

Reflections on World Politics: Russia & Ukraine - #16

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Who Cares About the War in Ukraine?

Now that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has continued into its fourth month and the prospects for an end to the war appear uncertain, many American and European political leaders who have supported the Ukrainians are starting to worry about the long-term global impact of this conflict. Popular support for arming the Ukrainians is also beginning to wane, as people start asking how long their country should spend valuable resources to support the struggle against Putin's attack in light of so many other national priorities.

A clear case needs to be made for why this conflict is so important not only for the United States, but also for the future of global politics. We are facing a critical point, in terms of threats to our country and to democracy worldwide. In the 20th century, democracies were able to defeat the radical secular ideologies of Joseph Stalin's communist regime, and Adolf Hitler's and Benito Mussolini's fascist states. But the world has dramatically changed since the beginning of the 21st century. Democracies that support the rule of law, freedom of religion, and respect for individual rights are now in serious decline. The new challenges facing democracies are not ideological but practical, as brutally nationalistic states controlled by autocrats continue to support each other.

Autocracy Inc.: Anne Applebaum, a historian who writes for *The Atlantic*, provides helpful background and context to help understand the threat of the autocratic rulers who control Russia, China, Turkey, and India, among others. As she explains, these corrupt dictatorships have developed sophisticated networks of financial institutions, security services, and professional propagandists, and they are connected to other corrupt state-controlled dictatorships in alliances committed to preserve and protect their personal power and wealth. These alliances operate like a network of companies – a network that Applebaum has labeled “Autocracy Inc.” The dictatorships comprising Autocracy Inc. are driven by a lust for power and greed, and they will do whatever it takes to secure the assets they have stolen from their people, while offering impunity from arrest to each other if needed.

Putin and his national security cronies on the Security Council are accountable to no one but themselves. The Russian parliament has been converted into a rubber stamp operation. Bill Browder was the largest foreign investor in Russia until 2005; he has now committed his life to sanctioning human rights abusers and kleptocrats, first in Russia and now around the world. His new book, *Freezing Order: A True Story of Money Laundering, Murder, and Surviving Vladimir Putin's Wrath*, tracks the amount of dirty money that has moved out of Russia since Putin came to power. Financial analysts who investigate money laundering have concluded that Putin and his network of approximately 1,000 closest supporters have stolen \$1 trillion -- maybe more -- from Russia. Putin's greed knows no bounds, and his personal share of these funds is estimated to be several hundred billion dollars. Like other dictators, he does not care about what happens to Russia or the plight of his people. His obsession is to protect his massive assets and his life; he knows he is losing power because of the failing Russian economy, the country's isolation, and his disastrous war effort – an effort he hoped would give him a boost in popular support, as it did when he ordered the takeover of Crimea in 2014.

The Significance of the Attack on Ukraine: If the United States, NATO, and the European Union begin to back down from their impressive support of Ukraine as the war drags on, Putin may be able to escape from his miscalculated aggressive attack. Pressure will build to negotiate a cease fire and this will make the struggle over Ukraine’s Donbas region and Crimea a “frozen conflict.” This means Putin and his colleagues can patiently wait for the West to become distracted by other important issues -- global climate concerns, world hunger, or China’s expansion in Asia, to name a few -- and then renew their attack on Ukraine.

Putin has also described his plans to consolidate Russian control over other former Soviet republics like Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, Belarus, and possibly even the Baltic states (Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia) that are now members of NATO. If he gets away with this attack on Ukraine, it will make it clear that other dictators can also take aggressive actions against weaker nations with little risk of being censored or blocked by international coalitions.

As the conflict continues and the deaths of combatants and vulnerable citizens multiply, there are growing warnings about not “humiliating Putin” and giving him an “off-ramp” to end his invasion. As Yale Professor Timothy Snyder has pointed out, this is the equivalent of asking Ukrainians, “who are victims of a genocidal war to comfort the perpetrator.” Ukrainian leaders keep telling us that these appeals will make the war last longer and distract democratic forces from the necessity of Russian defeat. This war needs to end with Russian power seriously diminished so that its leadership, Putin or his successors, are no longer able to massacre their neighbors. The vast majority of Ukrainians believe the war can be won, and they are not willing to concede territory taken from them.

Two very different futures are at stake. If Putin undermines Ukrainian independence and democracy, “the world will return to an era of aggressive and intolerant nationalism reminiscent of the early 20th century,” according to Stanford Professor Francis Fukuyama. If Putin fails, world leaders may relearn the lesson that power unconstrained by law leads to national disaster. This is the boost that democracies need. It will also allow democracies to turn their attention to other major issues that are important – though less important right now than the struggle for freedom in Ukraine.

There are also arguments grounded in ethical and moral values that support caring for the fate of Ukraine. People of faith have deep convictions about confronting injustice and working for peace, which also need to be expressed in our public conversations. I will share more on this in weeks to come.

These “Reflections” are circulated approximately once a week. If you want to have your name added to our mailing list, let me know (johnbernbaum@gmail.com); you can unsubscribe at any time. All of these “Reflections” can be found on Dr. Bernbaum’s website (www.johnbernbaum.org), along with many other resources.