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### **QI Panel:**

#### **Book Talk: Towards the Abyss in Ukraine**

February 20, 2023  
12:00-1:00 PM EST

#### **Anatol Lieven 0:41**

Hello, everyone, I'm Anatol Lieven, director of the Eurasia program here at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. It's my great pleasure today to introduce Dr. Volodymyr Ishchenko to discuss his latest book. Before I do so just a couple of things. First, we will talk the two of us will talk for about half an hour. And then I will throw it open to questions from you, the audience. Could you please write your questions in the q&a on your screen, and I will pass them on. I apologize in advance if I can't get round to everybody's questions, because, of course, time is limited. The other thing I need to say is that tomorrow at 11 o'clock, George Beebe and I will be holding an online discussion with Professor Michael Kimmage of Catholic University, on the subject of our latest paper for Quincy, a Diplomatic Path to Peace in Ukraine. So I hope that as many of you as possible, can attend that and also read our paper naturally. So thank you again, for coming. And it is an immense pleasure to introduce Volodymyr Ishchenko. Vladimir is one of the in my view, most important and certainly most independent and free thinking Ukrainian analysts working today. He is currently a research associate in the Institute for East European Studies at the Freie Universitaet. Berlin. He , s his research has focused on social movements, revolutions, nationalism, and civil society. And he has written very extensively on Ukraine and on the war on the background, the war for a range of publications. And he has just published a fascinating book, very different from almost well, yes, I mean, almost anything you will read on the subject of Ukraine, called Towards the Abyss: Ukraine From Maidan to War, and that is just this week been published by Verso. So Volodymyr welcome. Thank you for joining us. Thanks.

#### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 2:59**

Thank you for that generous introduction.

#### **Anatol Lieven 3:03**

I wanted to begin by asking you about a key theme of your book, which is the role of class identity in well, both in Ukrainian domestic politics, but also in the international alignments. And, in particular, the identification of dominant sections of the Ukrainian intelligentsia with an idea of the West as representing the the summit of civilization. Perhaps you could tell us something about, well, about your views on this, but also your own personal experience of this, which plays a central role in your book?

#### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 3:48**

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Yeah, that's that's a great question. And I do believe that it's very, very underestimated the class dimension of the oldest war, because it's certainly not simply about Ukraine and Russia, and not simply about, for example, any, let's say ethnic regional divisions within Ukraine. But there is some some fundamental cross cutting conflict, which cuts across the whole Soviet space. And the people who, in Ukraine, we see in so called, let's say, pro-European pro-Western camp. There are also the people like this in Russia. So for example, the followers of Navalny or the people in broad rational position against Putin, and so you would see some and it's a similar political, more or less similar political positions. And that's, that's a question of class and it's also fundamentally the question of the waste for modernization After the Soviet Union collapse, so that was do certain group of people and this were professional middle class, which was coming from or in large extent also from the Soviet entered against them. And they will see the way forward primarily in the western integration. And that was also not simply some idea, not simply ideology, it was also rooted in their own class interests. That was the way for them to become more economically, politically culturally powerful. And, and the problem on the other side is that there was no comparatively strong, hegemonic attractive project from Russia have, let's say, from the part of so called pro-Russian Ukrainian elites, and that's why they fail. And that's a big part of the explanation why Russia went for the power, military violence, because they didn't process the sufficient soft power in Ukraine a power that for example, European Union had.

### **Anatol Lieven 6:20**

And yet as you write, perhaps in a in an incoherent and of course, not very often not nearly so, educated or literate way, a different you know, a very different kind of cultural identity has also been very present in large parts of Ukraine in the east and the south. And as you write, I mean, that was critical to what happened in the in the Donbas in, in 2014. Outside the areas under Russian control will count, can you can you describe this, this culture? And can you also say, in unoccupied Ukraine, let us say, do you see any future for this now? Or is it in fact, now, simply bound to disappear?

