

# The Concept of Tolerance and its Relevance in Ukraine

*Ihor Vehesh*

Tolerance is one of the key conditions in the harmonious development of a society. On one hand tolerance can be described as an effective mechanism of understanding between different social communities, and on the other hand, it is one of the most important paradigms in modern scientific and philosophical discourses. Its worldwide implementation became possible only in the conditions and circumstances of recent history. After all, only in the late twentieth century the growing importance of tolerance led to the adoption of the “Declaration of Principles on Tolerance” at the UNESCO conference, the introduction of the International Day for Tolerance, and encouraged a gradual and persistent implementation of the basic principles of tolerance in a number of Western countries. Due to the growth of relevance a number of different platforms discussing issues related to tolerance/intolerance have been created, and concrete steps have been taken in order to build a space of tolerance in the particular areas of public life in developed countries. In addition, the intellectual circles of European countries are aware of the fact that democracy as a fundamental value of Western civilization can not be fully realized without taking into account the conceptual structure of the idea of tolerance. Modern theories of democracy, that emphasize the protection of minority rights in the view of the interests of the majority, are highlighting the connection between democracy and the conceptualization of tolerance. This broadens our view of tolerance and let us consider the socio-political context of this term.

The idea of tolerance appeared in history for the first time at the dawn of Modern Age, when Reformation and the birth of political theories laid the foundations of liberalism. However, ideas close to tolerance were expressed long before the Modern Age, in fact, they were part of the cognitive discourse throughout the history of human civilization. Of course, at different times and in different communities, this discourse was colored differently, but at all times the necessity of tolerance was a common conviction. Tolerance has always been considered an extremely important human virtue that required effort and work.

The principles of tolerance are the foundations of peace and stability, which were built by the best representatives of human civilization since

ancient times (from the principles of the Christian ethics of peace to the humanistic ideals of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment), but gained their more systematic, meaningful and holistic form not so long ago (XX-XXI centuries). Despite its centuries-old presence in philosophical treatises and scientific researches, tolerance for the general public has been discovered relatively recently. This, of course, leads to heated discussions about understanding the essence of this definition, discussions in which different approaches to interpretation give this category its semantic emphasis. Anyway, despite the variety of approaches to the interpretation of tolerance in modern science all of them can agree on the idea of mutual respect. The “other” can and should be treated with the same respect I would appreciate to be addressed with and the other should enjoy the same rights as I am enjoying.

Despite the significant evolution that the concept of tolerance has undergone in its development, the countries of the former socialist camp were able to join the world trends on this issue only after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Therefore, broad, diverse discussions on the interpretation of the concept of tolerance, as well as discussions on the starting points of various concepts of tolerance became possible in the post-Soviet space only after 1991, when socio-political scientific discourse was cleansed of theoretical postulates of dominant ideology. As a result, a number of countries, including Ukraine, lag slightly behind the general Western trends, as a whole period of discussions and theoretical confrontations (almost three quarters of a century) has been missed.

This omission is a serious flaw, because in transitional societies, which include of course Ukraine, the issue of tolerance (in various areas – from cultural to political) is extremely important. After all, the circumstances that arise in transitive societies inevitably cause contradictions and conflicts, which often exceed the limits of tolerant attitude. Various political actors (from statesmen to civil society) enter into socio-political communication with vague and unprotected rules, which makes it impossible to understand each other within civilized boundaries and increases the tendency to violent actions and counteractions.

In the Ukrainian context, the issue of tolerant cooperation in the socio-political sphere includes necessarily the following aspects:

1) The problem of interaction between generations (the older generation, part of whose life fell on the times of authoritarianism of the Soviet system, and the younger generation, which identifies more with the post-authoritarian worldview and is closer to the values of democracy and cultural progress). This confrontation can be considered both on a political level and on a cultural one, because in this case we are talking about a

conflict of worldviews, a conflict of life models. Young people tend to be individualistic, because they are born in a space shaped by democracy and a free market, while the older generation remains in the position of mental collectivism, in which the role of the individual, freedom and responsibility are greatly diminished, and the role of the state machine embodies a paternalistic model of social interaction. Compared to the older generation, the younger generation is characterized by the ability to accept more easily innovations, by social mobility and an active attitude towards changes in global trends regarding social, political and cultural progress. Dialogue between the two generations of Ukrainian society will require time of preparation and social efforts. One key element of this dialogue must be tolerance.

