

THE CAVALIER DAILY

Democracy Dialogues panelists urge support for Ukraine amidst decreasing global democracy

The panel explored the invasion of Ukraine through trends in indices of domestic and global democratic stability

By Eileen Powell
March 19, 2022

The second Democracy Dialogues event of the semester centered on a discussion about the stability and relevance of global democracy in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine this past Wednesday on Zoom. Democracy Dialogues series is co-sponsored by the recently-endowed Karsh Institute of Democracy and the Miller Center to encourage civic awareness and strengthen democracy.

The event was moderated by Margaret Brennan, host of the CBS “Face the Nation” program. Brennan is a Class of 2002 alumnus, who graduated with a bachelor’s degree in foreign affairs and Middle Eastern studies and a minor in Arabic. The panel featured Freedom House President Michael Abramowitz, Miller Center Senior Fellow John Bridgeland, Seema Shah, head of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance and Ian Vásquez, vice president for international studies at the Cato Institute.

The event began with an introduction from Provost Ian Baucom, who recognized the importance of indices developed over the past decades to assess the stability and health of democracy throughout the world. These indices measure freedom, corruption, checks and balances and civic engagement, and have shown a global decline in democracy over the past decades. “It would be impossible to discuss these indices without recognizing their real world implications for current events surrounding Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine, China’s relationship with Taiwan [and] waning trust in institutions in the United States,” Baucom said. “Our hope is that today’s session can result in a dialogue about the overall health of democracy as well as exploring what’s at stake.”

On Feb. 24, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Following the invasion, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy declared martial law, and the United Nations voted to condemn the invasion.

The first portion of the discussion questioned the role of international intervention in the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a “defense of democracy,” particularly in the context of the declining stability of global democracy.

Abramowitz underscored the symbolic nature of the invasion of Ukraine as an outlier in Eurasia amidst the decline of democracy.

“We are in the midst of a global democracy recession, if you will,” Abramowitz said. “So I very much think Ukraine is at [the] front [and] center of that issue.”

Vásquez added that the decline of trust in institutions in the United States has allowed for the rise of populism within both political parties, and that Ukraine highlights the consequences of these declines.

“I think that the invasion of Ukraine has been a clarifying moment, because one of the things that I’m sure all of our [indices] have been tracking is this decline in freedoms [and] decline in the robustness of democracies,” Vásquez said. “The clarifying moment in Ukraine is that when you take those polarizations and that kind of authoritarianism to an extreme, you don’t only get a loss of freedom within the countries that practice populism and instability and conflict in the extreme — you get the kind of brutal international conflict that we’re seeing in Russia now.”

Miller also emphasized the significance of this conflict for the understanding of democracy in the United States, referencing the Jan. 6 insurrection and Americans’ general underestimation of the fragility of democracy.

“Ironically now, we’re seeing with after January 6, and the undercutting of democratic norms in recent years, President Zelenskyy and the Ukrainians ought to be renewing Americans’ passions to defend our own system.”

While they recognized the importance of aiding Ukraine and encouraging democracy, the panel also warned against escalating the conflict through direct military intervention. Vásquez cautioned against encouraging American intervention for the promotion of democracy.

“We’ve had a lot of those experiences and they have not turned out well — instead, they have led to endless wars that haven’t produced very good results,” Vásquez said. “So I don’t think it makes sense to idealize the ability of the United States or any particular country to go on a democracy crusade.”

Abramowitz reiterated the danger of escalating the conflict and emphasized the use of alternative measures to isolate Russia and support Ukraine.

“I think we’re sort of early in this story, and I think — first of all — that the idea that the Biden administration has a binary choice between force and no force is not correct,” Abramowitz said. “It risks an escalation that may not be wise but, number two, it risks making this a war between NATO and Russia.”

One area where the Biden administration should be doing more, according to Miller, is the protection of Ukrainian citizens. Bridgeland referenced a briefing the previous day with cabinet officials and humanitarian relief organizations in which he learned that humanitarian corridors — demilitarized zones which are intended to escort civilians safely out of conflicts — are not being adequately protected.

“We’re pushing hard for the United States to step up, support the people of Ukraine in addition to the financial, economic, some level of military aid and the other levers we’re pulling,” Bridgeland said.

Shah noted that Ukraine had been experiencing declines in several indices such as impartial administration, judicial independence and corruption over the past decade, but recognized the discrepancies between the inclusion and exclusion of different democratic governments in NATO.

The discussion then transitioned to a domestic perspective, underscoring the decline in public faith in democratic institutions and the culture of democracy in the United States. While the panelists recognized that the United States remains a high-functioning democracy in the global context, all of its respective indices captured declining trends in democratic indicators over the past decades.

According to Shah, IDEA data shows that the U.S. is one of seven backsliding democracies in the world, defined as a pattern of significant declines in checks on government and civil liberties over the past five years. Vásquez also noted a long-term decline in the measures of the level of freedom in the United States, with the largest declines beginning around 2000.

“I think what’s going on is weakening not only of formal institutions but also what you might say is the culture of freedom,” Vásquez said. “We’re living in a moment of intolerance and for institutions to survive they really do have to be backed by a culture that agrees that these are legitimate institutions, or that there’s a sort of shared system of values around the concept of liberal democracy.”

Abramowitz reiterated a downward trajectory of democratic indices over the past decade and asserted the international importance of democracy in the U.S.

“We care about U.S. democracy for its own right — that we want to have a strong democracy in this country — but it is so crucial to the health of global democracy,” Abramowitz said.

Shah remained hopeful about the future, however, citing the increase in protests for democracy around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic as proof of a widespread desire for democracy.

“We found in our analysis [that] almost 80 percent of countries around the world experienced protests during the pandemic, despite restrictions on protests and freedom of assembly,” Shah said. “And we found that to be stunning, that the level of demand for democracy sort of was phenomenal.”