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 7:26**

Yeah, this is important question. It's also important for me personally, and that's one of the very typical ways to look at this problem of different varieties of identity Ukrainian identity, or Eastern against Western or Hitchens is to a little bit kind of like essentialism, that this this conflict to clay which, for example, Russian speakers against Ukrainian speakers, western regions against eastern regions, there have been a lot of research who challenged this yo and to kind of look in what extreme parts of the research basically they dismissed any difference. I was trying to articulate a very different approach that took a look at the dynamics of the modernization of the Soviet revolution of class dynamics, and how this was the material forces that's thought behind this interview and divergence of identities of ideologies. So that way, it's going back to the first question that's also in particular about class, a significant group of Ukrainians were not exactly benefit benefiting from the pro Western project for Ukraine. So this one in particular, the people who suffered from the neoliberal reforms after the Maidan in particular, the people in the large segments of the public sector in the heavy industry, which become damage to the industrialist.

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So this was rooted in their class interests, and also the crux of the Russian elite, which were kind of like more interested in to have a sovereign state against the West and not been appointed constant monitoring because of the corruption and other things because this was kind of directly getting into the, their main competitive advantage in the content identity was fundamentally rooted in the process of Soviet modernization.

And it's very important to understand that, let's say Ukrainians who in particular, I'm describing most of the experience of my own family. Like my mom, my grandparents were coming from Ukrainian villages and going to take the work on shops, in particular, in the higher education institutions, they were becoming technical intelligence. And they were switching to Russian language, not because this was the language of oppression for them, but because this was a language of modernization of advancement, they were making social progress. And they were also understanding the switch of the of the languages not so much as in ethnic terms from Ukrainian to Russian, but mainly is from the language of the countryside to the language of the cities. And this experience of the modernization of social advancement was was fundamental for many, many Ukrainians. And that also was the reason why after Ukraine became independent, Ukrainian Russian speaking, Ukrainians did not simply switch to Ukrainian language, which would be kind of like natural if you think about that. Language vanquished dynamics in terms of like colonization, oppression, discrimination, Ukrainians were free, but they were not switching that. And the reason for that was the post-Soviet demodernization, the loss of jobs, so lots of incomes, the destruction of the social ties, and so far as the independent Ukraine was not capable to offer them move to the modernization. So we're not switching to the trend, which, and the only mind shifts probably are happening right now when part of former their Russian speaking Ukrainians now for political reasons, switching to Ukraine, to the Ukrainian language because of the Russian invasion. But we also need to see to which extent it was actually backed up by the positive modernization process and what not remain simply a negative rejection of everything Russian. Yeah.

### **Anatol Lieven 12:16**

Well, I mean, that was my next question, really. Because there is today very visibly in Ukraine, what you could call her. I mean, tragic, tragic irony, and largely as a result of the Russian invasion, but not totally, which is that the pro Western forces, I mean, the forces which, well, at least, you know, within the liberal intelligentsia, which desperately want to join the European Union, in future but have been largely subsumed by I mean, understandably, in the context of the war, but still a pretty virulent form of ethno cultural nationalism, which is, in fact, antithetical to what at least, you know, the European Union claims you need to be to be represented. I mean, is this is this going to be a major problem, in your view in future? Or? Well, I mean, I suppose you could say that, you know, I mean, Ukraine could pursue these two things to a degree simultaneously, if LePen is president of France. But then, well, Europe will look a very different place.

