

Whitewashing Ukraine's Corruption

The country is not a symbol of freedom and liberal democracy.

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Statements from U.S. and other Western officials, as well as pervasive accounts in the news media, have created a stunningly misleading image of Ukraine. There has been a concerted effort to portray the country not only as a victim of brutal Russian aggression, but as a plucky and noble bulwark of freedom and democracy. The conventional narrative would have us believe that Ukraine is an Eastern European version of Denmark.

The promoters of that narrative contend that the ongoing war is not just a quarrel between Russia and Ukraine over Kiev's ambitions to join NATO and Moscow's territorial claims in Crimea and the Donbas. No, they insist—the war is part of a global struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is a leader worthy of nothing less than Winston Churchill's legacy. President Biden, in his [March 26 remarks](#) on the war, said the conflict was “a battle between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force.”

CNN's John Blake literally [compared](#) Ukraine's cause to America's in its Revolutionary War. He claimed Ukrainians “are building their own monuments to democracy, with their blood.” The world, he said, “has been transfixed by their battle to repel the mighty Russian army and preserve the birth of democracy in their homeland.” He added that “the war in Ukraine isn't just a geopolitical struggle—it's a call to remember. The courage of the Ukrainian people is a reminder of what the U.S. used to be—a ‘beacon of liberty,’ where virtually every schoolchild memorized the [‘Concord Hymn’](#) poem inscribed at the base of the Minute Man statue.”

In a March 26 *USA Today* op-ed, John M. Bridgeland, director of the White House Domestic Policy Council under President George W. Bush, similarly [expressed fawning admiration](#) for Zelensky and Ukraine's alleged commitment to democracy. “The world is seeing the bravery of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and the Ukrainian people, who are willing to die to defend their democracy and freedom,” he wrote. Indeed, Bridgeland said, “No cost is too high [for Ukrainians] to defend their democracy and beloved Ukraine.”

Fox News contributor and former CIA station chief Dan Hoffman contended that “What scares Vladimir Putin at the heart of this conflict is democracy. It’s not that NATO represents a threat.” He added that “Putin couldn’t stomach a democracy on his border with a Russian-speaking population and commercial links to Europe. That’s why he launched this brutal attack which has caused so many Ukrainian civilians, innocent civilians, to die.”

The notion that Ukraine was such an appealing democratic model in Eastern Europe that the country’s mere existence terrified Putin may be a comforting myth to U.S. politicians and pundits, but it is a myth. Ukraine is far from being a democratic-capitalist model and an irresistible magnet for Russia’s groaning masses. The reality is murkier and troubling: Ukraine has long been one of the more corrupt countries in the international system. In its annual report published in January 2022, Transparency International ranked Ukraine 123rd of the 180 countries it examined, with a score of 32 on a one to 100 point scale. By comparison, notoriously corrupt Russia ranked just modestly lower, 139th, with a score of 29.

Ukraine’s track record of protecting democracy and civil liberties is not much better than its performance on corruption. In Freedom House’s 2022 report, Ukraine is listed in the “partly free” category, with a score of 61 out of a possible 100. Other countries in that category include such bastions of liberal democracy as Rodrigo Duterte’s Philippines (55), Serbia (62), Hungary (59), and Singapore (47). Interestingly, Hungary—which has been a target of vitriolic criticism among progressives in the West because of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s conservative social policy—ranks eight points higher than Ukraine, which is the recipient of uncritical praise from the same Western ideological factions.

Even before the war erupted, there were ugly examples of authoritarianism in Ukraine’s political governance. Just months after the 2014 Maidan revolution, there were efforts to smother domestic critics, which accelerated as years passed. Ukrainian officials also harassed political dissidents, adopted censorship measures, and barred foreign journalists whom they regarded as critics of the Ukrainian 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. The neo-Nazi Azov Battalion was an integral part of President Petro Poroshenko’s military and security apparatus, and it has retained that role during Zelensky’s presidency.

Indeed, some repressive measures deepened under Zelensky even before the outbreak of war with Russia. In February 2021, the Ukrainian government closed several (mostly, but not entirely pro-Russia) independent media outlets. They did so on the basis of utterly vague, open-ended standards. Zelensky has now used the war as a justification for outlawing 11 opposition parties and nationalizing several media outlets. Those are hardly appropriate measures in a democracy, even in wartime.

It is entirely appropriate to sympathize with Ukrainians who are experiencing terrible suffering as a result of Vladimir Putin's decision to launch a war. Whatever the level of provocations from the United States and its NATO allies, and Ukraine's willingness to collaborate in those provocations, Russia's response was over-the-top. It created a dangerous breach of the peace in Europe and a humanitarian catastrophe. However, one can condemn Putin's actions and even cheer on Ukraine's military resistance without fostering a false image of Ukraine's political system. The country is not a symbol of freedom and liberal democracy, and the war is not an existential struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. At best, Ukraine is a corrupt, quasi-democratic entity with troubling repressive policies.

Given that sobering reality, calls for Americans to "stand with Ukraine" are misplaced. Preserving Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity most certainly are not worth the United States risking war with a nuclear-armed Russia.

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