



Soft power lessons from Russia's war: How to overcome polarisation and strengthen liberal democracy

Dr Leila Alieva¹

May 2024

The lessons which the international community have drawn thus far from Russia's aggression against Ukraine have been dominated by the necessity of measures in the military sphere. However, the war has also exposed weaknesses in the soft power field – such as polarisation along political and geographic boundaries – as well as illuminated the role of exclusion, the underestimation of societies' potential to reform, and the domination of neopatriarchy in contemporary politics and international relations.

In the early 1990s I was shocked, and puzzled, when a close Russian friend of mine, 'Alex', remarked on the future for Russia's relations with its neighbours: "We will be back – we will crush your people by tanks and will buy off your elite". Even if said half-jokingly, this was a sharp contrast both with his personal attitude towards me, as he and his family were good friends, and with his rather dissident position in the 1980s, during which he openly criticised Soviet authorities.

This cruel and dehumanising attitude seemed to be a reflection of a personal frustration with the effects of the Soviet Union's collapse. It also coincided with Russia's active meddling in secessionist conflicts in the former Soviet Union (FSU), against the background of reforms carried out by Russia's then president Boris Yeltsin. The developing conservative and nationalist ideology perfectly fitted the destroyed fates of the many whose hopes to realise themselves were broken in these years of uncertainty.

My friend graduated from the most prestigious department of the Moscow State University (MGU) where most of the students, unlike himself, had parents who were diplomats. In spite of the calamities of transition, most of them secured diplomatic jobs, however Alex, due to his absence of contacts, ended up in unemployment, or often low paid and non-related jobs. This happened in parallel with the process at the national level – in which the former status of Russians as an 'older brother' of all Soviet nations was destroyed, adding to frustrations with identity and daily life. Later I saw him among the protesters in front of the US Embassy during the Kosovo crisis. An absence of a

¹ Dr Leila Alieva, an Associate of REES, Oxford School for Global and Area Studies (OSGA), shares her analysis of these themes, based on her research and lived experience.

deep, or prolonged, experience of liberal democracy united him with the new generation of Russian democrats, many of whom did not oppose aggressive Russian foreign policies, including the annexation of Crimea in 2014, or attack on Georgia in 2008. Years later, one of the leading and well respected Russian opposition figures in the West, speaking about the possibility of secessionist trends in a weakened Russia, said with the visible sign of disrespect to the subjects of the Russian Federation: “Well, good riddance then...”

This example hints at how exclusion can be a powerful driver of social and political behaviour, which might lead Russian citizens to direct their resentment and emotions toward a constructed enemy. Failure to conduct liberal reforms and develop a positive identity in the new international configuration and state of transition seemingly furthered this phenomenon.² But this feeling of exclusion might not only take place within a nation’s borders. Away from domestic politics, a reductive interpretation of international relations, identifying the state and the country with only the regime, or its leader, is another form of exclusion, which might contribute to ‘conservation’ of resentment and the basis of an ‘identity politics’ that can be manipulated by autocrats and elites.

The outburst of violent conflict in recent years, accompanied by the rise of extremism and populism is amplifying hatred and aggression. The inability of autocratic leaders to create an attractive political model has directed people’s frustrations towards boosting identity-based politics, built on outdated concepts of power. While autocrats do this through expansionist wars, direct enforced control over land and communities, or through repressive policies, no alternative vision to resentment of the ‘other’s’ image is built by populist and far-right leaders in democratic states. Overall, the aforementioned trends have been contributing to rising polarisation both at the international, and domestic levels, amplifying other factors, such as inequality, migration, unemployment and a failure of governance.

Recognising societies’ potential and strengthening their agency – breaking the logic of geopolitics

The end of the Cold War, according to Gilford John Ikenberry, a leading scholar on liberal international relations, is a source of contemporary crisis of international liberal order. He calls it a “crisis of success,” because the order of one half of the Cold War project became the global order after victory in this era.³ According to Ikenberry, going global undermined two pillars – the authority and the social purpose of the order, which during the Cold War was limited to democratic and/or liberal states.

This order evolved as the one to safeguard democracies from the challenges of modernity, but essentially was Western-led, and in that period specifically, by the United States (US). However, the liberal internationalism of the US President Woodrow Wilson era did not, as Ikenberry argues, challenge European imperialism or racial hierarchies.⁴ Recent studies suggest that the European Union (EU) project has also emerged as essentially the “white project.”⁵

The post-World War II (WWII) era witnessed the adoption of the principle of universalism of human rights and democratic values with the US hegemonic liberal order, which in turn was challenged after the Cold War. Ikenberry concludes that the future of this liberal order, which helps to respond to these challenges, will depend on the ability of the US and EU, etc. to lead it. This in turn hinges not only on state power, but also on the appeal and legitimacy of the ideals that the ‘great powers’

² Leila Alieva, War as a sign of weakness., Foreign Policy Centre, July 2022, <https://fpc.org.uk/war-as-a-sign-of-weakness-failure-of-reforms-and-of-reframing-the-russian-nation/>

³ G. John Ikenberry, The end of liberal international order?, *International Affairs*, Volume 94, Issue 1, January 2018, pp.7-23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>

⁴ Ikenberry. p.15

⁵ Hans Kundnani, *Eurowhiteness: Culture, Empire and Race in European Project*. Hurst, August 2023.

