



Why Are Critics Afraid to Confront the Ukraine Lobby?

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There is a concerted effort in the United States and Europe to intimidate, smear, and silence anyone who dares criticize Ukraine's government or the Biden administration's policy on the Russia-Ukraine war. The latest example was the decision of the Congressional Progressive Caucus to retract an open letter it had sent to the president just days earlier urging him to give higher priority to diplomacy as a way of ending the bloodshed. Representative Pramila Jayapal (D-WA), chair of the caucus, offered an explanation that quickly drew derision from multiple quarters. "The letter was drafted several months ago, but unfortunately was released by staff without vetting."

Ironically, the letter itself was a rather tepid venture. Indeed, the signatories went out of their way to emphasize their support for Ukraine and praise the Biden administration for the financial and military aid it had given to Kyiv. The fawning opening paragraph epitomized the tone. "We write with appreciation for your commitment to Ukraine's legitimate struggle against Russia's war of aggression. Your support for the self-defense of an independent, sovereign, and democratic state has been supported by Congress, including through various appropriations of military, economic and humanitarian aid in furtherance of this cause. Your administration's policy was critical to enable the Ukrainian people, through their courageous fighting and heroic sacrifices, to deal a historic military defeat to Russia, forcing Russia to dramatically scale back the stated goals of the invasion."

However, the letter went on to advocate a limited course modification. "Given the destruction created by this war for Ukraine and the world, as well as the risk of catastrophic escalation, we also believe it is in the interests of Ukraine, the United States, and the world to avoid a prolonged conflict. For this reason, we urge you to pair the military and economic support the United States has provided to Ukraine with a proactive diplomatic push, redoubling efforts to seek a realistic framework for a ceasefire." The pro-war lobby's response made it clear that even such modest apostasy would not be tolerated.

The cowardly retreat by the Congressional Progressive Caucus is not the only recent example of opponents of the current policy caving under pressure. In August, Amnesty International issued a report criticizing Ukraine's military for using civilians as human shields and committing other abuses in its war effort. Predictably, the report generated a political, diplomatic and media firestorm that Kyiv orchestrated. Ukraine's supporters in the West even accused Amnesty of echoing Vladimir Putin's propaganda – a smear that should be even less credible than the usual attempts to silence criticism of Volodymyr Zelensky's regime. In reality, the report was well-supported by multiple forms of evidence.

Faced with the tsunami of vilification, Amnesty officials sought to placate their critics while still standing by the accuracy of the document. They issued a statement regretting any "distress and anger" the report might have caused. That ploy did not satiate Kyiv's zealous supporters. Multiple Amnesty officials connected to the report resigned under pressure during the following weeks. When a brave and honorable organization like Amnesty International has to throw its own personnel to the wolves, it is compelling evidence of the dangerous strength of the Ukraine lobby in the West.

Perhaps the retreat by the Congressional Progressive Caucus and Amnesty International should not be all that surprising, given the well-funded propaganda effort to back Kyiv without reservation and to harass and smear anyone who challenges that narrative. At times, Ukraine and its Western supporters have fostered a campaign of outright neo-McCarthyism, utterly chilling debate regarding policy toward the Zelensky government. The overall pro-Ukraine propaganda campaign was underway long before Russia invaded Ukraine, but it has grown much worse since then.

The level of intimidation that Ukraine's Western political and media allies foster, though, pales compared to the menace flowing directly from Kyiv. Zelensky and his colleagues have no tolerance for even the most peaceful opponents, domestic or foreign. The willingness to target and attempt to intimidate foreign critics became abundantly clear this summer when his government's Center for Countering Disinformation (partly funded by U.S. taxpayers, no less) published a "blacklist" of such opponents. Numerous prominent Americans were on that list, including University of Chicago Professor (and renowned foreign policy realist), John Mearsheimer, Fox News host Tucker Carlson, former congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, and Cato Institute Senior Fellow Doug Bandow.

Responding to the publication of that list, especially its inclusion of Bandow and other scholars, Cato Institute President Peter Goettler, published an article denouncing such behavior. He warned that "this kind of action – the establishment of ill-advised truth and disinformation bureaus, and the unfair smearing of eminent scholars – does nothing to burnish Ukraine's reputation as an aspiring liberal democracy." It is a reputation that Kyiv has never truly deserved.

The ominous, threatening nature of the blacklist became even clearer in late September, when the CCD issued a revised roster (including addresses) of the top 35 targets. That narrower, high-priority list denounced those critics as "disinformation terrorists" and "war criminals." Several Ukrainian and Russian individuals on the blacklist have already been assassinated, with open praise from the creators and stewards of the list. Thus far, no Americans or other Westerners have

met that fate, but describing critics as terrorists and war criminals does nothing to discourage fanatics from taking direct action.

Despite risks to budgets, careers, and perhaps even lives, it is imperative that critics of the Kyiv government and the ongoing war not be intimidated by the Ukraine lobby's thought police. The United States is sending billions of dollars in aid to a thoroughly corrupt, increasing autocratic regime. Worse, Washington is incurring grave risks, including the danger of nuclear war with Russia, to protect a client state of little intrinsic economic or strategic value to America. Such policies should be the subject of in-depth discussions and vigorous debate. The Congressional Progressive Caucus's ignominious retreat under pressure sends the opposite message.

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