2) The problem of interaction between the East and the West of Ukraine is that they differ significantly in cultural, mental and political terms. This is why S. Huntington called righteously Ukraine a “cleft country”. These differences do not concern only the language and religion, but also the idea of the role and place of Ukraine in the global civilization, the point of view on its further social development and its course in the global political process. Western Ukraine has always tended to strive for European values, while a large part of the population in the East of this country is leaning to Russia as an “older sister”, as political and cultural authority – despite a century of colonization. Even now, after Russia has annexed Crimea and the regular Russian army has invaded the Donbass region in 2014, this orientation has not changed radically. Therefore, we have to deal with discussions about the civilizational choice that Ukraine is facing with regard to the aggravation of the conflict, a delicate discussion that in one way or another touches the issue of various political and cultural opinions that differ from one region to another. It is important that these discussions should be based on the principle of tolerance and should be focused on finding common ground concerning the socio-political, economic and cultural development of Ukrainian society. The model of interaction of polarized forces, proposed by the concept of tolerance, is essential in this context.

3) It can be recognized a radically irreconcilable struggle of different political parties, which perceive each other not as opponents in an open and honest democratic struggle, but as outright enemies, who are the bearers of “foreign values” and who will attack “my” values “with their” values and deny the relevance of my convictions. In such cases, the competition of political parties becomes so extreme that the methods of confrontation sometimes lead to violent actions. Exacerbation of confrontations between different political forces of Ukrainian society often leads to total rejection

of each other, although the roots of this conflict is merely a fundamental misunderstanding caused by differences in language, ideology, political dreams. Resolving these contradictions in the short term is impossible, because it is a type of issue that can only be resolved democratically over years and decades. Therefore, there is an urgent need to apply a practice of political tolerance, which would keep the tension of political confrontation within civilized borders.

4) The conflict with Russia was and will remain a major obstacle to tolerant communication between the two countries and among Ukrainians between pro Russia and pro European forces. In this context, the priority is not so much the issue of tolerance as a concept of peace, because it is almost impossible to build a space of tolerance on ground occupied by war and annexation. Only after war has finally ended and peace has been restored, it will be possible to construct a space of tolerance. Of course, this will be extremely laborious and time-consuming as the wounds inflicted by the war will be still fresh, but preparations for this large-scale work have to begin now. It will depend not so much on the format of future post-war cooperation with Russia (although it is also an extremely important component, as Russia and Ukraine are sharing a border which is thousands of kilometers long) as on the stability of Ukraine's political system.

This set of problems, which are only the tip of the iceberg, because there are many more, requires a strengthening of political tolerance in Ukrainian society, otherwise disintegration will only intensify and conflicts will spread and will threaten ultimately the democracy in Ukraine.

In this regard, there is a need for gradual implementation of mechanisms of tolerance in the Ukrainian socio-political space:

1) Creation of platforms for the promotion of "active" tolerance in educational institutions and the media, because these are the key information channels through which public opinion is formed and that are creating possibilities of interaction.

2) Preparation of educational programs and realization of trainings on political tolerance for civil servants and politicians who are holding positions of various levels in public authorities and in local self-government in Ukraine. The issue of tolerance, learning and adoption of its key principles, is primarily a question of education. Therefore it is required a use of pedagogical methods and various teaching techniques. In this respect, there is an urgent need to develop and use the latest educational approaches and techniques to implement tolerance.

3) Establishing a peaceful dialogue between representatives of different identities of Ukrainian society, long and persistent work in search of common goals and guidelines that will help to overcome misunderstandings

and contradictions. In this context the role of the “third party” which is not participating in the confrontation and which will involve moral authorities from civil society (from priests to publicists) will be to promote a broad civilized dialogue between all sides of the conflict by creating a space for this dialogue and following the rules of discourse.

4) Search for the best practices of political tolerance taking into consideration both the Ukrainian political system and the experience of foreign political communication, which would crystallize the expediency, effectiveness and profitability of tolerance for the broad circles of Ukrainian society.

