

WHILE UKRAINIANS STAND UP FOR DEMOCRACY, DEMOCRACY REMAINS UNDER THREAT IN THE UNITED STATES

“I’m hoping that seeing the Ukrainians come under attack because they’re a democracy and defend their country so bravely because they believe in democracy increases faith in ours here at home. ... The best thing we can do for the world is to present an example of a functioning democracy at a time when, around the world, autocracies are on the rise and are literally attacking democracies like in Ukraine.”

Rep. Colin Allred (D-TX)
[NBC News interview](#)

We should not have been surprised by Russia’s attack on Ukraine that was unleashed on February 24. The invasion of Ukraine began far earlier than February 24 – the annexation of Crimea was in essence an invasion, and the assaults on democracy date back to at least 2014. We should not have been surprised because there have been virtually no significant consequences to the “hybrid warfare” targeting the West or Putin’s deployment of military force as part of that hybrid warfare doctrine. No surprise then that Putin felt he could act with impunity to quash the emergence of a democracy on his front door.

The events of the past few weeks have upended the global security order in countless ways and are fast transforming Ukraine, Russia, Europe and the United States. Ukraine has a new identity – it is firmly part of Europe. It is unlikely that the Ukrainians will surrender to Russia, and if Russia continues its campaign, it will face years of costly insurgency. It is possible that there will be a military stalemate, and Ukraine will emerge with some form of neutrality. If Ukraine emerges with less, the West will face greater instability and democracy will have suffered a significant set-back.

While there are countless consequences to assess and a growing number of prescriptions to consider, let me focus closer to home, and what this means for domestic politics and policy.

In a timely articulation of the threat, at fundraiser this past week for Rep. Liz Cheney, Senator Mitt Romney is [reported](#) to have characterized, in the context of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the survival of democracy in our country as a two-pronged battle. Abroad, he cited the invasion and sees the threats from Vladimir Putin as he follows his authoritarian playbook and, in the United States, he sees the strengths of institutions, rule of law and the courts as the bulwark against the “same kind of authoritarian leader as Putin.” In speaking about American democracy, he is reported to have said that “we have to appreciate how fragile the system is.”

Little to Stand in his Way

Let us start with the failures to impose consequences.

Think back to Georgia (which Putin invaded in 2008, blaming Tbilisi among other things for committing ethnic cleansing, and levelling Grozny), Libya and Syria, to the 2014 invasion of Ukraine that culminated in the annexation of Crimea (again using as one rationale the need to protect ethnic Russians in the Donbass). Think back to ransomware and other cyberattacks tracked back to actors in Russia acting largely with impunity, and to the massive disinformation campaigns that have targeted individuals and groups across civil society that also can be tracked back to Russian sources.

Think back to the assassination of Alexander Litvinenko, and the attempted assassinations of Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, and Alexei Navalny. (One could probably add the poisoning of Viktor Yushchenko to this list as well.) While the Skripal assassination attempt grabbed the headlines in Britain for a few weeks, the at times farcical response from Russia following the identification of the two GRU officers believed responsible contributed to downplaying the significance of the action. As Carole Cadwalladr so eloquently [put it](#), the question now of whether Putin will use unconventional weapons in Ukraine, is the right question, but it is four years too late, because the 2018 attempt on the lives of the Skripals was an attack in Britain using unconventional weapons. Carole cites a recent [interview](#) with Fiona Hill, who noted that “[t]here was enough nerve agent in [the discarded bottle of perfume left in a charity donation box] to kill several thousand people.”

Think back to Russia’s role in the 2016 Brexit referendum and the US elections. In fact, a plausible case can be made (again referring back to Carole Cadwalladr) that the disinformation war against the West, via social media platforms, began in 2014, much of these dress rehearsals for the campaign targeting the 2016 presidential election. The Russian role is set out in detail in the [Mueller Report](#). Ultimately, there were no consequences to efforts that some have continued to view as far more sinister than commonly believed. We collectively characterized Russia’s role as “interference” or “meddling,” and perhaps got side-tracked by the parallel focus over collusion. In the process, we lost sight of the fact that these actions were undertaken largely by the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (commonly known by its prior abbreviation, [the GRU](#)). This is the same agency that reportedly was responsible for a string of attempted assassinations, including the attempt on the lives of Sergei and Yulia Skripal. These were all military operations.

Here is what ties these efforts together. As Eugene Rumer of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace set out in a [2019 paper](#), the Russian playbook in the hands of Putin is based on a convergence of military doctrine and the use of hybrid warfare activities and tools. Hybrid warfare – which fuses soft power and hard power as the driver of permanent confrontation and is often referred to as the “Gerasimov Doctrine” – should be seen as an effort to develop an operational concept for confronting the West in furtherance of a doctrine that sees the unipolar world dominated by the United States as fundamentally unacceptable (as championed by former Russian foreign and prime minister Yevgeny Primakov). The importance of counter-balancing US unilateral power was also articulated by the current foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, in his [2021 manifesto](#). All to say that efforts to undermine democracy need to be seen as part of a broader military effort.