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 13:45**

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Yeah. So that's, that's a problem, to say the least. And this problem starts not not not just to the invasion, it's important to understand that when it's not like Ukraine had massive liberal intelligentsia, and then suddenly, only when Russians attacked, ethno-cultural nationalism appear to become so dominant. If you recall the discussions of the late 80s or the early 90s, there already are groups of intellectuals and not just in the far right segment, but also within moderately nationalist opposition within so called people's movement, party, who who had this agenda. And they're also people who really kind of like were complaining that it was actually bad that Ukraine got the independence without war for independence because the war would would provide for them an opportunity to shape the country. And now when Russians invaded they see this as an opportunity to kind of like to reshape the whole country in their image and liking and how they actually wanted the Ukraine to be. And it really takes sometimes ridiculous, sometimes extreme forms. As did, for example, they did the ban on teaching Russian Language and Literature in Ukrainian schools, even in the predominantly Russian speaking cities like Odessa or Kharkov for what exactly or the equally ridiculous attempt to pass a law of which Ukrainian parliament actually voted in the first region, but hasn't passed further, about the ban of writing in Russian language sources in science and education, even in academic books. That's just what the explanation for this. And if you think about this, you just cannot explain it simply by the, let's say, military needs. Of course, during the war, some restrictions on the political freedoms are justifiable. That's happens everywhere. But what is exactly the point of this symbolic move in terms of the if, if our goal is to win against Russia, when you do give this kind of like arguments for actually for Russians to claim that, that was part of their propaganda may be true, and why we do give the arguments also for the different publics in the Western Europe, to also to, to, to, to mobilize or to, to kind of like to come up with the anti Ukrainian issue. So for example, the harsh Ukrainization policies into education, give the arguments for Orban and it pushes this question you can get in minority and education rights. And it's constantly ideas, you know, the Hungarian-Ukrainian conflicts with shall also be such a hardship and overcome the EU decisions about support for Ukraine.

So what exactly is this language policy for, to create more problems for Ukraine, to create more problems to receive recognition in the international public's, and also when when it becomes so kind of ethnic culturally focused, it really makes it much more difficult to explain the cause for Ukraine for the global south. So, it just becomes simpler like about particularistic identity, not about any universal issues, that is so necessary to articulate to bring to global maturity, they do maturity of the humanity for to to fall on the side of your trade. And on the other side, are Putin and Russian intellectuals are constantly trying to train and certify in the fields that actually have more relevance for the people in the Global South, and this is this is a losing position. And you see this as a kind of so self defeating moves. But they also understand why they happen because for some people, that's actually the main theme behind this war. That was not simply to defeat Putin, and to destroy the Russian army from Ukrainian territory, they want to change Ukraine in a very specific way, which may not be even relevant for a large part of Ukrainians.

**Anatol Lieven 19:10**

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From that point of view, before 2014, you know, on a number of occasions, I had conversations precisely with you know, more radical Ukrainian ethno nationalists, who would say, actually, we should get rid of the Donbass and Crimea, let Russia have them. Because having got rid of all those Russian speakers with their Russian, Russian language, Soviet culture, then we will have a real chance of moving rapidly to our version of you know, true, true, Ukraine, ethno nationalist Ukrainian language. Of course since 2014 in public that is almost entirely disappeared. But, you know, when it comes to this issue of not formally, I don't think any Ukrainian government can do that, but as part of a of a peace settlement, leaving the occupied territories in Russian hands, I mean, could that sentiment play a part in future? Do you think? Or has this idea of Ukrainian territorial integrity in the borders of 1991 become such an absolute that nobody can, nobody can leave it?

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 20:33**

Well, first, you're totally right. Before the invasion there had been a lot of choice, the to, put it mildly, skepticism and to put it like frankly, comic relief for part of Ukrainian public that Donbas and Crimea are no longer Ukraine. And you can find such comments since 2014, Andrew Wilson's primary well cited book basically argued that loosened Crimea and Donbass gives Ukraine a chance to push forward very quickly the necessary forms. And the Peter Korotaev, Junior Researcher, read through all of the articles in Ukrainian Tuz, which is the major, most important Ukrainian liberal website is a very big audience and also influence, and he read all these intellectuals or pet articles about the Minsk accords, and it was very clear argument that they can't implement Minsk accords, because that will jeopardize our progressive movement, our progressive transformations and the necessary reforms. And at the same time, they would not be ready to just formally recognize that. And well, and for Russia, also that you will also need to be honest, they wanted to include Donbass in order to regain influence in Ukrainian politics. Then the question is actually what what was better for the Ukrainian people as a whole for the people in Donbas, for the people in Ukraine? And not simply for the Ukrainian or Russian elites, that's an important thing to discuss. And obviously, not not not not this bloody and destructive war? Definitely not.

### **Anatol Lieven 22:48**

Just to interject, there was a question, could you just repeat the name of the researcher who went through Granskapravda? Was it Dr. Peter Korotaev?

