to potentially happen.

This is what I want to tell Europe, because you do not understand: there is an idea that this crisis can be contained within Ukraine's borders. No, this is ultimately not a Ukrainian crisis. It is not even a Russian or European crisis. It is a global crisis. The shape of the world's future is at stake here. There is a popular saying: “cutlets separately, flies separately” – meanwhile, the flies are already sitting on the cutlets and they cannot be separated. The Ukrainian problem is a global problem and one finally has to learn to see this.

Please treat us much more seriously than you took us before – than we took ourselves.

Edwin Bendyk

As this conflict has a global dimension and the future of the world is being decided on, what is Poland's place in this puzzle? What can we do? How should we be involved in these events?

Yaroslav Hrytsak

I cannot be an advisor here; I can only say “thank you”. We feel that, both among neighbouring countries and more distant ones, the Polish assistance is the most distinct. The point is not whether it is the biggest – because, despite everything, Poland has its own limitations – but it is the most distinct. Let us say clearly that there are also politicians in the Polish government who, until recently, were not very well disposed towards Ukraine, for various reasons, including the historical narrative. Yet the war is changing all of that.

⁴ A Wilson, *The Ukrainians. Unexpected Nation*, New Haven–London 2000.

I fear that Poland's role is diminishing, as Germany still remains the key territory. We have already received and are still receiving what we wanted to receive from Poland, as part of these same capabilities. The key question now is how far can Germany go, as we understand that the contours of Europe currently depend on its policy. If we speak about Europe's weaknesses, those are above all the weaknesses of Germany itself. If we speak about the transformation of Europe, all that depends on the transformation of Germany and on what is happening there. I do not know how, but it is important for both us and you to change the approach of Brussels, Berlin and Washington.

Why are Poland and Ukraine similar and why do we understand each other? Because we had the same feeling of danger a few decades ago. We had the same experiences and were used to the same narrative to convince everyone. The martial law and other events are to some extent similar.

I can only thank you. At the same time, I have a huge request: we would very much like to have our Ukrainians back, especially those who are in Poland. We fear that many of them will assimilate and want to stay in Poland. And that is a social and demographic problem for Ukraine. Ukraine has given away a large part of its youngest Ukrainians. Those who were supposed to go to school and university. If we lose these people, it will be a huge problem for us and for Ukraine's development. Everything needs to be done for these people to return to Ukraine.

Edwin Bendyk

We need to spread this appeal. The question of resilience during a crisis, not just of the army itself, but of the structures of the state, which is capable of ensuring social services, appears in various analyses. It is said that this is a success of the reforms after 2014, such as decentralisation. Can this observation be confirmed or is it overly hasty? What is the dynamic here?

Yevhen Hlibovitsky

The Ukrainians are learning and acquiring new habits very quickly. This network nature of Ukrainian society makes it possible for one person to find appropriate solutions that spread rapidly throughout the network. The challenge is currently to build a hierarchy and structures. It seems to me that building institutions and shaping new rules will be the biggest challenge. We now have a political team in power that is attempting to simplify the rules and restrict the institutions. After the war, we will see to what extent this approach will change – whether the action will be ideological or more populist. I hope it is the latter, though my professional experience points to the former.

The Ukrainians are getting better and better at carrying out reforms. Over the past 30 years, changes took places slowly; we were gaining maturity to face systemic changes and increasingly broad challenges. There was not this fragmentary nature, unlike in countries that carried out reforms rather quickly, societies loosened up, stopped defending democracy or other achievements, from privileges or their own economy's competitiveness. War is a catalyst for powerful processes. We have sped up incredibly. Demographically, we are already *de facto* in the next decade, after 2030. We must get used to the fact that events have overtaken our readiness to adapt and that this ability to adapt will need to be rebuilt anew. I am convinced that the Ukrainians will manage, both in terms of reforms and security. Our diversity is our strength.

The question arises: what price will we pay for this war? If Ukraine loses blood slowly, as it does now, without enough resources from the West? This support is safe; this is the easiest kind. The easiest

thing that can be done is to send weapons or money. This support does not require the loss of human life and difficult decisions. And we are not even receiving enough of this kind of support. As a consequence, there will be more difficult decisions, as this war does not only concern Ukraine. This is also about China, the rules of global trade and values versus private interests, as we see with the example of Germany, but not only. The key thing is to enable the Ukrainians to do their work and not complicate a situation that is already complicated.

I agree that Poland's contribution is fantastic, but I also really regret the wasted previous years. I was a member of the group for Polish-Ukrainian relations supported by the Batory Foundation and the International Renaissance Foundation. When it comes to Polish-Ukrainian relations, we have wasted many years. We spoke about the past when we should have been discussing the future. May this serve as a lesson.

Edwin Bendyk

Thank you for these closing words. They will serve us during the next meeting in the "Ukraine speaks" cycle and help expand it into a shared conversation about the future. We are convinced that this future is being decided on in Ukraine now; hence the need to discuss it and plan it with Ukraine.

Thank you for this fascinating conversation which has mapped out the subjects that we need to talk about.

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