“embody and project.”⁶ The idea that leadership is about “projection” of ideals and values, rather than recognition of the potential of the other communities and support for their realisation, however, does not overcome limits of the *realpolitik* (or neo-imperial) approach. Stressing the need for a liberal renewal of the political system, Timothy Garton Ash, a modern European historian, lists amongst the ways to achieve this, the reduction of “disparity of esteem” and fighting ‘liberalocracy’ or the extraordinary power of very rich individuals and corporations.⁷

International relations have been moving away from an ‘elitist’ approach, reduced to decision-making between officials, through the gradual involvement of non-state actors into the decision-making process. There have been various institutions and ways to directly recognise and include societies in the international decision making processes, such as the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Platform, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) annual review, as well as institutions such as the Council of Europe (CoE). The International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, besides adopting breakthrough decisions on women’s rights, was memorialised by the unique civil society participation of 1,200 non-governmental organisations (NGOs).⁸ Since then, the number of NGOs and other non-state actors participating in the international conferences of global character on issues of critical importance for the future has been increasing.⁹ The role of civil society was made particularly central to conflict resolution, seen as being a “primary driver of transition” in conflict transformation strategies.¹⁰

The institutions of bilateral and multilateral relations, however, still have to catch up with rapid contemporary changes, including those brought by online platforms, along with the crisis of multilateralism, as is demonstrated by the states/actors not represented in a number of multilateral institutions, or NGOs’ status being limited to the role of observers. As stressed during the recent discussion on the future of multilateralism, many countries still do not have a say in a number of multilateral institutions.¹¹ The crisis of legitimacy, it is argued, “is about the actors, but also about how the architecture has reflected an old and now completely outdated view of the role that these actors can play.¹² In regards to civil societies, technological progress and social networks have empowered societies by giving a chance to voice their needs, positions and views, making them more independent and prominent actors. At the same time, the competition of narratives was amplified by their transfer to the virtual level. In addition, with the rise of autocratic trends, the space for civil society has been closing down, a phenomenon directly contrasting with the expanding possibilities for connectedness opened by the rapid development of modern technology.

In the early years of transition, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, outreach to Russian society by the US Presidential administration under Bill Clinton was significant. Yet, it did not overcome the limitations of the top-down approach, particularly as there was no clear crediting of Russians for the

⁶ Ikenberry, p.22. To note, ‘Great power’ is understood as a state with capacity to influence the system of international relations.

⁷ Timothy Garton Ash, The future of liberalism, Prospect Magazine, December 2020, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/40827/the-future-of-liberalism>

⁸ Susan Cohen and Cory L.Richards, The Cairo Consensus: Population, Development and Women, Special Report, Family Planning Perspectives, Vol.26, No.6, November/December 1994, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2135895>

⁹ For instance, 3,804 NGOs and IGOs were registered as observers at the last COP28 in 2023 in Saudi Arabia. See: UNFCCC, Observer organizations, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/parties-non-party-stakeholders/non-party-stakeholders/overview/observer-organizations>

¹⁰ Ursula Werther-Pietsch, The impact of SDGs on International Law - A Nucleus of a Right to Peace?, OZP- Austrian Journal of Political Science, March 31, 2018, Vol 47, Issue 1, p.19, <https://ulb-dok.uibk.ac.at/download/pdf/4587982.pdf>

¹¹ Carnegie Endowment, Is this the Moment to renew Global Governance? Prospects for the new UN Summit of the future, YouTube, February 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1s2qgM_kx0

¹² Minh Thu Pham in *ibid*.

co-creation of these values.¹³ The failure to credit societies for their capacity to reform is often perceived as unequal treatment, with this grievance eventually being exploited by autocrats. For example, along with expressing support for war and the regime, those recently polled on the streets of Russia mentioned that “Westerners do not consider us human beings.”¹⁴

Foreign donors’ support of the societies eventually turned into an excuse for autocrats to persecute dissidents. This was partly because this support was not matched by the importance placed on normative/soft value contributions, communicated at the inter-state level, especially after instances of failed reforms, like in Russia. The inconsistent support for democratic values, reflected in a variety of prioritisation of foreign policy objectives, has been perceived by autocrats as a mere *realpolitik* cover-up by leaders of the democratic states. As early as 2006, US ex-ambassador to Russia Jack Matlock reflected on this perception: “American actions seem hypocritical. When we begin to talk about democracy, we seem to make it clear that what we have in mind is simply serving American interests.”¹⁵

