

Higher Ed as an Antiauthoritarian Force

Higher education can build appreciation for nuance and empathy and blunt the allure of authoritarian quick fixes, Jamie Merisotis writes in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

By [Jamie Merisotis \(/users/jamie-merisotis\)](/users/jamie-merisotis)

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The conviction [on Thursday \(https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/us/guilty-verdict-george-floyds-rights.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/us/guilty-verdict-george-floyds-rights.html) of three police officers on civil rights charges for failing to intervene as another officer murdered George Floyd was a welcome moment of justice in a confusing, increasingly complex and dangerous world. Coming just a few days after the [federal hate crimes convictions \(https://www.npr.org/2022/02/22/1082300218/ahmad-arberys-3-killers-found-guilty-of-federal-hate-crimes\)](https://www.npr.org/2022/02/22/1082300218/ahmad-arberys-3-killers-found-guilty-of-federal-hate-crimes) of the three Georgia men who murdered Ahmaud Arbery, I felt a slight sense of satisfaction with these legal victories.

Yet these moments of success are set against a backdrop of a largely unthinkable new war on European soil, hearkening back to a time many Europeans (and Americans) believed had been relegated to history.

What's most evident to me about the Russian effort to invade and occupy Ukraine and eliminate its government is that this brutal assault—which could be short-lived or could drag on for a long time—has real implications for us as Americans.

A realignment of the global world order, accelerated by cravenly authoritarian leaders and an increasingly fractured international community, will not be “someone else's problem.”

Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin, challenges the American dominance of global institutions, international dialogue and shared value creation. He is dedicated to shifting power from the United States and its allies. He wants to divide the world along “us-versus-them” lines—and the Chinese government implicitly supports him, playing a long game of economic and cultural restructuring that also is clearly anti-U.S. and anti-European in its design.

In coming months, we can expect more economic gyrations within the U.S. economy, more significant uncertainty about the global world order and an increased fracturing of our national sense of shared purpose and democratic unity. This moment is not one that will soon fade. It will evolve, change and have implications that are still difficult to sort through.

So, what does this have to do with higher education and the foundation I run, Lumina Foundation—a U.S.-based foundation committed to advancing social progress through higher education

attainment? The short answer is, a lot.

Our work is not driven just by the idea that education equals more economic success and better jobs for individuals. It's also motivated by the powerful notion that a better-educated population—reflecting the racial, cultural and social diversity that has been a hallmark of the American experiment for more than two centuries—serves our shared interests and ideals, which include:

- More compassion and empathy for others.
- Greater appreciation for each other, without regard for our origins and experiences.
- Deepening levels of trust.
- An ability to sort truth from misinformation.
- And respect for the idea that the well-being of our neighbors and communities is something to be cherished and shared, not envied or denied.

All of that is, at its core, what we mean when we say our goal is to “prepare people for informed citizenship and success in a global economy.”

As the Russian invasion commenced, I spent time looking at photos I had taken in 1999 on a trip to Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. I was there for a consulting project with the Eurasia Foundation to help build new higher ed systems and approaches in the post-Soviet sphere. The pictures show a city and people that a dominant external force had decimated, one that used fear and coercion over decades to control the lives of their perceived “subjects.”

The photos also prompted me to recall a resilience, a sense of optimism and new beginnings, among Ukrainians. Our group was, perhaps now ironically, working to create bridges between Russian and Ukrainian academics trying to build new economic structures that would advance democratic systems and norms to prevent a return to “the old times.”

That effort has failed—for now.

But higher education will remain the best way for civil societies to develop talent. It will remain the best way to support equity and justice. And it is the best way to promote economic, social and cultural flourishing.

Everyone benefits from societies of educated, diverse and free people.

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