6-10-2022

What Next in Ukraine?

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Recommended Citation
Barrington, Lowell, "What Next in Ukraine?" (2022). Political Science Faculty Research and Publications. 129.
https://epublications.marquette.edu/polisci_fac/129
What next in Ukraine?

Dr. Lowell Barrington:

It is impossible to say with certainty what a country will look like decades, or even years, in the future.

One can, however, reflect on the factors most likely to affect important long-term outcomes. Ukraine's post-war unity and democracy are outcomes worthy of such reflection.

How united will Ukraine be?

The 2022 invasion shattered Putin's myth of Ukrainians and Russians as one people and made clear his underestimation of Ukraine's growing Ukrainianness.

Prior to the 2022 invasion, Ukraine was a partial, flawed democracy with prevalent corruption...

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Recent scholarly works highlight weakened connections to Russia since its seizure of Crimea in 2014 and support of secessionist activities in eastern Ukraine. This occurred alongside a deepening attachment to a citizenship-based civic national identity. If 2014 was a catalyst for diminishing connections to Russia and a strengthening civic Ukrainian national identity, 2022 has propelled these processes forward with great force.

Both trends will aid Ukrainian unity in the years ahead.
How democratic will Ukraine be?
Prior to the 2022 invasion, Ukraine was a partial, flawed democracy with prevalent corruption. Freedom House called Ukraine a "transitional or hybrid regime" in its [2022 analysis](https://freedomhouse.org/report/2022-analysis).

Ukraine's "democracy percentage" stood at 39.29 out of 100 with a "democracy score" of 3.36 out of 7. By comparison, Czech Republic's percentage was 75.6 and its score 5.54, earning it the "consolidated democracy" label.

The U.S. and Europe can buffer post-war Ukraine against Russian interference and Ukraine's own internal anti-democratic features with a [Marshall plan-like effort](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_plan) to rebuild the country. In return, Ukraine will need to show, through a progressive deepening of its democracy, that as an EU member it will look more like the Czech Republic and less like Hungary.

Western efforts will be vital, but Zelensky will be the central driver of Ukrainian democratization. He has said the war is about democracy but has also restricted political parties and independent media as part of the war effort. His broad domestic support and extensive praise (and [awards](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Award)) from the West may strengthen his backing of genuine democracy in Ukraine. They might also encourage an "only I can fix this" brand of populism.

Ukraine's successes on the battlefield this spring do not necessarily imply a successful consolidation of democracy in the longer term.

[Dr. Lowell Barrington](https://www.marquette.edu/polisci/faculty/barrington-lowell.htm) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Marquette University. He specializes in post-communist politics, ethnicity and nationalism, democratization, and political science research methods. He regularly contributes to journals such as [Europe-Asia Studies](https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ceuas2), [Post-Soviet Affairs](https://academic.oup.com/pos), and [Eurasian Geography and Economics](https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ceuagb).