The agency and resilience of small states and societies’ agency emerges when there is a threat to their identity, values, and sovereignty. Greater recognition of small states and societies as agents of policies can be also expressed in changing the terminology of functioning of multilateral institutions. ‘EU accession’ or ‘NATO accession’ sound more relevant in this regard than ‘EU’ or ‘NATO enlargement’. Even though at the current stage the EU enlargement is viewed as rather defensive in nature, the term *accession* is more precise as is pointing to the aspiring countries’ primary and active position in this process.¹⁶ It marks a shift towards states aspiring to freely choose to join the alliance, as opposed to an expansion of the organisations in a Cold War spirit, thus sending a message to other large states about the driving forces in the process. In any case, international relations institutions should catch up with the speedy empowerment of civil society, with ordinary citizens’ voices having become increasingly visible due to new technology and social media.

Limited importance of history and geography

The importance of the practice and experience of liberal democracy for the development of values of freedoms, equality and human rights is hard to contest. Moreover, the presence of only some elements of it in history cannot yet constitute the basis for a negative deterministic perspective on the capacity of societies to reform in this direction. This is confirmed by the consensus on universality of human rights and freedoms, reflected in many documents of the United Nations (UN), EU, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and CoE. Yet, both in practice and within established policies, this universality is not promoted consistently.

The unjustified aggression of Russia against Ukraine and its exceptional brutality resulted in a flow of academic, political and activists’ analysis of Russia’s history and roots, often in deterministic terms. The concept of historical and social-political cycles has been particularly popular in explaining failure of all previous attempts to liberalise and make a breakthrough in the endless vicious circles of

¹³ The declassified documents show an impressive inclusion of and outreach to the Russian society of the US administration as reflected in the programme of the meetings with diverse and broad groups of non-state actors for instance during the Clinton’s official visit to Russia in 1993 – as “an answer to those critics, who misperceive our policy as Yeltsin-only embrace”. See: Anthony Blake, Subject: Your visit to Moscow. The White House. Washington, December 1993.

¹⁴ The poll can be viewed here: Maksym Borodin, Twitter post, Twitter, January 2024, <https://twitter.com/i/status/1748343123023966658>

¹⁵ F. Joseph Dresen, Putin and the Russian Tradition: Illiberal but Democratic?, Wilson Center, Kennan Institute, Russia and Eurasia, Part of the Meeting Reports Publication, May 2006, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/putin-and-the-russian-tradition-illiberal-democratic>

¹⁶ Hans Kundnani, Ukraine means enlargement is again the EU’s priority – but not for the reasons it claims, Chatham House, February 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/02/ukraine-means-enlargement-again-eus-priority-not-reasons-it-claims>

unfortunate history.¹⁷ One of the reasons for such a direction of study might be the domination of historians and security experts within this field. Yet at least two factors should be considered when resorting to history to explain contemporary trends.

First, one can find roots of freedoms and rights in the history of any nation or state and, regardless of the length of these periods of history, the memories of them may play an exceedingly important role in mobilising social movements for reforms. This was demonstrated by the post-communist mass movements in the FSU states, for instance when the number of protesters, inspired by the ideas of the first democratic republic (which existed for only two years between 1918-1920), reached one million people at the Freedom Square (Maidan) in Baku during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Secondly, the relative importance of history and geography has been proven by the existence of the countries divided in two parts (e.g. Korea, Germany, Azerbaijan), as well as the existence of liberal democracies in such distant places as Australia, or Japan. In fact, the adoption, in 1918, of the suffrage law by the parliament in the Muslim Azerbaijan, took place one year before it was adopted in the US (and 53 years earlier than in Switzerland), and women were elected as their country's leaders in India and Pakistan earlier than it occurred in many Western states. In a move to overcome Eurocentrism, experts suggest the “reversal of democratic gaze” for the EU to turn and open up to the experience of democracy building elsewhere beyond the European region.¹⁸

Chinese scholars, such as P.C. Chang, one of the authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), has been studying the Chinese historical roots of liberal democracy and their influence over 19th century Western philosophers.¹⁹ The philosopher Liang Qichao has written about “the universal laws of all nations” in both the West and China.²⁰ Even Sharia Law is being discussed as an instrument to promote women’s rights and freedoms and rule of law, depending on political context and the actors applying it.²¹ “People should free themselves from history” said historian Yuval Noah Harari in one of his interviews, which is notable as a historian’s warning against the dangers of determinism that can be particularly relevant in regards to “failures” of liberalising developments in history.²²