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 22:58**

Yes, Peter Korotaev, he published so far the parts of his analysis and his scholastic block, and as far as I understand, he wants to publish it as an academic article as well.

### **Anatol Lieven 23:14**

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So I hope that people people got that. I must read it myself. It sounds it sounds very interesting. Do you mean given this division? Um, in your view? Or was there a possibility of reconciling these two identities in Ukraine before 2014? Or was a clash inevitable? And what was the what were the roles of what was the role of geopolitics of Russia and of the West, in bringing this clash to a head? So I mean, how how much, you know, how much was culturally or domestically determined? And how much was the result of of rival and and extreme policies by Moscow, Washington, Brussels.

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 24:17**

I sense that, that all of these things had some impact on this development. Obviously, I look, first of all, at the social dynamics as the dynamics of the modernization in the post Soviet countries, and in that dynamics when the main political forces actually couldn't, could not offer strong attractive project of development because even the EU, project of European development course of Ukraine before Maidan, it was not actually supported by the majority of the population and the changes since in the public opinion has happened very much because of the Russian aggressive actions since 2014. Yeah, increasing support for NATO, increasing support for the EU. It was not because the EU became more attractive, but because Russia became less attractive. Yeah, that's important to recall. And the problem is reconciling this also came from from the so called Eastern Camp, actually, I challenge to the extent that it was actually pro-Russia because we could see how the most of the constituents and the most of the elites and in that supposedly pro-Russia camp didn't support Russia, when the critical moment came, and the they started the invasion. And they actually expected that part of the elite, part of the population would be more supportive, what they're going to do. And we've seen how these people reacted, they didn't support them. And this question, so what is this whole idea about it was a pro-Russian, or it was indeed different from the pro Western pro European nationalist. The problem was that the they had some vague understanding that Ukraine should be different. But they were they until the last moment they were not capable to articulate a strong, attractive project or alternative Ukrainian development, let's say as a bridge between EU and Russia, there have been some discussions among the pundits in television and media. And this notion of breach was kind of a recurrent. But that three requires much more than simply a metaphor, it requires programs, it requires also investment, it requires also political organizations and real political organizations, not simply some some oligarchic parties with TV channels and paid pundits, but an actual civil society behind this alternative project. And this this camp was not until the last moment it didn't have a comparable civil society towards the Western camp had with the intellectuals with magazines with the universities, the support from the West, of course, for funding fellowships, grants projects are working on. But there was also some sort of more significant middle class intellectual basis to articulate pro European, pro western support in Ukraine and did not exist on the other side of Ukrainian political spectrum. And it's a very underestimated part of the explanation how we came to this catastrophe. Now.

### **Anatol Lieven 27:59**

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This is a remark I've often made about, about Belarus, you know, the Lukashenko regime, and its mass support, which it has had have always been simply called pro Russian. But that's not by any means entirely true. It is a post Soviet Russian speaking, but the Russian identity, but there too, I mean, even though this is the government in Belarus, it hasn't been able, well, I mean, well, I won't talk about Lukashenko. But it really hasn't been able to craft a an idea, if you like a new idea capable of competing intellectually and culturally with the the attraction of of the West, though. Well, we now have to see what happens to the west, a different question. As far as the war is concerned, I mean, can you see any way out of this abyss? Can you give us any any sense of how you think this this tragedy could end or what America could do, or what Ukraine could do to to bring it to an end?