Other Contributors to Putin’s Miscalculation

For the sake of completeness, Putin had a few other reasons to believe he would face few real consequences for his actions.

NATO could have been on life support had Trump had his way and pulled out. Trump had trashed American allies at every opportunity and rarely missed an opportunity to align himself with the world’s autocrats. Trump had been impeached twice. Trump had engaged in a full-court press to overturn an election he so clearly lost, culminating in an attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021 supported by a Republican Party largely buying into the Big Lie. Democracy in the United States continued to be under heavy assault, even after January 6. Enough of the background noise to the first impeachment would likely have relegated

Ukraine in the minds of many Americans to the cohort of countries whose governance is deeply suspect. The culture wars continued to harden the partisan divide.

The Biden administration, calling an end to forever wars, was very much on the defensive after the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan. Would America retreat as it did after the ill-fated “Black Hawk Down” mission in Somalia, followed only weeks later by the genocide in Rwanda as the world looked on from afar? How would the America that drew a red line over use of chemical weapons in Syria respond to an escalating use of nonconventional weapons? This America, Putin surmised, would be unlikely to stop him.

Europe was hugely dependent on Russian natural gas and oil, and had spent the previous four years coming to terms with the outcome of the Brexit referendum. Britain, in a monumental act of national self-harm, chose to withdraw from the European Union, depriving it of its historical voice on the global stage and depriving the European Union of a traditional force for good in forging consensus between warring factions of EU member states. Britain has been trying to come to terms with its reputation as “Moscow-on-Thames” or “Londongrad” and is fighting its own culture war, as evidenced by a statement from Boris Johnson earlier today, while rallying his base perhaps with an eye on the election campaign he reportedly is ready to kick off, in likening the resistance of the Ukrainians to the decision of the British to leave the European Union, incidentally ignoring the fact that Ukraine has called upon the European Union to grant it membership.

Putin badly miscalculated – both on a tactical level as to how efficiently his invasion would unfold (he overestimated his forces and underestimated the effectiveness of the resistance and unity of the Ukrainian people) as well as the unprecedented unity of purpose of the West in reacting to the greatest threat to the European security order since WWII. Putin likely has fallen into what Brian Klaas [refers](#) to as the “dictator’s trap” – the strategies an autocrat uses to remain in power tend to lead to eventual removal; the autocrat begins to believe his own lies; the autocrat suffers from the mistaken belief that he can control the outcomes of far more than he actually can control; the autocrat tends to create a culture of fear among “trusted” advisers, inhibiting any of those close to the autocrat from speaking truth to power and, as the autocrat becomes more paranoid about whom he really can trust, advisers are prone to curry favor through more outlandish views. That Putin miscalculated, however, is of little consolation to the people of Ukraine.

Three weeks plus into the war though (note it took US forces three weeks to occupy Baghdad), it is clear that how the West continues to act – in fact react – will likely be dictated by events. We need to maintain our resolve, and we need to keep the West together and aligned. Ironically, we need to find an offramp for a crisis that Putin himself instigated, but at the same time a price has to be paid for the invasion. Otherwise, there is little reason to believe that Putin will not make good on the rest of his ultimatum, which is to see NATO remove troops and weapons deployed in eastern Europe. So long as Putin is in power, Putin alone will decide Russia’s course of action – he has no legislature or political party to convince and he is not constrained by any ideology. As Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines noted, Ukraine is a war Putin believes he “cannot afford to lose.” We should not repeat past mistakes, but we are not driving outcomes.

Assault on Democracy

The invasion is a clear violation of international law (most directly the UN Charter’s prohibition on the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any

state, and potentially war crimes as well, for targeting civilians). It is equally a blatant attempt to crush a budding democracy. Anne Applebaum has [noted](#) that Putin “wants to put so much strain on Western and democratic institutions, especially the European Union and NATO, that they break up. He wants to keep dictators in power wherever he can, in Syria, Venezuela, and Iran. He wants to undermine America, to shrink American influence, to remove the power of the democracy rhetoric that so many people in his part of the world still associate with America. He wants America itself to fail.”

In Russia, Putin is stifling dissent by forcing the closure of any remaining independent media. The websites of TV Rain and the radio station Ekho Moskvyy (Echo of Moscow) were shut down for violating the ban, imposed by the Russian media regulator Roskomnadzor, on calling the invasion of Ukraine “an invasion” or the war “a war,” insisting on the use of the term “special military operation.” The Russian State Duma has criminalized the intentional spreading of “fake” content about the activities of the Russian armed forces, discrediting the Russian armed forces or supporting sanctions against Russia.