Political tolerance is one of the important steps towards the implementation of “active tolerance” in a broad context. This is a necessary step that for societies in transit (and societies of a delayed transit) can on the one hand facilitate the process of democratization, the process of overcoming the corruption and on the other hand this step will be a solid foundation for the further formation and functioning of a sustainable society. Ukraine needed this step for a long time, but was looking at it as it was a secondary factor – economy comes first and culture and values are second. At the same time there can be no order in this issue because the cultural component and the values (which include “active” tolerance) are as important for the democratization of the political sphere as the economic one. “Active” tolerance teaches different political actors to act together and only after having learned this concept it is possible for different groups of Ukrainian society to work together to overcome the situation of political, economic and any other crisis. The formation of Ukraine as a successful European country is impossible without the awakening of its society, which is in a situation of socio-political isolation, collective indifference and growing intransigence. Of course, Russia’s role in growing this intransigence is also considerable, but it would be much weaker if Ukrainian society was stronger. This requires the first steps, and it is clear that these steps must be educational.

Factors that characterize the possibilities of creating a space of tolerance in Ukraine:

1. Religion. Despite some religious differences Ukrainian society is largely Christian and therefore Christian ethics (based on love and peace) is understood and welcomed by a great part of the society. This suggests that the adoption of the concept of tolerance as well as the creation of a space of tolerance in the Ukrainian society will have a fairly strong basis. Such important elements of Christian ethics as forgiveness, acceptance, and nonviolence are the fundamental principles from which the very idea of tolerance grows. Thus, we can assume that the religious consciousness

of a large part of the Ukrainian population will be an important factor in establishing the concept of tolerance in the wider social and political environment.

2. Multiculturalism and polyethnicity. Ukraine, as a country with a large number of national minorities, has a positive experience of coexistence of these minorities, e.g. in the polyethnic Transcarpathian region, where Ukrainians, Slovaks, Hungarians, Romanians, and others easily coexist. However, historical experience must always be approached with caution, because, as the Ukrainian researcher Vitalii Khanstantinov notes, “for all its attractiveness and significance, the historical past cannot be the main consolidating factor for modern Ukrainian society. First, the historical path of each of its large communities has significant differences... Second, detailing the past in the relationships of such communities cannot so much consolidate as provoke unpleasant issues”<sup>1</sup>. Thus, tolerance will work more effectively here as a value, that does not so much appeal to the partly controversial past as it focuses on the construction of a peaceful future.

3. Request for large-scale integration of Ukrainian society into the system of values and norms of the Western hemisphere. After the revolutionary events of 2014, the vast majority of Ukrainian society demonstrates a desire to strengthen the process of rapprochement to the countries of the European Union. This intention is reflected in a number of reforms that are taking place in Ukraine with varying degrees of success. The reforms are aimed at bringing Ukraine as close as possible to the standards of Western countries. This will open opportunities not only for economic and legal changes in Ukrainian society, but also for cultural and mental ones. The phenomenon of tolerance will work more effectively in a space that is culturally closer to it.

4. The war in Donbass offers an occasion to understand the confrontation of different identities in Ukraine as well as to move this confrontation into a tolerant course. Despite all the tragedy of the situation in Donbass, this war gave Ukrainians the opportunity to look at themselves from the outside to comprehend their positions and orientations, to become more aware of their role and place in the world. Having gained this bitter experience, Ukrainian society has also gained knowledge on how to build relationships between different social groups, which models of interaction work to preserve Ukraine, and what exacerbates destructive tendencies in

---

1 Khanstantinov 2009: 41.

it. Of course, the model of tolerant communication is the primary goal in this context.

5. The conflict with Russia is contributing to destabilize the situation in Europe and poses the question how to develop a format of tolerance in a “hybrid” war. There is a need for a clear understanding that tolerance in wartime is not a sign of weakness, but rather a consolidating factor which allows former politically intolerant identities to unite. In addition, it is necessary to begin to develop a tolerant perception of Russians and Ukrainians with a pro-Russian stance. Again, this is primarily needed not so much in order to build up potential relations with the Russia, but to maintain peace within Ukrainian society.