In the words of Mark B. Smith “although Russians themselves live constantly with history, including with a sense of its apparently deep and repetitive rhymes, their own recent past teaches them about [the] immediacy of a historical chaos.”²³ Ironically, cultural characteristics that seem irreconcilable, may appear much closer to each other – well described by Doug Saunders in his book ‘The Myth of Muslim tide’, showing almost identical perception and description of the Catholic migrants in the US and later Muslim migrants in Europe in coverage by media throughout the 20th and early 21st century.²⁴ My own experience when studying cross-cultural issues for my PhD was a discovery that Irish Catholic family stereotypes were very close to those in the country where I grew up –

¹⁷ Nikolai S. Rozov, *Cycles of Russian History: The Inner Driver and Actual Political Dynamics*, *Open Journal for Studies in Philosophy*, 2(1). 19-34, September 2018, <https://centerprode.com/ojs/ojs0201/coas.ojsp.0201.03019r.pdf>

¹⁸ Kalypso Nicolaidis and Richard Youngs, *Reversing the democratic gaze*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/11/24/reversing-democratic-gaze-pub-85840>

¹⁹ Hans Ingvar Roth, P.C.Chang and the Quest for a Global Ethic, *Diogenes*, SAGE, February 2017, Vo.64 (1-2), 39-46.

²⁰ Yang Xiao, Liang Qichao’s Political and Social Philosophy, Ching-Ying Cheng and Nicholas Bunnin (eds) *Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd 2002, pp. 17-37.

²¹ Mark Fathi Massoud, *The theology of the rule of law*, Lecture at Humboldt University, 2024; Hassan Abbas, Keith Ellsion, Asra Q. Nomani and Ani Zonneveld, *A Roundtable discussion: Islam and Liberalism, Democracy*, *a Journal of Ideas*, Summer 2016, No.41, <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/41/islam-and-liberalism/>

²² TED, Yuval Noah Harari interview with Bruni Giussani, YouTube, March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQqthbvYE8M>

²³ Mark B. Smith, *The Russia Anxiety and How history can resolve it*, Penguin Books, 2019. P. 372.

²⁴ Doug Saunders, *The Myth of the Muslim Tide: Do Immigrants Threaten the West?*, Knopf Canada, August 2012.

Azerbaijan, which has a predominantly Muslim population, although the two belonged to different confessional and ethnic groups. The peak of the cross-confessional unity on the conservative basis was expressed during the voting on the issue of abortion at the UN Conference on Population and Development in 1994.²⁵

LGBT rights are often named as the biggest challenge for adoption of liberal values. Yet, post-Soviet developments in Azerbaijan showed that the issue became a subject of a rational media discourse during the beginning of liberalisation. This was not unlike other cases in Europe, such as the experience in Spain post-Franco regime when there was liberalisation of legislation and practice in this area. The return of authoritarian trends in this post-Soviet state, and the worsening of LGBT rights, demonstrated a correlation between the type of regime, on the one hand and the societal openness to the liberal values on the other, – rather than being a consistent ‘cultural’ trait. The other related aspect, which is often underestimated in explaining the democratic deficit, is the role of structural factors as impediments to the opening of political regimes as a cross-cultural and cross-regional variable. In fact, three countries are united by the rentier nature of their states – with two of them, Russia and Azerbaijan, exploiting their own rich energy resources, while Belarus extracts rents from re-selling Russian ones. Research evidenced that both Russia and Azerbaijan would demonstrate a much higher record of democracy and liberal values if they did not have such an abundance of natural resources.²⁶ At the same time, democratic institutions in Belarus and Azerbaijan bore similar traits due to the role of rents from natural resources.²⁷ One of the consequences of more consistent de-linking of liberal democracy from geography will be undermining the basis of perception of the Euro-Atlantic integration as a threat to regime security of the big autocratic states, such as Russia, which reacts violently to the liberal reforms and pro-Western foreign policy in its neighbourhood, seeing it as ‘expansion’ of the enemy. It will also reduce the manipulation by autocrats of anti-western attitudes – indeed if we share the same values, why be against them?

Potential to reform and state identity

International relations play no less an important role in dynamics and formation of nations’ identities than domestic factors. Possible added value and the unique contribution of Russians and other nations expressed in their identity is the result of the influence of domestic formation/construction in interaction with the external context. “Identity is fundamental to behaviour because it provides an actor with the value that shapes the actor’s preference”, argues the academic Kuniko Ashizava, but at the same time, stresses that it depends on the context of “interactive policy formulation with the significant other.”²⁸ Besides playing the role of the significant ‘other’, the recognition by external actors, states and international organisations, of societies’ potential to reform is a key factor in their transition especially for post-colonial countries. Some of the post-Soviet states’ leaders and elites, particularly those rich with natural resources, quickly capitalised on their energy riches, responding to the strategic energy demand in the international arena and presenting themselves as critical partners for Europe and the US. The crises and challenges in the post-Cold War era exposed another feature – the deficit of the value based aspect of what has been predominantly technocratic or pragmatic international relations.

