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False Democracy

Ukraine is not the bastion of freedom described by most Western media.

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Ukraine's Western cheerleaders seem to have no shame. They continue to portray the country as a freedom-loving democracy, even though evidence continues to mount that it is nothing of the sort. The political and media lovefest accompanying President Volodymyr Zelensky's official visit to Washington and his address to a joint session of Congress in late December was the latest example.

Voice of America published an article comparing Zelensky's appearance to Winston's Churchill's address to Congress in December 1941 in terms of its heroic tone and substantive significance. The *New York Times* contended that public morale back in Ukraine had been greatly buoyed by Zelensky's "hero's welcome" in Washington. *19FortyFive* senior editor Matt Suciu chastised Rep. Lauren Boebert of Colorado and Rep. Matt Gaetz of Florida for "refusing to clap and join in a standing ovation for Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky's address to the United States Congress last week," noting that Russian media were highlighting their display of dissent. David Frum, writing in the *Atlantic*, asserted that Zelensky "recalled us to ourselves" and our democratic values. Fairly gushing with praise, Frum stated that the Ukrainian president "came to the United States to thank us for supporting Ukraine. It is Americans who should thank him."

Zelensky's speech perpetuated the myth that Ukraine is a plucky democracy defending the ramparts of freedom from Russia's assault. President Biden epitomized that attitude during the earliest days of the Russia–Ukraine war, when he charged that the conflict was part of a global struggle between freedom and democracy on the one hand and authoritarianism on the other. *New York Times* columnist German Lopez contends that "the West's enduring rally around Ukraine exemplifies an important trend from 2022 that could influence future global events: 'This was the year liberal democracy fought back,' as Janan Ganesh wrote in The Financial Times."

Such painful oversimplifications of a complex world would be bad enough even if Ukraine were a genuine democracy. The country, however, did not deserve that status even before the Russian invasion, and Kiev's lurch toward systematic repression has grown much worse since the outbreak of that conflict. Today's Ukraine is a corrupt and increasingly authoritarian state. It is not a democracy even by the most generous definition of that term. Unfortunately, Kiev's supporters in the West continue to ignore, minimize, or even justify the Zelensky regime's repressive behavior.

Genuine democracies do not ban multiple opposition parties or close opposition media outlets. Nor do they rigorously censor (and put under strict government control) media outlets that they allow to remain open. Genuine democracies do not outlaw churches that advocate policies the government dislikes. They do not imprison regime opponents, let alone without meaningful due process, much less tolerate the torture of political prisoners. Genuine democracies do not publish “blacklists” of domestic and foreign critics, thereby putting a target on their backs. Yet the Ukrainian government has committed not just one or two, but all of those abuses.

Efforts to smother domestic critics became evident just months after the Maidan revolution, and they have dramatically accelerated in the past year or so. Even early on, Ukrainian officials harassed political dissidents, adopted censorship measures, and barred foreign journalists they regarded as critics of the government and its policies. Such offensive actions were criticized by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and other independent observers.

Even before the onset of Russia’s invasion, the level of domestic repression was becoming worse under Zelensky. Kiev’s track record on democracy and civil liberties before the current war was not impressive. In Freedom House’s 2022 report, Ukraine was listed in the “partly free” category, scoring 61 points out of a possible 100. Human Rights Watch’s 2021 report on Ukraine also was far from favorable, citing abuses by government forces, “including arbitrary detentions, torture or ill-treatment.” Journalists and media workers “faced harassment and threats connected to their reporting.” In February 2021, the Ukrainian government closed several opposition media outlets on the basis of allegations that they were Russian propaganda tools.

War has intensified these dynamics. Zelensky promptly used the conflict as a justification for outlawing 11 opposition parties. He also invoked martial law to issue a presidential decree that combined all national television stations into one platform. He contended that such a measure was needed to ensure a “unified message” about the war and prevent so-called disinformation. On December 29, 2022, Zelensky signed a new law that his party had pushed through parliament, a measure that further curbed an independent press. The latest statute requires publications to obtain licenses to operate, and any media organization without the proper paperwork can be shut down immediately. The administrative body handing out the permits will, not surprisingly, be under Zelensky’s control.

Not even religious institutions are safe from government harassment and repression, as the Moscow-affiliated Orthodox Church discovered in the autumn of 2022. On December 2, Zelensky announced that he would seek to ban all religions with ties to Russia, claiming the move was needed to “guarantee spiritual independence to Ukraine.” The ban would especially impact the millions of Ukrainians who identify as Russian Orthodox. Indeed, Kiev soon imposed sanctions on specific Orthodox religious figures. Typical of the attitude in the West was the reaction of one Zelensky defender that the issue was “massively complicated.” That posture was something less than a vigorous defense of religious freedom.

The overall miasma of political and media repression grows steadily thicker, with mounting reports of arbitrary imprisonment and even extensive torture of regime opponents. Yet some supporters of Ukraine even seem unwilling to condemn the regime’s ongoing flirtation with neo-Nazi elements. An especially egregious performance has occurred with respect to the role of the Azov Battalion (now the Azov Regiment) in Ukraine’s defense effort. The Azov battalion

was notorious for years before the Russian invasion as a bastion of extreme nationalists and outright Nazis.

That aspect should have caused a problem for Ukraine's Western admirers when the unit became a crucial player in the battle for the city of Mariupol. Yet most accounts simply focused on the suffering of Mariupol's population, the heartless villainy of the Russian aggressors, and the tenacity of the city's brave defenders. These stories typically ignored the prominence of Azov fighters among those defenders, or failed to disclose their ideological pedigree. Yet colluding with Azov personnel was merely one manifestation of the Ukrainian political elite's long-standing, overall tolerance of neo-Nazi elements and their activities.

Perhaps most revealing of their contempt for democratic norms, Zelensky and his closest 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 in the summer of 2022 when the Ukrainian government's Center for Countering Disinformation (partly funded by U.S. taxpayers) published a “blacklist” of such opponents. Numerous prominent Americans were on that list, including University of Chicago's Professor John J. Mearsheimer, the Fox News host Tucker Carlson, the former Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, and Doug Bandow, a Cato Institute Senior Fellow and former aide to President Ronald Reagan.

The 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 high-priority list denounced those individuals as “disinformation terrorists” and “war criminals.” Describing critics as terrorists and war criminals encourages fanatics to take direct action to harm them. A blacklist can easily become a hit list, but the Ukrainian government is indifferent at best to the danger it has fomented.

Despite such warning signs, Ukraine's ardent advocates in the West persist in their propaganda. A typical example was a fawning *New York Times* column by Bret Stephens that contended that Americans “admire Zelensky because he has restored the idea of the free world to its proper place.” Membership in the free world, Stephens insisted, “belongs to any country that subscribes to the notion that the power of the state exists first and foremost to protect the rights of the individual.” One wonders what country Stephens is talking about; Ukraine does not fit that description.

Ukraine's Western admirers need to face the unpleasant reality about their cherished foreign client. Ukraine is not a democracy, and Zelensky is not a noble, beleaguered champion of democratic values. The Russia–Ukraine war is not part of an existential struggle between freedom and authoritarianism. It is an ugly turf war between two corrupt, repressive governments. America and other Western societies do not have—or at least should not have—a dog in that fight.

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