

COMMENTARY

Witnessing downfall of a nation once great

Your Turn
Koray Ozpolat
Guest columnist

In Greek tragedy, a great man falls from good fortune to bad which is brought on him by his fatal flaws. Like human beings, nations also have the potential for self-destruction. In his recently published book, "The Tragedy of Ukraine: What Classical Greek Tragedy Can Teach Us About Conflict Resolution," Nicolai Petro uses the Greek tragedy as a lens to analyze the conflict in Ukraine. As the war reaches its one-year mark, I will argue that it is not just the Tragedy of Ukraine but also of Russia, and the hubris of Russian elites prevent them from seeing it!

First, I believe that Russia's rulers are shortsighted. In the long run, the real threat to Russia's survival comes from Asia – not from Europe or the U.S. Unlike Napoleon or Hitler, Germans or French today have neither the power, nor the desire, to push to the gates of Moscow again. With an area of 6.6 million square miles, Russia occupies 10 percent of the world's land mass but houses less than 2 percent of the world's population. Billions in East and South Asia live in very dense geographies.

There is already a significant Chinese migration to Russia's far east – some call this "a time bomb." Climate change may trigger further mass movements in the future. Sparsely populated Russian east will be an attractive nearby destination for many Asians – whenever a geopolitical opportunity arises. Thus, for a sliver of land in eastern Ukraine, engaging in a military conflict with the West in general and Ukraine in particular is a tragically shortsighted decision of Russia's elite, who must be blinded by nationalism.

Second, Russia's population is in decline. The average life expectancy for Russian men is as low as 66 years. It did not help that more than 200,000 Russian troops have been killed or wounded during the war, so far. Many more young Russian men also escaped the country to avoid conscription. Most of these draft-dodgers are highly skilled professionals and their plight hurts the Russian economy badly. Worsening Russia's long-existing demographic challenges, loss of half a million young men at their prime ages has left many Russian villages and towns desolate, which is a demographic tragedy.

Finally, Russian shelling of Kiev, Kharkiv and other Ukrainian cities, in my opinion, accelerated the nation-building process of Ukraine. While Russians claim that Ukraine and Russia are one nation, most Ukrainians disagree, although cultural proximity is acknowledged. A few weeks into the war last year, I watched a BBC interview with an old Ukrainian woman sheltering in Kharkiv's subway to survive. Viewing Russia as a sister nation, she roughly said, "I still cannot believe it is our Russian brothers and sons bombing us!" Russia's ruthless shelling of cities alienated many Ukrainians from their Slavic identities and accelerated the nation building process in Ukraine.

It is not just Ukrainians but the neighboring Polish, Finns, Kazakhs and the Baltic nations are also worried. Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership already. Russia unified liberal democracies, scared its neighbors, and lost much of its soft power, which is a diplomatic tragedy.

Disconnected from the world's advanced economies with a dwindling population, Russia cannot indefinitely rule this vast empire based only on nukes and oil-gas revenues. Unfortunately, nationalist Russian elites cannot see how their own actions in Ukraine are paving the way for an eventual collapse of their country. The downfall of a great nation, which gave the world Tolstoy, is indeed a Russian tragedy.

Koray Ozpolat is a graduate student of political science at the University of Rhode Island.



A protester holds a sign outside a federal courthouse in Portland, Ore., during a hearing on the fate of Oregon's physician-assisted suicide law last March. DON RYAN/AP

Where will push for assisted suicide end?

Your Turn
Giuseppe Butera
Guest columnist

A bill to legalize assisted suicide was recently introduced in the Rhode Island legislature (H5210). The bill includes so-called safeguards limiting assisted suicide to those with less than six months to live. In an op-ed published in 2021 ("Legalized assisted-suicide targets our most vulnerable," Commentary, March 4), I argued that the legalization of assisted suicide should be rejected even by those who see nothing morally wrong with it because safeguards, like lines in the sand, are all too easily moved.

Nothing has changed since 2021. The physically and mentally disabled will almost certainly be among the first to be threatened by the inevitable push to expand assisted suicide beyond the terminally ill. We have already seen this around the country. There are at least a couple of instances of people with anorexia using assisted suicide to end their lives. But there is another group

that would also be threatened by this push. I'm speaking of our legislators.

To see what I mean, consider those legislators who are willing to vote for H5210 only because it is limited to the terminally ill. What will they do when another bill is proposed to expand assisted suicide beyond these limits? And it will happen, because expansion beyond the terminally ill is already happening in the U.S. and around the world.

Sooner or later, all but supporters of death-on-demand will have to take a stand against assisted suicide. It might be with the push to legalize it for the mentally ill and the physically disabled; it might be with the push to legalize it for the clinically depressed; or it might be with the push to legalize it for minors. Whenever that moment comes, they will find themselves in the awkward position of having to oppose arguments they had previously used themselves.

Worse still, they will find it increasingly difficult to say no to those who insist that they, too, have a right to assisted suicide. Like a boulder rolling down a hill, the momentum behind the push to ex-

pand assisted suicide will prove harder and harder to stop.

There will never be an easier time to stop the push to expand assisted suicide than now, when it is still illegal. Once accepted, the logic of assisted suicide will overwhelm the "safeguards" found in H5210. For those with any doubt on this point, just look at what happened in Canada, where it took only five years for the "safeguards" limiting assisted suicide to the terminally ill to be dropped.

Proponents ignoring these warnings will say that assisted suicide is needed to prevent people from dying cruel and undignified deaths. But what dignity for the dying can there be in a society that is willing to abandon them at the time of their greatest need?

The least hard choice a legislator will ever make is the one that doesn't lead to harder choices down the road. Now is the time to vote no on assisted suicide. After all, what the suffering need is a hand, not a push.

Giuseppe Butera is an associate professor of philosophy at Providence College.

Tell your legislator affordable housing matters

Your Turn
Alex Speredelozzi
Guest columnist

During the last week of January, I volunteered in the Point in Time Count, an annual census of Rhode Islanders experiencing homelessness, as mandated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The count brings awareness of unsheltered individuals in our state and helps us advocate for federal and state funding to support housing for all Rhode Islanders.

I am a board member of the Rhode Island Coalition to End Homelessness. I gravitated toward the work of the coalition because of the rising levels of homelessness in our state, including children, and I wanted to be part of the solution. As a community, not to rise up and lend a hand seems cruel.

In conversations with people the night of the count, we were struck with how thankful they were to have a roof over their heads for the evening. Despite the difficulty of not having a place to go home to and some bad breaks in life, the people we spoke with had humor, warmth and appreciation. However, we saw that living unsheltered takes a heavy toll on people. These were people who, right now, needed a few things to go right for them. Having a warm home would be a good start towards



A homeless tent encampment outside the State House in December. DAVID DELPOIO

that end.

Yet, in nearly all Rhode Island communities, rising home prices and rental rates price many out of a home. According to the HousingWorksRI 2022 Factbook, more than one in three Rhode Island households pay too much for housing.

It's time to get off the sidelines. Call your state legislators and local officials and let them know that housing is a priority for you, shelter is a priority for you, and emergency shelter is a priority for

you. No one should have to live outside — in the winter or in the summer.

If you are faced with that situation, you should have options to ensure that you, your family and your children are in a safe, stable environment where they can thrive. To learn what actions you can take to support unsheltered Rhode Islanders, go to e-news at www.rhomeless.org.

Alex Speredelozzi, of Providence, is secretary of the Rhode Island Coalition to End Homelessness.