



Risking Nuclear War for a Corrupt, Increasingly Repressive Ukraine

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Fortunately, President Biden thus far has rejected the most risky policies that hawks are pushing in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Despite being under intense pressure, he continues to rule out proclaiming a no-fly zone, and he flatly rejects suggestions (including from one close political ally) that he consider sending U.S. troops to Ukraine. However, even the policies the administration has embraced entail an unacceptable risk of entangling the United States in a military confrontation with a nuclear-armed power.

The United States and some NATO allies are pouring increasingly sophisticated weapons into Ukraine to bolster that country's resistance to the invasion. Russia recently reiterated its warning that such shipments are legitimate military targets. In addition to lavishing arms on Ukraine, Washington is sharing key military intelligence with Kyiv. The United States is skirting very close to becoming an outright belligerent in an extremely dangerous war.

It would be imprudent for U.S. leaders to put America at such risk even if Ukraine were the most splendid, pristine democracy in history. It is utterly irresponsible to do so for an appalling corrupt and increasingly authoritarian country. Yet that is an accurate characterization of today's Ukraine.

The twin problems of corruption and repression were evident well before Russia launched its invasion. Ukraine has long been one of the more corrupt countries in the international system, and that situation did not improve appreciably after the so-called Orange Revolution put pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko in the presidency in January 2005. Corruption charges continuously plagued Yushchenko's presidency. The optics were not improved by his 19-year-old son's ostentatious lifestyle, including tooling around the streets of Kyiv in a new BMW sports car worth \$120,000. Media accounts proliferated about the apparent financial improprieties involving the president and his family.

A similar process occurred after the so-called Maidan revolution in 2014, when U.S.-backed demonstrators overthrew Ukraine's elected, pro-Russia president, Viktor Yanukovich. The new president who emerged from that turmoil, oligarch Petro Poroshenko, was at least as corrupt as

any of his predecessors. Indeed, public frustration at the pervasive financial sleaze in his government was a prominent reason for the victory of maverick comedian Volodymyr Zelensky in Ukraine's 2019 presidential election.

Efforts to smother domestic critics also became evident just months after the Maidan revolution, and they have accelerated as the years passed. 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. The neo-Nazi Azov Battalion became an integral part of Poroshenko's military and security apparatus, and it has retained that role during Zelensky's presidency.

The corruption problem remains extremely tenacious, and the level of repression is rapidly growing worse. At best, the extent of corruption has improved just marginally under Zelensky's leadership. In its annual report published in January 2022, Transparency International ranked Ukraine 122 out of 180 countries examined, with a score of 32 on a 1 to 100-point scale. By comparison, Russia, with its notorious level of corruption, ranked just modestly lower, 136, with a score of 29.

Kyiv's track record on democracy and civil liberties before the current war was not much better than its performance regarding corruption. In Freedom House's 2022 report, Ukraine was listed in the "partly free" category, with a score of 61 out of a possible 100. Other countries in that category included such models of democracy as Rodrigo Duterte's Philippines (55), Serbia (62), and Singapore (47). Interestingly, Hungary, which is a frequent target of vitriolic criticism among progressives in the West because of Prime Minister Viktor Orban's anti-globalist stance and his conservative domestic social policies, ranked 8 points higher than did Ukraine, which is the recipient of uncritical praise from the same Western ideological factions.

Human Rights Watch's 2021 report on Ukraine also was far from favorable. "Justice for conflict-related abuses by government forces, including arbitrary detentions, torture, or ill-treatment remained elusive." Equally troubling, "the government proposed legislative amendments that threaten freedom of expression and media. Journalists and media workers faced harassment and threats connected to their reporting." Those were not exactly the characteristics of what Western admirers contend is a "young and vibrant democracy."

Even before the onset of the war, the level of repression was worrisome under Zelensky. In February 2021, the Ukrainian government closed several opposition media outlets on the basis of allegations that they were Russian propaganda tools. The owner of three of the closed television stations, Viktor Medvedchuk, was indeed a longtime friend of Vladimir Putin, but he was also a Ukrainian citizen supposedly entitled to participate in a free press. In May 2021, the Zelensky government arrested Medvedchuk and charged him with treason. As 2021 drew to a close, there were ominous indications that Ukraine's "democratic" government was becoming ever more autocratic. In late December, authorities even charged former president Petro Poroshenko with treason. Much as the French Revolution did, Ukraine's Maidan revolution was becoming increasingly intolerant, and it exhibited signs of devouring some of its own leaders.

Matters have become decidedly worse in a wartime setting. Zelensky promptly used the war as a justification for outlawing 11 opposition parties and combining all national television stations into one platform to ensure a unified message about the war and prevent so-called disinformation. The overall miasma of repression grows thicker. Zelensky fired two top national security officials and accused them of being traitors. Other, lesser known, officials have suffered similar fates. Indeed, vague "treason" allegations have become an all-purpose justification for arresting, torturing, and even assassinating a growing number of regime opponents. The incidents have become far too numerous to discuss in an op-ed, but one can find good, detailed treatments here and here.

Zelensky's conduct makes a mockery of the hero worship now taking place in much of America's establishment news media. A typical example is a fawning April 19, 2022, *New York Times* piece by columnist Bret Stephens describing the many reasons why Americans like the Ukrainian leader so much. One of them is that "We admire Zelensky because he has restored the idea of the free world to its proper place. The free world isn't a cultural expression, as in 'the West;' or a security concept, as in NATO; or an economic description, as in 'the developed world.' Membership in the free world 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. And the responsibility of the free world is to aid and champion any of its members menaced by invasion and tyranny."

If that justification and several other equally vapid reasons Stephens cites were not enough, "We admire Zelensky because he holds out the hope that our own troubled democracies may yet elect leaders who can inspire, ennoble, even save us. Perhaps we can do so when the hour isn't quite as late as it is now for the people of Ukraine and their indomitable leader." Victims now in Zelensky's torture chambers would likely disagree with Stephens' assessment.

Dismissing arguments for intervening militarily in the chronically unstable Balkans, 19th Century German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck contended that the Balkans "aren't worth the life of a single Pomeranian grenadier." Corrupt and increasingly authoritarian Ukraine is not worth the life of a single American. Risking war with a nuclear-armed Russia that could take the lives of millions of Americans is beyond shameful. The Biden Administration needs to take several firm steps back from the abyss.

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