Thus, the gradual introduction of the concept and practice of tolerance in the Ukrainian socio-political space will not only strengthen the appreciation of democracy in Ukraine and bring the political system closer to the European models, but it will also create an effective mechanism that enables the society to solve internal contradictions and conflicts. For modern Ukrainian society tolerance is not only one choice of many possible alternatives of socio-political and cultural development, but rather the necessary decision that our country has to make and that is decisive for its well-being in the future.

However, it is also necessary to reconsider the peculiarities of Ukraine’s development, its history, and the conditions in which Ukrainian identity is formed, because it is under these conditions that the concept of tolerance will have to function. In this case we are talking about developing a concept of tolerance that would take into consideration the Ukrainian reality and would be flexible enough to effectively implement the principles that are the basis for building a space of tolerance. It is for this purpose that the concept of proactive tolerance was developed within the framework of cooperation between German and Ukrainian scientists<sup>2</sup>. It includes a set of principles and values that are vitally important for the peaceful and effective development of any society including, of course, the Ukrainian society.

In societies with different levels of development, history and specific cultural codes, the concept of “tolerance” is defined by a different understanding. The broad implementation of tolerance in the culture of thinking and behavior of different peoples also requires mandatory consideration of specific conditions that determine their lives, and also the goals, aspirations, and even illusions that move them. In this regard, the issue

---

<sup>2</sup> Vogt/Husmann 2019.

of tolerance and its discussion in Ukraine can be considered quite extensive. However, it also remains indisputable that fundamental principles, underlying the concept of tolerance (respect for the “other”, the attitude to interact with the “other”), are unconditional priorities of modern Ukrainian society.

Ukraine, having declared a course for European integration, trying to reach the European standards and follow European values, however, faces a number of problems related to understanding the importance of the idea of tolerance and its implementation in the domestic socio-political space. In this context, it is possible to clearly outline a set of challenges that may hinder the effective implementation of proactive tolerance in Ukraine.

1. *Definitive question.* Despite the fact that the Ukrainian scientific elite has confidently used the definition of tolerance for a long time, this concept causes misunderstanding and even outright resistance in certain circles of Ukrainian society. This situation appears strange, because the concept, which aims at overcoming contradictions and calls for peaceful cooperation, becomes a source of contradictions in Ukrainian society. The idea of tolerance implies respect for another, if he does not infringe on my rights, and in general tolerates my identity. However, the question “Should I be tolerant?” often includes another question in Ukrainian society: “To whom shall I be tolerant?” This question is to some extent intolerant, and the answer to it usually indicates exceptions depending on different social groups. And this highlights first of all another very important issue – the issue of a tolerant person. And who is she – a tolerant person? What is it like to be a tolerant person? For example – can we consider a person to be tolerant if he or she is only tolerating a specific identity, but at the same time is completely intolerant to another identity? Can this person be described as tolerant or not? In the Ukrainian reality the assertion of the principle of tolerance will inevitably involve the construction of a certain type of personality that is ready to get rid of internal barriers for the sake of becoming a tolerant person. In this context, we will not try to construct mainly a space of tolerance, we will rather work on the formation of a tolerant person.

2. *The level of civic culture* of Ukrainian society. Despite the experience of two revolutions over the last 15 years, which have demonstrated the activist potential of Ukrainian citizens, the Ukrainian society instead as a whole needs still considerable effort to develop a stable culture of civic participation. Elements of the Soviet mentality in the minds of many Ukrainians, legal nihilism, underdeveloped individualism will make it somehow difficult to implement proactive tolerance in Ukraine. However, there has already emerged a whole generation of young people, that have

no experience of living under colonialism, for whom independence and autonomy are an ordinary attribute of their lives, and freedom is seen not as an acquired value but as a habitual routine. For these people, participation in socio-political processes and broad social interaction with various “other people” does not provoke any difficulties. The environment of the youth could potentially be more receptive to the idea of proactive tolerance.