²⁵ Report of the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 5-13 September 1994, United Nations, New York, 1995.

²⁶ Gubad Ibadoghlu and Rashad Sadigov, *The economics of petro-authoritarianism: Post-Soviet transitions and democratization*, Resources Policy, Vol.85, Part B, August 2023, 103752, Elsevier.

²⁷ Leila Alieva and Alexei Pikulik, *Rent Distribution Modes in Azerbaijan and Belarus: Implications for the Opposition*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, July 2022, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09668136.2022.2088700>

²⁸ Kuniko Ashizawa, *When Identity Matters: State Identity, Regional Institution-Building, and Japanese Foreign Policy* *International Studies Review*, Wiley, September 2008, Vol.10, No.3, p.593.

Externally, the formation of new states' identities after the Cold War was shaped by world market demand, primarily in security, trade and economic terms. For states in transition, particularly in the more authoritarian states, these identities might have similarly matched the needs of the elites (rather than societies), who had a hand in shaping the 'brands' of these countries. These were based on such qualities as the market attractiveness of a geographical location, making them important as a transportation hub, or on the lucrative resources that allow benefits to both the customer state and the elites of the producing one, which is, as a rule, an autocratic petro-state. Although these aspects could have been meant to attract the attention to the other qualities of these states, societies, especially in oil rich countries, have been struggling to voice their needs, values and goals and are rarely heard through the wall of the interest-based relations. The value of new post-colonial states was often defined in strictly realist terms – strategic size, location, or resources. Russia was luckier in being able to utilise its soft power, but mainly through the prominence of high culture, rather than potential to contribute to normative values, especially after failure of the liberal reforms in the 1990s.

However, there is a striking difference in how external actors signalled demand for, and significance of, normative aspects of relations in the early 20th century and a century later. It was for instance observed in Azerbaijan, when the statements of past politicians are compared to those in the post-Cold War period. Many would refer to a quote by President Wilson about the members of the Azerbaijani delegation whom he met at the Paris conference: "One day there came in a very dignified and interesting group of gentlemen who were from Azerbaijan. I was talking to men, who talked the same language that I did, in respect of ideas, in respect of conceptions of liberty, in conceptions of rights and justice."²⁹ In the 19th century, under the influence of the cross-border interactions, the liberalisation and emancipation of women was advanced by the uneducated Azerbaijani villager who gained access to oil revenues which he subsequently spent on women's education.³⁰

A century later, the perceived priority of Azerbaijan was well highlighted by the few prominent European and US politicians who stressed the importance of the country as a strategic energy supplier. This matched the vision of the presidents Heydar and Ilham Aliyev who came after a short period of democratic rule under Abulfaz Elchibey, and who positioned themselves as drivers of a successful oil strategy, rather than descendants of the first democratic republic in the East. Here, the recognition of the Azerbaijani society's distinct identity and potential for reform was not prioritised in the pursuit of bilateral relations. In relations with Russia, the basis for cooperation was often officially stated as non-normative/value-based, especially after failure of reforms, in security, like cooperation with NATO, or in economic, mainly natural resources.

In fact, Putin in such concepts as *sovereign democracy* addressed the basic need of any social group to be *equal and different*. While pursuing his own political goals of control, he utilised and manipulated the need for identity which would on the one hand, equalise Russia with the West, but on the other show its distinct nature and contribution to the world's most advanced values. In contrast, only a few publications on Russia in the West would stress the periods of liberal ideas and thought as, even though short, an important component of its history, as well as in the context of the world history of values of liberal freedoms.³¹ In the continuation of his idea about Russia's

²⁹ The Atlantic, Consul General of Azerbaijan: U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was impressed by the diplomats of ADR in Paris, Report News Agency, May 2018, <https://report.az/en/foreign-politics/consul-general-of-azerbaijan-u-s-president-woodrow-wilson-was-impressed-by-the-diplomats-of-adr-in-paris/>

³⁰ Zeynalabdin Taghiyev was famous self-made man, from the peasant family from one of the Baku villages, and oil magnate who managed to open the first secular school for girls in Baku in the late 19th century.

