

25 років Незалежності України

Олександр Мотиль, професор Рутгерського університету (США), американський історик українського походження, вважає найбільшим досягненням України з часу проголошення незалежності – збереження своєї суверенної демократичної держави всупереч очікуванням недоброзичливців, які бачили проект «Україна» короткотерміновим.

Вживання України як держави, на думку професора, пов'язане з трьома факторами: по-перше, з 1991 до 2014 рр. країна перебувала у сприятливих геополітичних умовах; по-друге, стабільність Європи в цілому Україна скористалася для зміцнення свого суверенітету; по-третє, українське громадянське суспільство виявилось напроцуд прогресивним і активним.

Автор розмірковує над перспективами реінтеграції Донбасу і Криму, окупованих Російською Федерацією. Навпевно, рецепт професора Мотіля далеко не всім видасться оптимальним, однак із його висновком, ймовірно, погодиться більшість – нині вперше з 1991 р. Україна отримала можливість остаточно вирватися з орбіти Росії та жити як по-справжньому незалежна, демократична, процвітаюча держава.

25 Years of Ukraine's Independence

Ukraine's biggest achievement since inde-

pendence in 1991 is to have confounded its critics, ill-wishers, and the Kremlin and to have survived as a democratic state. Many expected Ukraine to be short-lived. And many expected it to follow in the footsteps of its post-Soviet neighbors and abandon democracy. Instead, 25 years after independence, Ukraine survives as a democratic state.

Its survival is due to three factors. First, from 1991 to 2014, Ukraine had the good fortune to exist in relatively benign geopolitical circumstances. Russia, the only conceivable existential threat to Ukraine, had been weak in the 1990s under President Boris Yeltsin and, after becoming fascist under Vladimir Putin in the mid-2000s, turned overtly hostile only after the Euromaidan Revolution of early 2014. Those 23 years gave Ukraine the opportunity to grow and consolidate as a state.

Second, Europe in general and Eastern Europe in particular were stable and prosperous during this same time. The European Union expanded, NATO enlarged, the United States remained committed to playing a leadership role, and the West's relations with Russia were mostly constructive. The West's attitude toward Ukraine was rooted in indifference and ignorance, but Ukraine was able to take advantage of the post-Cold War peace to consolidate its sovereignty.

Third, Ukrainians—or, more precisely, Ukrainian civil society—proved to be

remarkably progressive and active, consistently pursuing agendas of democracy, tolerance, and people power and thereby compelling Ukraine's elites to build democratic institutions and embark on some semblance of economic reform.

Independent Ukraine emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union's collapse, and its subsequent trajectory was the product of the inertia generated by the USSR's breakdown. That trajectory resulted in a decent society, less because of the willful choices of Ukraine's elites, and more because the rapid, sudden, and comprehensive end of Soviet empire and totalitarianism propelled the post-Soviet Ukrainian state toward independence, while the popular engagement produced by breakdown assured that Ukraine would be democratic.

Signally failing to play a significant role in the process of state and nation building were the Ukrainian political elite and the state itself. The former proved to be incompetent and rapacious, preferring theft to policy and enrichment to patriotism, while the latter remained a bloated, useless, corrupt, and inefficient Soviet-era apparatus that served to promote the elite's personal goals, confound the aspirations of Ukrainian civil society, and block change. The apogee of elite and state dysfunctionality took place in the three years of Viktor Yanukovich's misrule, 2010-2014.

The Euromaidan Revolution fundamentally changed this condition of relative stability. First, it provoked fascist Russia to punish democratic Ukraine by invading Crimea and the Donbas. Second, the Revolution and subsequent Russo-Ukrainian War compelled the West to take the stand that it had so assiduously refused to take since 1991: siding with Ukraine and against Russia. Third, the Revolution and War profoundly enhanced Ukrainian national consciousness by forcing Ukrainians, for the first time since 1991, to take sides: with Ukraine or with Russia. The vast majority chose Ukraine.