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 29:14**

I'm actually afraid that Ukraine is a kind of like, you know, rancor with the gold globally destructive processes. So it's, in a way it's kind of like a magnifying glass to too many global and universally relevant problems. And now we actually see that the problem or of Ukraine is pretty much interconnected to us international problems. So it's not now not kind of like becomes not simply calm. flipped between Ukraine and Russia. It's intertwined with the conflicts in the Middle East. It may be intertwined with a conflict in Korea, in Taiwan might be between Venezuela and Guyana, you see how Ukraine become a major factor of the domestic politics in the United States that just just simply, two American presidents have an impeachment case because of Ukraine. The impact of our country on on the politics of the major nation in the world, our account became the part of European dimension and also contributing to the destructive centrifugal movements within the European Union. So it seems like the solution for the war I mean, at best should be should be looked on on the global level. Of course, we'll be doing a lot of discussions that we need kind of like an overarching security structure that will to at some point, can we overcome the geopolitical nationalist imperialist issues that were driving behind the Russian invasion, but also need to understand that there are also some material forces behind those escalation and scandal accent simply reinventing the League of Nations or the United Nations with the restructure which are becoming more and more discredited? Right now is in capital to stop major wars. I think I think there should be some fundamental Material Transformation over the of the world. And the solution for the worse, not only in Ukraine, but also in other hot spots of the world would come is not simply this policy proposals, not simply this, the negotiations, because negotiations might not just only temporarily, and the war, the war, but this the material restructuring of how the world economy and world politics looks like. And here, we just entered nto a very long term and very speculative sphere. So perhaps we should end at this moment and get some questions.

### **Anatol Lieven 32:38**

I mean, Gorbachev in his model, to a degree genuinely idealistic way did point that way towards that, but of course, nothing came with it. Yes, I mean, questions. First, I mean, obviously, some statements by Putin, and you know, more widely in the Russian media, by Ukrainians and Russians being one people. And then the identity, Putin himself has said this, you know, Russia

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being country without borders. Do you see these as an existential threat to Ukraine? I mean, they've even been portrayed in some quarters as implying genocide, or what are, in your view? are Russian ambitions, more limited and capable of compromise?

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 33:40**

Well, I think that Putin certainly has some vision for Ukraine. The the argument that many people make, that it's precisely this nationalist or imperialist ideology, is it drove Putin to stop the invasion? I find it actually not convincing. Because for many, many reasons, because the, for example, regimes personalistic or authoritarian regimes like Putin actual very much prone to start wars, and Russia is not is not that exceptional. In that comparison, you also see that there are some strong material interests behind the war. And so at the beginning of the invasion, there was a lot of, say wishful thinking and expectations that Putin started this war because of his crazy ideas about Ukraine. And the need to simply to contribute to an elite split in Russia. So Russian oligarchs Russian elites will just organize and conspire against Putin ust gonna end. So I believe there was this was a serious expectation, at least among parts of the Western elite. And some of the actions that the West took in the early months after the start of the invasion could only be explain with the expectations of the Russian elites' fragility. But we now see that rationality is actually winning from the war, they became richer, they became wealthier. They is they profited from the properties that the Western companies left in Russia.

### **Anatol Lieven 35:42**

Well, I mean, one section of the of the elites.

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 35:49**

Some, some could could lose, but on average, which is seen in the statistic in Bloomberg, for example, this is that the richest Russian oligarchs can become even richer, they say this in the Smith Wealth Report, on average, Russians become richer. Now, we will also see the GDP statistics, the manufacturing statistics, rational economy is kind of like shown better result than the EU economy. And it's not only about elite, that's another chapter in the book actually discusses this, this is discussed implications also, for the at least some troops within the Russian society, which start to directly benefit from the war, because they receive high wages, they now receive the stable contracts that the military industrial factories, and at least a part of the population might get materially invested in the war of Ukraine. And this, this gives them a much more different were reasons to support the war, that simply thinking that Ukrainians should not exist, or that simply thinking that Putin has, can do whatever he wants. So the response is that we need to understand the material forces, the material interests, defensive war, and that could also give us a better understanding, at which point putting my stop, because he might win in terms of his most important material interests, and he could be capable still to negotiate about Ukraine, in in certain type a zone of possible solutions

### **Anatol Lieven 37:55**



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I mean, my own perception is that, also critical, has been certainly as far as public opinion is concerned, but also elite opinion, is that even those who did not want the war and would not have chosen to go to the war, are now and even those who are not, during the devoted to complete victory, whatever that means, they are pretty determined not to lose. And so it becomes a question of, you know, just how much does not losing involve, you know, would it if they can reconquer the whole of the Donbass? Would that be enough?

