

## Reflections on World Politics #10

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### Telling the Truth

For those who don't normally follow global politics, the Russian-Ukrainian war can be very confusing. The Russians attack Ukraine and claim they are "de-Nazifying" their fascist southern neighbor – an assertion on the part of Putin and his national security establishment that does not make any sense. Ukraine currently has a Jewish president and earlier had a Jewish president and prime minister – the only country in the world outside of Israel with a Jewish leadership team. Ukraine's current president has many family members who were murdered by the German Nazis in the Holocaust. Ukrainians suffered terribly at the hands of the Nazis in World War Two, so how can they now be accused of being Nazis?

When I was young, global politics was a story of competing Great Powers (the United States and the Soviet Union) driven by opposing ideologies – democratic governments versus Communist regimes. Those days are over and, as I have discussed in previous essays, autocrats have emerged as major powers in every region of the world. These autocrats do not propagate an ideology but gain political control by claiming that corrupt elites have stolen power from the people. They seize leadership by polarizing their society and using "post-truth politics." Telling lies is what autocrats do.

**Post-Truth Politics:** Putin is desperate to justify his invasion of Ukraine, so he creates a massive lie as a justification for his policy of attack. He is smart enough to know that Russians have pride in their role in defeating Hitler's Nazi regime, which is one of the few accomplishments of Communist Russia. Many Russians experienced the trauma of the war, so Putin is twisting history by arguing that he is again fighting fascism in Ukraine. He claims Russian-speaking people in eastern Ukraine are being victimized, but this is untrue. As President Zelensky has repeatedly stated in response, Ukraine offers far more freedom for Russian-speakers than they would receive in the Russian Federation.

When you create a political system based on deception and lies -- a system with fake elections, fake political parties, a fake parliament, and fake news -- deception becomes your default setting. Like many autocrats, Putin is a pathological liar. Robert Cottrell, a veteran Moscow correspondent, explains that Putin lies as a display of power. He adds: "Only powerful people can lie and get away with it. The more blatant the lie, the greater the show of power when your listener cannot or dare not contradict you." Lying becomes just another form of bullying.

One of Putin's advisors, Sergey Karaganov, has made it very clear that the Russian cronies gathered around Putin are convinced "we are at war with the West and the European security order is illegitimate," so they are out to undermine it and restore Russian control over the region previously controlled by the Soviet empire. Putin has repeatedly stated that if Ukraine

tried to become a member of NATO, this would lead to war. Russia would not allow its southern neighbor, with its common border of 1,208 miles, to be a part of a western security alliance.

**Do Russians Believe Ukrainians Are Nazis?** This is hard for us to imagine, because we live in a nation with a free press and multiple independent news sources on social media. Putin and his national security regime have very effectively mastered propaganda and eliminated all sources of independent news. Most journalists have fled because any reference to the “war” can result in a 15-year prison term. TV channels, which are how most people get their news, are now simply repeating Putin’s narratives that Ukrainian leaders are fascists, and they put their artillery inside maternity hospitals.

According to Alexander Gabuev, a former diplomatic correspondent in Russia, most Russian people do not speak English. Only 16% of Russians have passports, and only 8% have travelled to countries that require a visa. As a result, their options are to swallow the government’s propaganda or ignore the news and work to protect their shrinking private space. The educated professionals, the 20-30% of the population who are not tied to the regime, these “best and brightest young people” have left the country. In Gabuev’s judgment, most of the Russian population won’t protest the war.

At a recent news conference, President Zelensky appealed to the Russian people. He said: “Living in the Russian Federation is like virtual reality, like a video game. Come back to the world. It’s more beautiful and more truthful.” Analysts are now predicting that Putin’s repression will increase, as he becomes increasingly paranoid and fearful for his life. He also knows that Russia – the last empire in Europe - could become as isolated as Iran and possibly disintegrate.

**A Flashback for Me:** During my twenties and early thirties, Americans were fed a steady stream of lies from President Johnson’s White House about the progress of the war in Vietnam, followed by another chorus of lies from the Nixon White House during the Watergate Investigation. There was a huge spike in public distrust of our nation’s leadership, and I am sure that public trust has not yet been completely rebuilt. History teaches us, over and over again, that the most essential element of any successful democracy is truth-telling -- by the President, his staff, and Congressional leadership. Exposing the lies of autocrats is important to do, just as it is critical that our leaders speak the truth and serve with integrity.

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