All these changes forced Ukraine's incompetent, rapacious, and corrupt political elites finally to get serious about systemic reform. Russian aggression confronted Ukraine's elites with the very real possibility of complete economic ruin, pushed the United States and the European Union to adopt outwardly pro-Ukrainian policies and recognize that Ukrainian survival was central to Western security, and propelled Ukrainian civil society to demand systemic change immediately—or else.

It is small wonder that Ukraine has changed more in the two years since the Euromaidan Revolution than in the 23 years that preceded it. The political elites have performed well, or well enough, introducing significant economic, political, and cultural changes. They may even have begun addressing



На трибуні Олександр Мотиль під час виступу перед українською громадою у Нью-Йорку

issues of corruption and rule of law. That most Ukrainians refuse to recognize the reality of these changes—mostly because the corrupt power holders of the past have escaped justice and revenge—does not change the empirical reality of these changes.

Although the Revolution and War have had a positive effect on Ukraine's trajectory by finally forcing Ukraine's elites to make difficult choices, they have also confronted Ukraine's elites and civil society with an unprecedented challenge: outright Russian imperialism. Back in the 1990s, the Yeltsin administration was disturbingly worried about the condition of Russians and Russian speakers in the so-called near abroad. Until the Putin regime turned fully fascist by the late 2000s, it generally expressed its distaste of Ukrainian sovereignty by employing the gas weapon. The gloves came off and the diplomatic niceties

ended with Putin's invasion of Ukraine in late February 2014.

Almost miraculously, Ukraine managed to field a genuine army, generate thousands of volunteers, and stop the Russian assault. The current stalemate in eastern Ukraine—despite costing the lives of innocent Ukrainian soldiers and civilians—is effectively a major victory for Ukraine. It stopped one of the world's largest armies and most vicious dictators. That is an achievement that most Europeans would be hard-pressed to repeat. And yet, it is a short-term victory.

To be able to deter a Russian attack permanently, Ukraine must grow economically. Ukraine must become an East European tiger with double-digit growth rates. Failing that, Ukraine's economy will not be able to sustain a long-term security effort to stop Russian imperialism. For the first time since 1991, economic reform is

not just desirable. It is absolutely indispensable to political and national survival.

Obviously, there can be no double-digit economic growth if corruption remains unaddressed. In this respect as well, for the first time since 1991, the fight against corruption is not just desirable. It is absolutely indispensable to political and national survival.

If economic growth is on fact so central to Ukraine's ability to survive as a state, then Ukrainians must do everything to promote it—from introducing far-reaching economic reforms to changing their habits and mentalities to decolonizing their geography to asking painful questions about the utility and possibility of reintegrating the occupied Donbas and Crimea.

Can those territories be reintegrated peacefully in the foreseeable future? Highly unlikely.

Can they be reintegrated

militarily? Definitely not.

Would reintegrating these regions promote or retard Ukraine's survival as a state? It's hard to argue that governance in Ukraine would become better with two highly corrupt, disloyal, and economically destitute regions affecting Kyiv's policy choices.

Would economic reform and the struggle against corruption be easier and more effective with or without these territories? I have yet to encounter an argument for reintegration promoting Ukraine's well-being.

Would Ukraine not be better off concentrating on reforming itself—and temporarily shelving the occupied Donbas and Crimea, at least until the Ukrainian economy grows and the Ukrainian state is effective?

Are Ukraine's elites capable of asking and answering these questions? Is civil society? Or will both succumb to the blandishments of cheap populism and ignore the priorities of survival?

For the first time since 1991, Ukraine has the opportunity finally and fundamentally to break out of Russia's orbit and to survive as a genuinely independent, democratic, and prosperous state. It would be a shame, and a tragedy, if Ukrainians sacrificed their statehood, nationhood, and prosperity on the altar of some imagined "sacred" territorial unity and thereby returned into fascist Russia's imperial fold.

*Alexander J. Motyl,
professor of political science
at Rutgers University-Newark*