

Opinion: Putin's war reminds us why liberal democracy is worth defendin

By [Fareed Zakaria](#)

February 24, 2022 at 4:23 p.m. EST

Russia's utterly unprovoked, unjustifiable, immoral invasion of Ukraine would seem to mark the end of an era — one that began with [the fall of the Berlin Wall](#) in 1989. In that post-Cold War age, Western ideas about politics, economics and culture spread across the world largely uncontested, and American power undergirded the international system. It was not a period of tranquility — think of the wars in [Yugoslavia](#) and the [Middle East](#). But it was a time in which American power and liberal democracy seemed triumphant, and the international system seemed to work more cooperatively than at any previous point in history.

The Pax Americana began to wane for many reasons, including the rise of countries such as China and India, the disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan, and financial and democratic crises in the West. But the most disruptive force has been the return of an imperial Russia, determined to re-create a sphere of influence in which it could dominate its neighbors. For the past decade, President Vladimir Putin's Russia has been the world's great geopolitical spoiler, actively attempting to unravel the rules-based international system.

For many [commentators](#), the current crisis is proof that this system has collapsed and that the democratic age was a brief fantasy. David Brooks writes that “history is reverting toward barbarism.” Robert Kagan [has said](#) that “the jungle” is growing back. But is that kind of pessimism justified? I am more hopeful that within the terrible news of today lie some powerful positive forces.

After all, what caused this crisis in the first place? It's very simple: the overwhelming desire of Ukrainians to live in an open, [democratic society](#). Let us not forget what it was that enraged Putin and led him [to invade Ukraine for the first time](#) in 2014. It was not a Ukrainian declaration to seek NATO membership; it was the efforts of the Kyiv government (a [pro-Russian government](#) at the time) to finalize an [“association agreement”](#) with the European Union. When the president of Ukraine ultimately balked at this deal — under pressure from Russia — he was greeted by massive street protests, and the parliament voted him out of office. That is what triggered Putin's first invasion of Ukraine.

Ukraine was not alone in choosing a pro-Western path. Over the past three decades, most of the countries that were part of the Soviet bloc have chosen one by one to become more open, liberal, democratic and capitalist. None are perfect — some far from it — but from the Baltic states to Bulgaria, from large countries such as Poland to tiny ones such as Moldova, most have adopted some versions of democratic politics and open, market-based economics. There has been backsliding in

countries such as [Hungary](#) and [Poland](#). But in broad terms, the movement of those countries toward Western values since 1989 is surely an affirmation of the vitality of the liberal democratic project.

Putin's reaction is a bloody, brutal effort to stem this tide of democratization. He has watched with horror as the movement swept across Ukraine, Georgia and, even by 2020, into Belarus, which experienced the largest pro-democracy [protests](#) in that country's short history. They were savagely repressed, [with help from Russia](#), and now Putin has one more country in which he can maintain control only through fear and force.

As for the liberal international order, it has more defenders than one might imagine. The most eloquent statement in support of it came this week at the U.N. Security Council, not from one of the Western powers in the room, but rather from Kenya's ambassador to the United Nations, Martin Kimani. He [said](#) that almost all of Africa's countries have borders that are deeply flawed. They were drawn by colonial powers, often dividing ethnic and linguistic groups. But, he pointed out, African leaders had decided that they would live with their imperfect borders, because to challenge them would have been to invite an endless series of wars and insurgencies. Instead, these countries chose to honor international law and the U.N. system. [Kimani said](#), "Rather than form nations that looked ever backward into history with a dangerous nostalgia, we chose to look forward to a greatness none of our many nations and peoples had ever known."

Far from Europe, what is at the crux of the problem between China and Taiwan? It is the fact that the Taiwanese people want to live in [an open, free, liberal society](#), and they fear that their way of life would be snuffed out by a communist dictatorship.

I don't want to minimize the troubles that democracy and liberalism face. Almost 25 years ago, I noted with alarm the rise of ["illiberal democracy"](#) and spotlighted in particular the nasty turn that Russia (among other countries) was taking. I have seen the erosion of liberal democratic values that I hold dear in the country of my birth, India, and the country in which I am a proud immigrant, the United States.

But what the backlash shows is that liberal democracy and the rules-based international order need to be defended — robustly, even aggressively. With the voices of nationalism and populism so loud, it seems that liberal values have few willing to defend them unabashedly. To those who dwell on liberal democracy's problems rather than its promise, I say, ["Let them go to Ukraine."](#) The people of Ukraine are showing us that those values — of an open society and a free world — can be worth fighting for and even dying for.