³¹ One of those publications is by Carol Leonard et al. on the period of trends in capitalist economy during the reign of Alexander II, reflecting processes similar to those in Europe. See: Land Prices and Railroad Building in European Russia, 1860s to the early 1900s, Russian Journal of Economics, 7(2): 93-104, July 2021, <https://rujec.org/issue/2921/>

historical resources, starting with the liberal reforms by Alexander II, academic Mark Smith notes that of all Russia's qualities – great power heritage, cultural and scientific achievements – “the capacity to embrace the paradox might be the most valuable.”³² The direct address to the Russian society, and others in transition, and public recognition of their capacity to contribute to the world's democratic development did not find high enough status in the hierarchy of policy priorities, as stated in bilateral or multilateral levels. The financial support for NGOs thus was interpreted by FSU leaders as an attempt to interfere in domestic affairs with the purpose of undermining the current regimes, conducting the coloured revolutions etc. In short, the financial support for civil society, as well as norms and values, was not accompanied by a high enough status of normative values in international relations.

Gender factor in politics and approaches to a future of Russia

Violence and destruction, hatred and death seems to rise again as means of achieving political goals. Contemporary international relations, with wars and oppression, in spite of progress with women rights, have risen to a new level of masculinity. War in Ukraine and in the Middle East has once again demonstrated that contemporary politics is predominantly a male domain. Not only was the war mobilisation in Russia a reflection of instrumental masculinity used by Moscow, but even most of the analysis and observation of the conflict is caught in the vicious circle of military logic and security, with little consideration of the variety of alternative approaches that could be taken.

Numerous films – melodramas in Russia – reflect the return to the traditional values so actively used by Putin's regime propaganda. The most popular narrative depicts a woman as the culprit for a failing family because of her professional career, or weak fertility. The peak expression of this trend was the MP Vitali Milonov's wishes to Russian women on 8th March, International Women's Day, in which he stated “that the best present for a woman is pregnancy”.³³ The debate on Russia has also revealed gender differences in approaches to the future of the country. The ideas of historical determinism mentioned in the previous section appear to have a gender dimension. While there is no hard statistical data on this matter, in an attempt to explain failure to reform and aggressive foreign policy, experts look at history and can observe the securitising and deterministic analysis of male experts versus more positive and alternative ones by female analysts.³⁴ The historian and teacher Tamara Eydelman for instance frequently speaks about the positive potential of Russian society to reform, – while cultural historian and philologist Irina Prokhorova talks about the lack of suggestions of positive vision of identity by the opposition and public leaders in Russia as a potential mobilising factor for reforms.³⁵ The political analyst and blogger Ekaterina Schulman often criticises the approaches which render Russian society's conformism, or support for a war, an exclusive character.³⁶ The other trait signalling masculine nature of the politics in Russia is little cross-gender solidarity in expertise when male experts rarely share, quote or appreciate opinions of female ones via social networks or in publications and public speeches, in spite of generally democratic views on the events in Russia and beyond it.

³² Mark B. Smith, *ibid.* p.376.

³³ Current Time, The USA and the threat of terrorist attacks in Moscow. Biden and Ukraine. General of Russia about the war in Europe, YouTube, March 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjkkIroROY8>

³⁴ See for instance comments about Russian violence: Living Nail, Andrey Illarionov, 29.09.2023, Youtube, September 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_-JweGf8B8

³⁵ See: Tamara Eydelman, I do not believe in historical determinism, Kholod, June 2022,

<https://holod.media/2022/09/06/eidelman-interview-diktatura/>; Irina Prokhorova, It is possible to close the borders, but not possible to prohibit thinking, Skazhi Gordeyevoi, YouTube, March 2022

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTwrqwa0f4>

³⁶ Varlamov, Ekaterina Shulmann, About Future of Russia, YouTube, November 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGrpEDj0zTk>

Internationally, most of the panels, with the visible exception of the last one at the Munich Security Conference, also reflect male domination. The instrumental use of ‘traditional’ values has been visibly increasing in the political rhetoric of Putin to accompany his strengthening grip on power. This, according to some experts, fits the global context of the crisis of liberal modernity.³⁷ Moreover, worldwide the emerging trend shows the overlap between the gender and conservatism/liberalism boundaries.³⁸ Yet, the women in most of the states in the crisis zone stepped in as the fearless and capable political leaders, like Ukrainian women-politicians, experts, MPs, state officials, and Sviatlana Tikhanovskaya in Belarus, and Yulia Navalnaya in Russia, etc. Debates on the current situation in Russia, the region and broader international relations would only benefit from wider inclusion of women, who might help deliver creative solutions to address the deadlock of an increasing hard power domination (both in practice and discourse) in international affairs.

Shared ownership of liberal democracy

War in Ukraine has had a double effect on international relations. It has promoted unity in Europe, and illuminated polarisation in the US and between the Global North and Global South.