In Russia, there is no truth – it truly is Orwellian. Putin claimed he was not going to invade, knowing full well that he would. US intelligence warnings of an impending invasion were labelled as “hysteria.” Putin claims that Ukraine as a sovereign state does not exist, and that invading forces are “peacekeepers.” Putin claims his “special military operation” is to liberate Ukraine from Nazis and to defend Russian speakers in Ukraine from a “genocide” at the hands of Ukrainians. He repeated these claims yesterday at an open air rally at the Moscow stadium.

Putin’s threat to “demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, and bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation,” can only be seen as signalling his intent to subjugate Ukraine, eliminate its sovereign autonomy and topple its current government. This is the same Vladimir Putin who attributed the bombing of two apartment buildings and an attempt at a third as the work of Chechen terrorists (assumed by many to be the work of the FSB) to justify his invasion of Chechnya; who, following the passage of the Magnitsky Act, said that Magnitsky was not tortured but rather died of a heart attack; and who denied any Russian involvement in the downing of Malaysian Airlines (MH) Flight 17.

In one ironic twist to all this, Putin pays lip service to democracy – after all, he was elected, as are members of the State Duma (the lower house of parliament). The State Duma approved a resolution asking Putin to recognize the Donetsk (DPR) and Luhansk (LPR) people’s republics as independent states. The State Duma and the Council of the Federation (the upper house of parliament) voted to recognize the DPR and LPR and grant Putin approval to use military force in the Donbas region. The recognition of DPR and LPR represents a repudiation of commitments under the Minsk agreements (implementation of which admittedly had stalled over a range of issues).

Putin Unites Democrats and Republicans, but ...

So, why is it that there has been an affinity among a segment of the Republican Party for Putin? How is it possible that there is, as Rep. Liz Cheney tweeted recently, a “Putin wing of the GOP”? While the GOP focuses on President Biden’s alleged weakness contributing to, or even being the predicate for, the invasion, where is the reckoning for the fact that Trump often was more aligned with Russia than with the United States, and few have repudiated Trump.

Republicans are trying to change the subject. The history of Trump's rise to power and his term in office would be incomplete were one to whitewash Trump's complex relationship with Putin.

Think back to the efforts in the summer of 2016 to strip away protections of Ukraine from the GOP platform; the reported leak of classified information in the Oval Office; Trump's suggestion to Putin, on the side lines of the 2017 Hamburg G20 summit, to form a cybersecurity unit with Russia to prevent future hacking of election systems, this being the first meeting where Trump took possession of the notes of the conversation taken by his interpreter; Trump siding with Putin at the Helsinki summit against his own intelligence agencies over whether Russia had interfered in the 2016 election (characterizing Putin's denial of interference in the election as "strong and powerful") (again no notes); a third meeting with Putin at the G20 summit in Argentina with no other US officials were present and no notes; Trump signing off on sanctions only because they were veto-proof; Trump pushing for Russia to be reincluded in an expanded G7 following its ouster for annexing Crimea; the Mueller report, which while finding no direct evidence of collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia, set out 10 instances where Trump possibly obstructed justice; Trump declining to criticize Putin over the Navalny poisoning or reports of GRU bounties to the Taliban; and of course the infamous July 2019 call between Trump and Zelenskyy that lead to Trump's first impeachment.

While many of these actions were Trump's, neither Trump nor Trumpism exists in a vacuum. He had cheerleaders and acolytes. Few stood in the way, the one notable exception being reactions to Trump's performance at Helsinki. Remember Michael Flynn's conversations with Russian Ambassador Kislyak and paid appearance on RT, the Manafort affair, the Trump organization's business ties to Russia. Roger Stone was charged with obstruction of justice arising out of the Mueller investigation, 13 Russian nationals linked to Russia's Internet Research Agency were charged with conspiracy to defraud the United States, 12 members of the GRU were charged with hacking the DNC and a former Russian associate of Paul Manafort's (alleged to have ties to Russian intelligence) was charged with obstruction with justice.

Fast forward to the invasion, and Trump called Putin actions in Ukraine "genius." Thereafter he claimed that the invasion would not have happened if the "election wasn't rigged and I was still president."

When asked at a news conference whether he had rethought Trump's July 2019 call to Zelenskyy, Rep. Steve Scalise responded (incorrectly) that Zelenskyy had called Trump, and that the purpose of the call was to thank Trump for his leadership, and ultimately got the relief money he was asking for."