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 38:42**

Yeah, I totally agree that in the course of the war, large segment of the Russian society, and we also know this from the empirical status, my colleagues, they conducted hundreds of interviews with ordinary Russians for sample support. There were others who oppose the war, and they see how the first people were shocked by the start of the war, they couldn't understand it. But in the course of months, years, they become accustomed to the war, they started to find some rationalizing narratives. They started to believe that, well, the war might be bad, but the war was inevitable for them. And they, as a portion of, of the Russian society started to really to believe in this argument that this war is also going on in the existential interests of Russia. So defeating this war would be for them not simply the defeat for Putin, not simply the defeat for the Russian elite, but the defeat for the whole nation. And of course, this contributes to the feelings of Russians in this war.

### **Anatol Lieven 40:03**

On the question, I mean, on the Ukrainian side, how do you see the future of Ukrainian politics? Because clearly, you know, division, you know, divisions in Kyiv are coming out into the open. And the removal of General Zaluzhnyi? I mean, what is the risk of political crisis within Ukraine? And how secure is President Zelensky's own position now in your view?

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 40:36**

Well, that's a great question, of course, to you to the point of concern, so many people's of speculations. We see now that, at least to the extent that we can count on the public opinion service in Ukraine, which lost a part of their reliability. And I'm also discussing this in the book in relation to of service about support for NATO, they said that, after the initial splash of support for Zelensky,, very high numbers at 90%, of trust and support, now, this is a decline that, and this is an outcome both defeat in the counter offensive and the dismissal of Zaluzhnyi had a very significant effect on the popularity of the last year, the one of the best polling companies, given the International Institute of psychology, yesterday published or this week published a survey that showed that in a few days after dismissal of the Zaluzhnyi, Zelensky lost another 5% of trust, or support. So here we see this decline. And this might show that the support for Zelensky was very much dependent on the expectations about Ukraine's victory. In 2022, they were high. And they will of course, the spectacular failure of the Russian original plan contributed to that,

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than the successful for the occupation of Kherson have some contributed to that. So the beliefs into ultimate victory of Ukraine were pretty high. Now, they are undermined. Failed counteroffensive, loss of Avdiivka. And this means that the escalations of more defeat on the front line which, which are not necessarily necessary, but are possible, because this depends on the supply of the weapons from the West. This depends on the success of conscription, which is now under heavy criticism in the not simply in the society, but also within the elites who understand that this is a pretty harsh move, and they may jeopardize their own political future.

### **Anatol Lieven 43:15**

And maybe even their own children.

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 43:17**

Yeah, yeah, I'm sure. And so if this, the things like this are not going to work, Ukraine may face more defeat on the battlefield. And at that moment, of course, there will be even more centrifugal developments in the political elite, who would start for example, questioning Zelensky legitimacy after May 2024, when the next presidential elections were supposed to be to happen unless the invasion started. And Zaluzhnyi may decide to go into politics, because why not? He's the most popular person in the country. And he might become a rallying point for different oppositional groups into politically Ukraine's political elite. And this combination of these factors, they all may contribute to a major political crisis in Ukraine.

### **Anatol Lieven 44:16**

And it seems to me that a key part of the problem, of course, is the Zelensky and his government but also much of the Ukrainian establishment has only defined victory or as defined the only victory is basically complete victory. I mean, again, and again, total Russian withdrawal, including from Crimea, and the Donbass, which now, well, to some degree never looked likely. And certainly now, given the situation, the battlefields and the balance of forces looks almost impossible, I would say. But would it be possible to construct a narrative in Ukraine which said look, by defeating the Russian invasion, and Moscow's hope of reducing the whole of Ukraine to a client state, by preserving an independent Ukraine on 80% of its territory, including all its core, historic ethnic territories, and preserving a path towards the European Union and Western alignment, that is a victory, not a complete victory. But nonetheless, you know, in terms of Ukrainian history of the past 300 years, it is, after all, a great victory, is it not? But is that something which it will be ever possible to say in Ukraine now?

