

Ukraine in a World Without Rules

The world is entering a phase of neo-royalism – an era, where international rules no longer function, and security guarantees become just temporary arrangements. In such a world, survival depends not on who is right, but on who is needed. Taking this into account, it is suggested to consider a number of practical steps for Ukraine: how not to become a “trophy” of new global elites, how to preserve agency, and how to turn military strength, the economy, and diplomacy into instruments of survival and influence.

In a world without rules, weakness is punished quickly, so Ukraine must be a “steel hedgehog” – dangerous to mess with and beneficial to cooperate with. The basis of our ability to survive in this world without rules can be built on the following key elements:

The first one is intrinsic value

In a neo-royalist world, to survive, it is not enough to just be an ally; one must be able to offer key resources. What valuable resources does Ukraine possess?

- 1. Military resource and security value.** This value is real, not symbolic, proven by years of successful resistance against a much stronger and more insidious adversary whom the other partners are afraid of.
- 2. Energy resource of strategic value.** Particularly for Europe and the United States, as our primary donors and contributors.
- 3. Political reliability.** That is, the willingness to act even when the system functions outside the normal rules.

We cannot rely on someone automatically protecting us – but we should clearly demonstrate our own value – both to partners and competitors. Any value, if it is real, is always worth the attention and protection of those who are interested in it.

The world is becoming increasingly cynical, driven by the interests of new elites. Old Europe is frightened of Putin – it does not want to fight on its own, though it could. Currently, it is more convenient for Europe to maintain Ukraine’s nearly million-strong army as a reliable guarantor against Russian aggression than to fight Russia itself. Therefore, they prefer to “buy off” Putin’s threat by supporting the Ukrainian armed forces and the military-industrial complex. Whether this is good or bad, only time will tell. But this has happened before, when Cossacks sometimes acted as a “mercenary” army.

The second important element is maximum possible subjectivity, independence in one's own actions and decisions

What does this mean in practice?

- 1. Ukraine makes its own decisions**, even if they are inconvenient for major partners.
- 2. There are no “strategic trustees”** – there is only a real position on the political map.
- 3. Any agreements concerning Ukraine must be beneficial to Ukraine.** To partners as well, but not at the expense of Ukrainian interests.

In a world where rules do not work, weakness is punished quickly. With the assistance of pragmatic Americans and Europeans, Ukraine should be that “steel hedgehog” that anyone would be afraid to bite, from Russia to some not-so-friendly Western neighbours.

The third element – the economy as an essential and necessary instrument

Neo-royalism means patronage and resources. Ukraine must transform its economy so as to be valuable and, where possible, indispensable. The key components here are as follows:

1. **Critical infrastructure** – in energy, the IT sector, defence, etc. It is important to engage interested allies here, but to retain our own control.
2. **Strategic minerals and raw materials**, which are important for the EU and U.S. technology and defence sectors.
3. **Investments** – not just any kind, but strategically important ones.

The economy should be a tool of influence, not an object of redistribution. For example, if there is a change of power in Iran, we should be the first to send a delegation there and sign a contract to build an AN-148 regional jet manufacturing plant there and negotiate the supply of our agricultural products. If the world is ruled by selfish gain, then we will have to play by these rules too.

The fourth element of indispensability is power and diplomacy

Power must not be only military, but also to include:

- **Diplomacy** that operates effectively even under unconventional conditions;
- **Connections with various elites**, not only governments;

- **Readiness and ability to bargain**, but on our own terms.

In a world dominated by an elite circle, Ukraine must demonstrate that we are a valuable player, not a victim of circumstances. We must abandon any illusions in international relations, where state egoism and focus on national interests prevail. Europe is pragmatic, the United States is pragmatic, and so must we be. Pragmatic in negotiations, pragmatic in economic matters, pragmatic in international relations. At the same time, of course, we must understand and consider the interests of our partners – provided that they also take our interests into account.

The fifth element – transparency and control:

- **Transparency and predictability** of political processes – so that allies trust our decisions;
- **Clear and reliable rules** based on compliance with laws;
- **Transparent control** over resources that should work for the whole country, not just for a privileged circle;
- **Partnerships**, both domestic and foreign, should be strategic rather than situational.

In today's world, it is not those who are right who survive, but those who are needed. Therefore, Ukraine must be valuable, not dependent. It must control its own resources and economy. It must combine strength and diplomacy. It must act as a stakeholder, not as a ‘trophy.’ It must understand and take into account the interests of its partners, but at the same time do everything possible to ensure that its own interests cannot be ignored. We may not like the current rules of international relations, but for now we have to play by them – if we want to survive.

Oleksandr Tytarchuk, Co-Founder and Member of the Board at the East European Security Research Initiative, Retired Colonel, former Military Adviser of the Ukrainian Delegation to the OSCE. He holds a Master's degrees in military management and international relations, and PhD degree in pol-mil sciences.

East European Security Research Initiative (EESRI) is a discussion, analytical and information-sharing international platform aimed at uniting efforts of the experts and researchers from various countries to find effective ways for strengthening security in the Eastern Europe.

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