

Reflections on World Politics #1

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UKRAINE'S STATUS

Introduction: A number of my family members and friends who know about my involvement in Russia and Ukraine have called me to discuss what is going on in our broken world. I have been encouraged to share some thoughts on the complex issues at stake in this conflict, which I was initially hesitant to do but decided this may be helpful for those who need some advice on how to understand what is happening.

Let me begin with some initial thoughts. The issues involved in this war between Russia and Ukraine are complex and it is easy to get discouraged. There are so many different opinions being thrown around and the domestic politics in our country make a thoughtful discussion even more difficult.

My beginning recommendation, if you want to dig into the issues at stake, is to read a diversity of sources and not rely on any one news source. Even if you only want updates or high-level snapshots, I encourage you to use different news sources – right, left and moderate. Personally, I do not get my information from TV or radio sources, but instead use the Internet to access commentary by top scholars from a wide range of political perspectives, which includes various think-tanks and academic centers. I do this because I know people who are involved in these countries, and I care deeply about them and their families. I am not suggesting everyone needs to do this kind of deep research, but it is from these kinds of sources that I will share what I am learning.

Democracy is a fragile system and it requires checks and balances – and compromise (which is not a bad word). Our system of governance involves finding solutions to tough issues through vigorous and honest debate, and this is not easy in a country which has become polarized between Right and Left. It is easy to see how alluring authoritarian governments can be, because under these regimes citizens simply do and believe what their dictator tells them to do and believe. There are no debates – just follow the leader, especially if he provides a reasonable economy, while often stealing enormous amounts for him and his friends. This is the case with Russia and Belarus.

Putin is a serious threat to world peace because he has limited accountability and has built a personalized autocracy which is essentially based on him – not on any ideology, or political party. Unlike previous Soviet leaders, who had at least some accountability to the Politburo (presidential council) of top government leaders, Putin has created a deep state populated by national security and military leaders who he has made very wealthy – beyond their wildest imagination - and who are as anti-Western and greedy as he is. What is his goal? In short, it is to rebuild Russian power, redo the political structure created after World War II, and make Russia the major power in Europe and Eurasia.

Putin is a pathological liar and has been spitting out a series of false charges against Ukraine to justify Russia's attack. He has called Ukraine a "junta," which stole power under the influence of the West, despite the fact that President Zelensky was democratically elected in 2019 after defeating 38 other candidates, something Putin has never done. Putin also claims Ukraine is trying to acquire nuclear weapons, when the reality is that it gave up all the nuclear weapons located in the country after the Soviet Union collapsed. Putin also claims Ukraine is not a real country but simply an appendage of Russia. A quick reminder: Ukraine was one of the fifteen republics that the Communist Party formed into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). When the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991, Ukraine declared its independence from Moscow, a decision supported by 92% of its citizens.

Ukraine is Putin's target because he feels threatened by his neighbor. Its democracy, while still in the process of being built, could become an attractive alternative to Russian society and may encourage Russians to mobilize against him and his cronies, which could result in his overthrow, like the Arab Spring when dictators lost power to widespread popular riots.

I'll share more in the weeks ahead about Putin's rule in Russia, his personality, and his "deep state" – and how I think he has badly miscalculated by starting this war. I will also share thoughts on autocracy, why it has become a serious threat in our world, and what its weaknesses are and how to combat it. I'll also update you on the reports I am getting from my friends in Ukraine.