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 45:47**

I absorbed into social networks, but also in the public opinion service. So, even even now, there is a small minority, who will refuse this, just immediately,, for example, comments that do we really need to fight for 1991 borders, and do we really want to die. And let's say, when when he has so many, we are so fixated on this public opinion, you also need to understand that there's a

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big difference between what people say, and what people do. Let's say the majority of Ukrainians would like to have all of Ukraine to be on the Ukrainian government controlled, okay. But how many of them? Are you ready to die for this? And just this is a very different issue. Right? So what our wishes and our readiness to invest every sense that we have to reach this goal. It's at this moment, it's it's I think it's not even the question of let's say, public legitimacy of this solution. But the problem that nobody in Ukrainian elite is ready to voice this agenda, will, with the exception of the figures, like Alexei Viskovic, who is outside of Ukraine and has become pretty much discredited. Still not still no, but at some point in time, it's possible because the tiredness of all of the war is growing, and the casualties are growing, and it may break through.

### **Anatol Lieven 47:54**

But of course, the longer that we wait, and Ukraine waits, the worst position Ukraine may be in. And the more it may have lost, and of course, well, and the more people will have will have died. I was trying to remind people of this, who say, oh, you know, we must hold on and hope maybe that Ukraine will be in a, you know, in a better position next year or the year after, but every day it goes on more young men die?

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 48:32**

Yes, this is a question. It's a question of life and death for thousands of Ukrainians, of destruction or even more cities like Bakhmut, Avdiivka, hopefully not bigger cities. And this is, of course, the question of moral choice. Those people who argue that they need to fight until the very end, they are taken their moral and political responsibility for the death of Ukrainian soldiers and also civilians who were killed by Russian rockets and rounds in faraway from from the front line. And as I said, a big part of those supposed national consolidation, which happened in 2022, around Zelensky, around pro Western shores, was a very big part determined by the expectations about Ukraine, expectations now look, less convincing on so forth, to more and more people in Ukraine.

### **Anatol Lieven 49:51**

But also, of course, as I observed very strongly during my time in Ukraine, you know, at the start that you, he accurate perception that Ukraine was fighting for its independent national life, and that the, you know, the Russian army was threatening to take care of it was threatening to take Kharkiv, cut Ukraine off from from the sea. So I mean, a tremendous rally, and it was tremendous of support and volunteers at that stage was very, very natural. But of course, it's ultimately in a very different if, if you've as I would say, I mean, Ukraine has I hope preserved its independent existence, because I cannot see how Russia could rule most of Ukraine that I mean, I just, I can't see how that could be made to work. But of course, there's the question of, well, how much of Ukraine is left. The question about the elections, I mean, how long can Ukrainian presidential and then after that parliamentary elections be deferred, because if I mean, also, of course, the people have raised the question, well, what if there's a ceasefire, but the war as such continues, there is no end of the war? How I mean, does that mean that

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elections can still be put off and put off? I mean, what what is your view on that? I mean, at what stage, does that have to be an election in Ukraine? And will that be agreed to by the present government? Or will it be forced, eventually by protests from below?

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 52:00**

Well, the legal aspect of this problem, that I'm not really qualified, I'm not a lawyer to comment to to interpret the Constitution and Ukrainian laws. So to my, not expert opinion on this, to the extent I can rely on on the experts, they say that the case for the parliamentary elections is stronger than the case for different presidential elections. So it's at least partially, this is not just a legal question, but it's also a political question, ecause if Zelensky wanted to have the elections, he could change the law. So it's not it's not simply his fault, it's not some evil intent. It doesn't change the law. And there are, of course, some legitimate reasons not having elections on to the war time. Yeah, it's also organize it, how to organize elections, how to be, which part of the population would be even capable to vote. The centrifugal developments because of the electoral competition might have very detrimental effects. So basically, the people who were pushing for the elections during the wartime, I'm not sure that they're thinking simply about primarily about democracy or personal political interests, first of all, so of course, this is a very risky on the war, that would have a divisive efforts on on Ukrainian publics and Ukrainian elites. Whether the elections are going to happen before the war, I think I would refer to my previous answer about the possibility of political crisis. If you're if you're going to have more military defeats, if the conscription would not work, if you're not going to have support from the West, that would all contribute to the political crisis. In in the course of development, we might get into elections earlier, but would it make Ukraine stronger or weaker? I'm very skeptical of this.

