

# Ukraine Matters to Us All

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A dangerous man is president of Russia. Do not blame or hate ordinary Russians. We can expect he would lose the next free and fair election there.

This is more than "a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing". The consequences can be far-reaching.

Ukraine is not far away. It is part of the European continent. It is a neighbour; it is a friend. Like most of the rest of Europe, Ukraine is a democracy. Most of its people do not want their country to become part of Russia.

We know a working democracy transforms the lives of people below the elites and stabilises a turbulent world. Healthy elements of democracy do good: free media, fair courts, honest elections and the freedom to criticise government and rulers.

Acts of terror that undermined the growing prosperity in Tunisia, in Egypt and more recently in Sri Lanka were by people who cared little for the lives of ordinary people seeking stability, prosperity and freedoms. Some of the most tense places in the world are on the peripheries of autocracies like Russia, China, Vietnam and North Korea.

The 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant theorised that no good democracy would go to war with another. There are few real wars between democracies. National government should not think itself immune from the electorate's verdict. War and conflict are sometimes the last resort for autocratic leaders like president Putin, clinging to power.

In January, after weeks of prolonged support and deliveries of supplies, the phrase "God Save the Queen" began trending on Twitter across Ukraine. Some bars and restaurants in Kyiv were offering free drinks to anyone who had a UK passport. As a friend and ally, we have a moral obligation to support the people of Ukraine. The UK also has a legal duty to support Ukraine's territorial integrity.

In 1994, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom signed the Budapest memorandum which promised to respect and protect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine. We must stand by our commitment as should other signatories: the United States and, surprisingly, Russia. Do look it up.

We cannot erode the vision of a Europe whole and free; one that emerged from the devastation of two terrible World Wars and the prolonged division of the Cold War. How we respond can reverberate across the globe. Beijing will be watching closely as it hopes to reunify Taiwan with mainland China.

Some may decry economic ulterior motives. The UK is in a fortunate position in Europe as the country with the lowest dependency on Russian Gas supplies. Other countries rely more heavily on Russian Gas: Finland at 94%; Germany at 49%; Italy at 46%; Poland at 40% and France at 24%. The UK is <2%.

The United Kingdom is most able to challenge the dangerous actions and intentions of Putin and the destabilising aspirations of others like Xi Jinping. Respect our allies who are taking expensive decisions.

The post-war international settlement owes much to the Foreign Secretary in the Labour government. Ernest Bevin had a life worth remembering. At the Workers Travel Association, the Priory in Nettlestone on the Isle of Wight, he drafted his influential speech that led to the Western European Union, the precursor to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation with its political and military arms.

With the main exception that followed some mistakes as the former Yugoslavia broke apart, NATO helped to keep peace, to deter war and to lead at least indirectly to many countries in central and eastern Europe joining non-Soviet organisations. It is a shame Russia did not make the same choices.

A quarrel in a far-away country may be nearer than we first think. Albert Camus is right, "Democracy is not the law of the majority but the protection of the minority."