3. *Geopolitics*. What Ukraine faced in 2014 was geopolitics in its purest form, it was a classic of geopolitics from the time of Karl Haushofer. Categories that have not been used in Europe since the Second World War have re-entered the scientific and broad social discourse – annexation, occupation, territorial conquest, etc. This raises a very pertinent question: Is tolerance possible where geopolitics operates? Is it possible to implement tolerance during the implementation of certain geostrategies? Is tolerance stronger than geopolitics? Even if we answer all these questions positively, this does not remove the question of geopolitics as a significant obstacle. In modern Ukraine, the discourse of tolerance cannot pass this barrier. After all, one of the most important issues in modern Ukraine is the issue of war, which is the result of Russia’s aggressive geostrategy. Therefore, the ethics of peace, which is directly embedded in the concept of proactive tolerance, must play a key role in finding ways for peaceful communication between the sides of the conflict. However, at the same time it must be understood that the ethics of forgiveness and acceptance involves the inclusion of two sides, because in order to be forgiven, one has to apologize first. And the question arises here again: Is forgiveness possible in an area of aggressive geostrategy?

We must understand that while we will try to construct a space of tolerance in Ukraine, while we will unite Ukraine with the idea of tolerance, our militant neighbor will implement its geostrategy at the same time, which has got an opposite aim – the strengthening of tendencies of intolerance, disintegration and destruction. However, it is also important to understand that tolerance is not a weakness, it is an effective force that can unite different communities. Thus, geostrategy acts on discord, but tolerance – on unity. Geostrategy can lose in a competition with another geostrategy, but tolerance has the advantage that it works for everyone, it is impossible to lose in the area of tolerance, because it protects the fundamental convictions and aims, not the temporary ones offered by geostrategy. This is its unconditional advantage.

4. *Institutional barrier*. There are social institutions that can contribute to the implementation of the concept of proactive tolerance – the church, the media, the institute of education. In modern Ukrainian conditions the

question should not rather be whether these institutions will be able to be effective translators of proactive tolerance, but how much they will strive for multiplication. The churches in Ukraine, regardless of their confessional affiliation, have always been wary of the concept of tolerance in which they saw a threat to traditional values. Despite the kinship of Christian ethics and the concept of tolerance the churches in Ukraine have always tried to distance themselves from the definition of “tolerance” as a mechanism of cooperation with “others”, those who, for example, do not share the doctrine of the church, or those who are treated by church as the propagandists of a “sin” (sexual minorities, proponents of abortion). This fear is embedded in the centuries-old policy of the churches, which have always tried to separate the “faithful” from the “infidels”, “ours” from “others”. Of course, with such a policy, the idea of tolerance will remain alien to the churches in Ukraine. That is why, before the church in Ukraine can become a translator of the idea of tolerance, the church itself must be convinced that tolerance is not a hostile idea that undermines church teaching. In turn, institutions of media and education could be active translators of the concept of proactive tolerance, as they have no barriers in the form of doctrines. At the same time, it is necessary to realize that the stability of the media and education as institutions capable of transmitting ideas will be undermined by the economic conditions of their existence in Ukraine. Social, political and economic crises will reduce the range of activities of these institutions. The education sector, being in a state of reform, is currently experiencing a period of reduction and optimization, which, of course, will affect its functional capacity. However, one may hope that these reforms will strengthen the institution of education. This might allow a qualitative implementation of important ideas for society, which, of course, includes the idea of tolerance.

Putting it into a nutshell, it is necessary to understand that the challenges facing the implementation of the concept of proactive tolerance in Ukrainian society should not be seen as obstacles that cannot be overcome. Rather, they are natural factors in the development of any transformational society, especially a society at war. Of course, this complicates the task of constructing a space of tolerance, but in the case of Ukraine, it makes this goal even more desirable.

## *References*

Khanstantinov, Vitali (2009): Політична толерантність як чинник загальнонаціональної згоди // Сучасна українська політика. Політики і політологи про неї. К.: Видавництво «Український центр політичного менеджменту» – Вип. 16. – С. 38–43.

Vogt, Markus/Husmann, Rolf (2019): Проактивна толерантність як шлях до миру. Християнське соціально-етичне визначення толерантності як концептуальної основи проекту «Толерантність на кордонах Європи: вимір для України». з доповненнями Михайла Фетька, Фелікса Геєра, Іво Франкрайтера, Ігоря Вегеша, Маріанни Колодій та Олександра Бокотея, Ужгород.