### **Anatol Lieven 54:46**

Several questions about corruption. I mean, how big an issue is this in Ukraine? How big an issue will it be politically within Ukraine? How much of an obstacle will it be to You know, Ukraine moving towards the west, I should perhaps say on that score, that when traveling in provincial Ukraine, I was struck by actually the absence of corruption compared to other places. In Kyiv, however, it was a very different matter. What are your views on this?

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 55:25**

It also depends on the level of corruption. Well, the corruption with which most Ukrainians face which are, which is on the low level, say, education institutions into police into courts. This is corruption of the middle class. And to a different question is top level of corruption, whether that's stealing millions, let's say from the military supply from some Western help, or, again, the design and the legislation that would help with tax evasion or capital flight for Ukraine, that was like the major problem of many, many post Soviet countries. For decades, a big part of Ukrainian elite lived from this corruption. So basically, this was a major competitive advantage, they could steal from the state and that allowed them to make their products more competitive, in fact, and part of this whole conflict is also conflict about eradicating these, how I call it,

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political capitalist class, the kinds of capitalists whose major competitive advantage or selective benefits from the state, the transnational capital that might be coming to Ukraine after the war in, for example, investing into the construction, it obviously is going to would be interested in more transparency, and have more clear rules and not allowing local guys to interfere there still stand some parts of that take the property, which, which has been typically happening in the past several years. And what we've seen during the course of the invasion, that the major Ukrainian oligarchs lost the big part of their political influence, they lost in the wealth, unlike the Russian oligarchs, in fact, they lost some of the property because the occupied territories were bombed. And somewhat, some property was actually nationalized. Supposedly, so different question is whether Zelensky himself if he stays in power is not going to create his own network, for example, benefiting from the popularity, but at this moment, he cannot even forecast that Zelensky might stay in power until the end of the war, he might be capable to be in the elections. One of the most recent polls, for example, showed just today that 43% of Ukrainians do not want Zelensky to run for the second time. It's not simply that they're not going to vote, they don't want him even running. For the second time, that he he legitimately has a right to

### **Anatol Lieven 58:57**

And last question, what happens when the soldiers come home? What impact does this have politically? People have, you know, drawing attention to what happened politically after the First World War in several countries? And how do you see more specifically, the future role of Azov and other extreme nationalist groups who, of course, are now very heavily armed and have gained great prominence as a result of the war?

### **Volodymyr Ishchenko 59:26**

That said, it's a very disturbing questions. It's not simply about the soldiers coming home and creating all variety of the problems that manifests for civil societies. You see how the spread of the weapons even amongst the civilian population, leading to random acts of violence, one of the cases was ne of the members of the local council, so an elected person through hand grenade in the middle of the local council, killing two people and injuring 20 people because of some local conflict. And this is insane. This, of course, contributes to the feelings of unsafety, even to the risk of coming back to Ukraine, in terms of refugees who left Ukraine, and as obviously a separate problem to the extent that they become so prominent, made heroes after the defense of Mariopol. And after the day, they appear in the most important points on the front line. So they were fighting Bakhmut, and they were now in the last day. So for defensive of the category, according to the reports relocated to Avdiivka, trying to keep Russians from the taking the city. And, and we also know and that there's still the same people who run this assault company, a veteran of the far right movement, his closest team calling in command, the details are still most of them are the same people who started us off in 2014, and who were coming from the far right movement too close to far right, hooligan network networks. So in case after the word, it's pretty expected that they will try to convert their symbolic capital into political capital.

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**Anatol Lieven 1:01:49**

Well, because even those who deeply dislike their ideology can hardly deny their courage, and resolution. And these are, these are brave people, right? Well, Volodymyr, thank you so much. This is a fascinating discussion. And as I say, from you know, a standpoint which we really do not hear nearly enough of. So thank you so much. I urge people to buy blood in his book Towards the Abyss: Ukraine from Maidan to War, and I hope that as many of you as possible will join us at 11 tomorrow for our discussion of the path to peace in Ukraine. So thank you all so much, and thank you for Volodymyr.