Beyond autocratic leaders’ undeterred aggressive international behaviour, there are unaddressed identity issues of the societies urging a recognition of their capacity to reform and thus of dignity and equality with the others. In the Global South, the concept of decolonising relations between the West and the rest dominates interpretations of world conflicts. The idea about democracy as a common value, regardless of cultural diversity of countries and nations, created and contributed to by every cultural and national group across geography needs a renewed recognition and strong official messaging at this stage. To deprive it of ‘imperial imposition’ meaning, one should move away from the exclusive ownership of the liberal values tied to geography, and empower societies, through recognition of their potential to reform.

Why is the concept of ‘shared ownership’ and ‘co-creation of democracy’ important? Firstly, it supports the universality of human rights and freedoms, once accepted as the guiding principle of international relations, but undermined by the backsliding in the recent decade. Secondly, the stress on local and national ownership of these values undermines its neo-colonial meaning and will prevent the presentation of it by officials as something externally imposed by the ‘liberal West’. Thirdly, it will make other societies feel empowered and equal in terms of their capacity to reach the level of freedoms and values, as it manifests itself in the West. Fourthly, it will allow us to develop yet another common basis for cooperation on the issues of world significance, besides climate change, economic crisis, etc.

There is no doubt that autocrats and leaders lacking popular legitimacy will be tempted to manipulate the issue, as they did in the past (recall Putin’s “sovereign democracy”, and most recently Peskov calling Russian democracy “the best”).³⁹ The universality of values within liberal democracy, which has so far proven to be the most attractive model of political development, and which was pronounced by Fukuyama as the final form of the government for all nations, can be re-asserted through the awareness of its shared nature, product of co-creation of all groups and nations. Besides the renewed assertion of universality of human rights, freedoms, human dignity, the international – at the multilateral and bilateral levels – recognition of each nation’s contribution (historical, actual, or potential) to the development of these values is no less important.

³⁷ Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2017.

³⁸ *The Economist*, Why young men and women are drifting apart?, March 2024, <https://www.economist.com/international/2024/03/13/why-the-growing-gulf-between-young-men-and-women>

³⁹ *Izvestiya*, Peskov called democracy in Russia the best, March 2024, <https://iz.ru/1660916/2024-03-06/peskov-nazval-demokratiuu-v-rossii-samoi-luchshei>

Missing vision of the shared future

There is no doubt that the development of the regime in Russia was a crucial factor in the invasion of Ukraine. Yet, there are some factors which contributed to the extreme and destructive outcome, thus demonstrating the imperfect means of deterrence by ill driven state leaders. This is partly due to divisions, absolutisation of diversity and differences, and the resulting polarisation. The weak vision of the common future and interconnectedness in all areas, including security, beyond national borders and the regions, impedes aid delivery to Ukraine, a resolution of the crisis in the Middle East or the conflicts in the FSU.

The way to overcome this division is to address societies and recognise their potential to reform regardless of their ethnic, geographic, or religious affiliation, or re-assert their ownership of liberal values, despite the failure of previous reform attempts, or the delayed implementation of much needed political liberalisation. While the basic recognition of the diversity of cultures in the world is essential, the universality of principles of dignity and the rights of people constituting the core of international and political relations norms in the world, yields even greater importance nowadays. The recognition of a shared nature of liberal values is a normative manifestation of the degree of equality, which is reflected in the formal or informal attitude of the united West, in relation to the rest of the world.

Therefore, the substantial issue is not the culture per se, but those parts of it, which allow people and societies to feel themselves equal in terms of their capacity to establish the rule of law and freedoms, or individual contribution to the norms of dignity and rights. This contribution can be found in the history of each nation and should be stressed and recognised at the international level. There is no insignificant contribution – even the shortest period of unfolding history matters. Similar to the powerful influence of just two years of independence in the early 20th century for the Azerbaijani, Georgian, and Armenian post-Soviet mobilisation, there might be such periods of various longevity stressed for many, if not all, nations, or groups, which are usually recognised for their distinct cultures.

International polarisation might be reduced by making the recognition of each society's potential to reform a priority as compared to economic, security and material resources. This will contribute to the *liberalisation of international* relations at the normative, ideational, and identity basis, allowing every nation or group to feel itself an equal member of the world's most aspired community. This assumption is not based on a constructed or idealistic foundation – many prominent authors point to the all human capacity to build and contribute to the world's most progressive values of freedoms and dignity of human beings. Shared ownership of liberal democracy and recognition of each nation's contribution to its co-creation also supposes and creates a basis for its protection and defence as a common good and achievement.

Consequently, the concept of Europe, or a consolidated West, 'spreading the values' should be replaced by one of support or help for societies to realise their best reform potential, thus moving further away from the exclusive ownership of the values of freedoms and dignity of the humans towards shared creation, shaping and enrichment of the liberal values.

