

Reflections on World Politics: Ukraine & Russia - #26

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What's at Stake in Ukraine?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has created two dramatically different visions of the future. President Putin's vision of the future is a crudely articulated version of Russia's past. He wants to recreate a world in which Russia is a revisionist power, a nation that wants revenge for past injustices. He is committed to forming a Slavic union comprising Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and part of Kazakhstan that will dominate Eurasia. For him, Russia has the divine right to rule over this region, and his vision necessitates wiping out any sense of a separate identity from the Russian Motherland. Beginning in 2014, when Russia went to war and seized part of Ukraine, this obsession has become Putin's primary focus.

It is important to understand that Putin and his national security cronies need a war against the West to sustain their power. Putin is a personalist autocrat whose political power has receded since the first decade of his rule, when oil prices generated a massive improvement in the Russian economy and freed the country from foreign debt. In addition to their intense desire to remain in power with increasing repression in Russia's domestic political life, Putin and his close circle of friends have stolen billions of dollars from Russia and have moved these assets overseas. Those in power in the Kremlin know that autocracies don't end well, and all they have stolen could be lost if they fail to remain in power. Staying in power and protecting their stolen wealth are the core values of Putin's regime.

We now know much more about Putin's background and the makeup of his national security operation. This operation is largely made up of former KGB officers from St. Petersburg who have been planning to take over the Russian government since Putin's early days as an official who controlled foreign investments and trade in that city. Catherine Belton's 500-page authoritative study entitled *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West* documents this story in remarkable detail. She shows how these high-ranking national security executives helped Putin's rise to power each step of the way and then generated events that helped him to stay in power.

When Putin was chosen by President Boris Yeltsin to become his successor, he was a person that most people had ever heard about before. Belton documents how this happened largely because the Yeltsin family wanted a successor who would protect their stolen assets and offer immunity from future prosecution. I remember that many of us working in Russia at the turn of the century had hope that this new leader would make Russia a "normal country" and bring law and order to Moscow's – and the country's – anarchy. It sounded like Putin had some democratic leanings, and the changes that he began to make in 2000-2002 brought hope.

We now know that this was never a possibility. His KGB cronies – now the Federal Security Service (FSB) – had a plan to take over the government and get their share of the country's wealth, a plan they justified as a way to prevent the West from seizing control of the country's richest oil

assets. As the economy began to falter after 2008, and Putin returned to the presidency in 2012 in the face of massive public protests, radical political polarization increased in intensity, and Putin once again turned to warfare as a means to rebuild his personal support. Aggression against Ukraine in 2014, which included the takeover of Crimea and which the West largely ignored, was designed to justify increased internal repression against “enemies” - both foreign powers and domestic “traitors.”

Like other autocrats who live in a post-truth world, Putin’s pathological lying is a normal practice. Because he believes that Western leaders can be “bought” since they are as greedy as he and his cronies are, he did not think they would try to stop his invasion in February 2022. To his surprise, the Russian attack was a wake-up call for the West. It is now clear that we are dealing with a leader who is trying to change the historical narrative of the last hundred years and create a new narrative in which Russia is a restored imperial power, even as all the other imperial powers have lost this status.

Ukrainian resistance to the Russian attack is a powerful affirmation of faith in democracy. In sharp contrast to Putin’s vision for the future, the Ukrainians are not imposing their own vision on another country. As Professor Timothy Snyder has pointed out, “Ukrainians are protecting their right to choose their own leaders against an invasion designed to undo their democracy and eliminate their society.” We can learn from President Zelensky that democracy is a value for which an elected official might choose to live or die. When some U.S. officials urged Zelensky to leave Kyiv once the Russians attacked, his statement “I need ammunition, not a ride” was extraordinarily courageous.

In contrast to Putin’s world, in which “nothing is true, nothing is worthy of sacrifice, everything is a joke, everyone is for sale,” Snyder highlights Zelensky’s refusal to believe that might makes right. Democracy is not about accepting the verdict that is being forced on them by the Russians, but it is about making history and relishing human values, freedom of speech, and religious freedom. It is about speaking truth to power. A Ukrainian victory would defend their sovereignty and encourage other post-colonial states to pursue their independence.

Russia’s effort to recreate a colonial empire -- the current narrative Putin and his national security colleagues are using to justify themselves in power -- must be defeated. Putin needs war to sustain his autocratic power, and Russian intervention will soon spread to other countries on its border. There is much at stake for Europe and the West, and this is not a time to back down to Putin’s criminal regime.

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