DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 12.11.2026 | Michele Bellini

Use it or lose it

As Ukraine fights for its survival, Europe's established democracies face a quieter challenge — remembering why freedom is worth defending

Over the past two decades, much ink has been spilled on democratic backsliding and the growing crisis of liberal democracies. This is hardly surprising, given the extensively documented deterioration of democracy across the world. In many cases, the focus has been on the erosion of democratic institutions, procedures and rules, as well as on the reforms needed to protect them. These are certainly key questions. Yet, democracy may be facing a crisis that institutional reforms alone cannot resolve: the gradual erosion of the cultural, moral and civic foundations on which it rests. Put differently, what if the crisis concerns the *soul* of democracy before it concerns its *body*?

Democracy is not merely a matter of rules and institutions; but rather it is underpinned by a political, cultural and even *sentimental* heritage that embodies its foundations as well as its promises. The French scholar Georges Burdeau wrote that 'democracy draws its strength more from the ideal it embodies than from the institutions through which it manifests itself'.

This is particularly interesting if one considers that even autocratic regimes often seek to preserve a democratic façade by holding elections, which are neither free nor fair. According to the V-Dem's Democracy Report, electoral autocracy remains the most common regime type in the world: today 57 countries fall into this category, accounting for 46 per cent of the world population, with 28 per cent living in closed autocracies. By contrast, just 19 per cent live in electoral democracies and a mere seven per cent in liberal democracies. Although it is obvious that elections alone do not make a liberal democracy, the fact that autocracies still hold them might suggest how powerful the democratic ideal remains as a source of political legitimacy, even where the institutional realities could hardly be further removed from it.

The question for our democracies becomes: are we still capable of regenerating the cultural, moral and civic premises on which they were

founded, or have we exhausted the historical inheritance from which democracies derived their legitimacy? And what happens when citizens come to regard democracy as something they possess, rather than something they must continually sustain?

Not to be taken for granted

Ukraine offers a striking perspective on this question. Still, the comparison must be handled with caution: Kyiv is fighting a war for national survival, which has demanded an extraordinary degree of mobilisation and sacrifice from its society. Yet state directives have encountered a civil society already politicised by previous waves of activism, from the Orange Revolution to the Maidan Uprising. Institutions have therefore been able to draw on established networks of volunteers and grassroots initiatives. Indeed, *military resistance* could not have been sustained without a much broader *societal resistance*, through which citizens organised essential services, translated solidarity into concrete action, and helped keep those very institutions functioning.

The political community made resistance possible; resistance, in turn, has strengthened that political community. Ukraine's experience thus illustrates a relationship easily overlooked in established democracies: institutions depend on the civic commitment of the people they serve.

Solidarity and the willingness to make sacrifices are not, in themselves, uniquely democratic virtues, but in Ukraine the defence of national independence is intertwined with a broader democratic aspiration.

Research on Ukrainian identity points to the consolidation of an increasingly civic understanding of national belonging, not reducible to language or ethnicity, while studies of public attitudes reveal a growing support for democracy and freedom of expression since 2014, with a further increase following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Solidarity and the willingness to make sacrifices are not, in themselves, uniquely democratic virtues, but in Ukraine the defence of national independence is intertwined with a broader democratic aspiration.

Of course, none of this means that Ukrainian society is a monolithic one; no society is. All the more so as the war drags on, it remains marked by divisions, tensions, fatigue and differing individual willingness to make sacrifices.

Nor is it a matter of judging how fully consolidated Ukraine's democracy is, but rather of identifying a historical trajectory. Since independence,

the country has faced profound institutional frailties – pervasive corruption (which remains a major problem today), the influence of oligarchs and weaknesses in the rule of law. Yet it is precisely within these contradictions that a significant part of Ukrainian society has repeatedly reaffirmed its aspiration to democracy, self-determination and closer ties with Europe. Hence, the point is not to assess the resistance in terms of the quality of Ukraine's democracy, but to understand it as the continuous effort of a political community to reforge itself in the face of Russia's systematic attempt to subjugate it. What Ukraine demonstrates is not that a strong civic spirit can compensate for democratic shortcomings, but rather that democratic aspirations can remain a powerful force even where institutions are fragile.

Ukraine reminds us that democracy is not simply something to inherit, but something that must be continually upheld.

This is what makes Ukraine relevant to our democracies beyond the immediate strategic stakes of the war. Ukraine's resistance is not simply a struggle to preserve national sovereignty; it also makes visible some of the conditions that precede and sustain democracy itself: belonging to a political community, a sense of responsibility towards others and the community, the capacity for collective action, the conviction that freedom and self-government are worth defending – and that doing so requires a willingness to bear their costs. These are precisely the premises that societies living for decades in conditions of peace, prosperity and individual freedom can easily come to take for granted.

In this sense, Ukraine can serve as a mirror for liberal democracies. Not because war should be romanticised as a source of civic cohesion, nor because societies at peace can or should reproduce the mobilisation of a country fighting for its survival. Rather, Ukraine reminds us of a fundamental truth about democracy, expressed by Alcide De Gasperi – one of the founding fathers of European integration and the first Prime Minister of the Italian Republic – who stated in 1948 that 'no constitutional safeguard could prevent the rise of tyranny if an active democratic conscience is not at work amongst the people'. Nearly eight decades later, the need for an active democratic conscience remains just as vital. German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier stressed that, alongside the constitutional instruments to defend democracy, there is a need for 'active democrats who speak out whether in parliament, in the football stand, in the pub, at school, at the bus stop and at work'.

The challenge for our democracies is not simply to focus on the institutions and the reforms needed to protect them, but to renew the civic foundations that give those institutions meaning and legitimacy. Nor can we assume that awaking our *sleeping democracies* can rely solely on the fear of existential threats. We need to foster a sense of belonging and revive a shared purpose, encouraging citizens to see democracy not merely as a provider of rights and prosperity, but as a vulnerable political system that cannot survive without their collective responsibility. Ukraine reminds us that democracy is not simply something to inherit, but something that must be continually upheld. Consequently, what we must ask ourselves about our democracies, then, is whether we will manage to rediscover what makes them worth defending before we are forced to discover what it means to have lost them.



Michele Bellini

Michele Bellini is a political analyst specialising primarily in European affairs; he is currently studying for a PhD at the *Università LUMSA* in Rome and is a member of the *North South Futures Forum* run by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.