Questioning and violating internationally recognised borders only strengthens the prominence of physical and material boundaries at the time in history, when the borders are increasingly being overcome in virtual reality. Currently, physical borders/boundaries are an inescapable reality, but along with the regional and global nature of the consequences of national policies there is also a virtual reality, caused by progress in IT, which overcomes these borders. Coupled with the connection to multiple identities, this reality allows people to feel themselves across specific ethnic

or confessional group's boundaries – as well as members of broader regional or international entities.

Conclusion: Changing a perspective

Putin's Russia will inevitably lose, primarily because his policies are built on outdated pre-modern ideas of power – the sacrifice of lives for the sake of a physically greater Russia, which is proving to become increasingly unpopular. The war is exposing and strengthening the challenges of the current times, which include polarisation, confrontation and resulting militarisation.

Besides lessons learnt from the Russia-Ukraine case – the consequences of impunity and appeasement and the importance of rapid, timely and sizable military support to the victim of aggression – there is a need to prevent possible revanchism and grievances coming from defeat and thus prevent the endless circle of military confrontation. While this defeat is inevitable, what will come as an idea/identity to replace the old one is no less important for the future of Russia and consequently the countries in the region. In the post-Cold War removal of confrontation, this context has been mainly defined in market, security and pragmatic terms and thus not always helpful for democracy especially in energy rich states. So, besides the market component of its definition, or security, there might be a need for recognition at the political level of the unique contribution of the society to the co-creation and strengthening of the values of liberal democracy. The role of the international community and external actors is critical not only as a 'significant other' but also as a helper in finding this added value.

The idea of the universality of liberal values should be taken to a new level at this stage of history – empowering every member of the world community through recognition of its potential to reform and strive for freedom, equality, and dignity. While leadership in preserving a rule-based order is still important, the recognition of the potential to reform as a universal one, with the contribution of each nation, will deprive it of possible neo-imperial arrogance. The idea, that 'great powers' or the EU should *project* its values sounds outdated – as it is not the actors per se, but the *process of interaction* with the other states and/or their societies as agencies (such as the process of EU integration, association, accession negotiations), which might be or might not be conducive for the realisation of the best reform potential of the societies. This approach, or change of perspective, undermines both bases of polarisation – along the lines of political confrontation, making societies united by the common values, on the one hand, and of colonial logic, de-linking liberal democracy from specific geography and 'imposition' of values, on the other.

In an increasingly multi-layered, interdependent, and overpopulated world, not everything can be physically divided. In the words of the academic Eric Hobsbawm, one of the challenges of accommodating nationalism has been "how to organise the actual coexistence of different ethnic, racial, linguistic and other groups in areas which are practically indivisible".⁴⁰ Except for the obvious expansionist policies undertaken by autocratic leaders, like Russia's wars, which should not go undeterred, unstoppable and unpunished, there is broader range of ways to co-manage or cooperate over the contested pieces of lands and cultural heritage without dragging states, nations or social/ethnic groups into bloody conflicts.

The role of international organisations is to show a new perspective – the increasingly changing nature of the world and of international relations, identities, states, loyalties and sovereignties – and at the same time – a shared vision of the common challenges, which are impossible to resolve without cooperation. A multi-layered past and to an even greater degree – the future – deems it necessary to be able not only to divide and compete, but also to cooperate and share.

⁴⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, Some Reflections of the Breakup of Britain, New Left Review, October 1977, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i105/articles/eric-hobsbawm-some-reflections-on-the-break-up-of-britain>

This new perspective on accommodating diversity is to move from *tolerance* through *recognition* to *appreciation*. The latter includes the perception of the others' contribution as an enrichment of the process of co-creation of the common values. The battle of the contemporary moment is that of inclusion, whether that is small states, societies, women or others, a renewed recognition of the universality of democratic values in the move away from the exclusive ownership of liberal democracy, and towards what Timothy Garton Ash called liberal imagination – “image of liberals of different colour, race and ethnicity”.⁴¹

There is a popular cartoon reflecting the evolution of rivals from the Cold War confrontation, which depicts the elephant and donkey symbolising US political parties at one end of the table and the Russian bear on the other, to the contemporary confrontation with the donkey at the one end of the table with the elephant and bear on the other. Whatever the political reasons behind this unusual solidarity are, this hints at the specificity of the current ‘battle of ideas’ underlying a confrontation of autocracy and democracy – that of neo-patriarchy and conservatism, trying to take a revanche for the decades of liberalism.

Yet, in spite of this backlash, as stated by Fukuyama, “this does not mean that the larger trend is not still toward democracy”.⁴² The major direction of migration in the world remains the one towards the liberal West – an unambiguous indicator of people’s preferences of political and state framework, which manages to create the conditions that allow societies’ to best realise their reform and creative potential.

⁴¹ Timothy Garton Ash, The future of liberalism, Prospect, December 2020, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/40827/the-future-of-liberalism>

⁴² “The End of History” 20 years later, Interview with F NPQ, Fall, 2013.