Sen. Tom Cotton insists that Putin invaded because President Biden would not stand up to Putin and took issue with the notion of fighting to preserve the "rules-based order." Yet, as the Washington Post records, Cotton ridiculed the idea that Trump's call with Zelenskyy in July 2019 was a scandal, not to be outdone by Iowa Gov. Reynolds who declared solidarity with Ukraine in the GOP response to the State of the Union address, yet called the impeachment of Trump over the July 2019 call as a "sad day" in American history. At the time that Putin was unleashing the Russian army to invade Ukraine, Arizona State Senator Wendy Rogers, Reps. Paul Gosar and Marjorie Taylor Greene and Idaho Gov. Janice McGeachin were reported to have attended the America First Political Action Conference,

whose leader, according to the Southern Poverty Leadership Center, believes in a White Christian nation and is an apologist for Hitler and Putin.

An increasing number of Republicans have now found common voice with Democrats on the need to support Ukraine against Russia. Interestingly, take Trump out of the equation, and Republican voters view Putin negatively and support taking a tougher stand against Russia.

A Quinnipiac [poll](#) found

- 74% of Republican voters believe the US response has not been tough enough; and
- 66% of Republican voters support accepting Ukrainian refugees into the United States and the same percentage support a ban on oil imports, even if it means higher gasoline prices.

Similarly, an Economist/YouGov [poll](#) found

- sympathies for Ukraine (vs Russia) at 79% among Democrats and 75% among Republican;
- on the question of whether Russia is deliberately targeting civilians, 73% of Democrats and 72% of Republicans believe they are, and on the question of whether Putin is guilty of war crimes, 74% of Democrats and of Republicans believe he is;
- as to approving of sanction, 78% of Democrats and 66% of Republicans approve (59% of Democrats strongly approve, while 43% of Republicans strongly approve), though as to personal sanctions against Putin, 80% of Democrats approve (62% strongly approve) while 66% of Republicans approve (51% strongly approve);
- interestingly, 56% of Republicans say sanctions should be tougher, while 49% of Democrats feel the same way, though 68% of Republicans and 77% of Democrats believe sanctions are a good idea;
- also interestingly, 66% of Democrats have a favorable view of NATO (34% with a very favorable view), while 55% of Republicans have a favorable view (only 12% with a very favorable); and
- now adding the political overlay (and not overlooking the number of Republicans who bought into the Big Lie and believe Biden is an illegitimate President), while 79% of Democrats believe President Biden is a strong leader (35% say he is very strong), only 14% of Republicans believe he is a strong leader (5% say he is a very strong leader); while 77% of Democrats believe President Biden is trustworthy, only 13% of Republicans feel the same way; and while 75% of Democrats approve of President Biden's handling of the response to the invasion (37% strongly approve), only 19% of Republicans approve (5% strongly approve).

But this is an election year, and Republicans can be expected to continue to criticize President Biden as being weak, with our sanctions being too little, too late, and the policies of President Biden and even President Obama being the predicate for the invasion. This incidentally is akin to the Republicans criticism of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, fully ignoring that the withdrawal was set in motion by Trump the year before. Expect to hear more about our energy vulnerability being due to the administration's restrictions on oil and gas leases and cancellation of the Keystone XL pipeline.

... Unity does not Extend to the Fundamentals of Democracy

The unity notwithstanding, there is a deeper problem: while Republicans are willing to distance themselves from Trump and his views of Russia (though with few exception there is as I note above little reckoning over Trump's indulgence of Putin) and are willing to condemn the assault on democracy in Ukraine (and call for a more robust response), the willingness of Republicans to support democracy stops at the border – the US border that is.

While Ukrainians are showing the world how to stand up for democracy, Republicans are busy passing legislation to [curb](#) voting rights at the state level and making every effort possible to replace nonpartisan election officials – from top state officials to precinct-level poll workers -- with partisan election [doubters and deniers](#) (who either claim Trump won the 2020 election, spread lies in public forums about the legitimacy of the 2020 election, call for “forensic audits” of the 2020 election, promote conspiracies about the 2020 election in public forums or took action to undermine the integrity of the 2020 election). Republicans blocked the creation of a 9/11-style commission to investigate the January 6th attack on the Capitol. The RNC recently, as part of its resolution censoring Reps. Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger, referred to the January 6th attack as “legitimate political discourse.”

Concluding Thoughts - Addressing Disinformation

In January, I set out [set out](#) a list of suggested actions to address our backsliding on democracy. That threat remains omnipresent, but there is one more takeaway firmly tied to the invasion.

We need to recognize that our polarization at home has been, and will continue to be, exploited by malign state actors, particularly but by no means limited to Russia. The weapon of choice in the world of hybrid warfare is disinformation – it is inexpensive to deploy and it is effective. It is effective in exacerbating existing divisions in our society (the Russians recognized perhaps earlier than we did our vulnerability to weaponizing our culture wars), in sowing confusion and fear of “the other,” in degrading trust in our institutions, and in generating confusion over the strategic objectives and the tactics of those malign actors.

Disinformation is being deployed not just around our elections or developments overseas. It is a 24/7, all-year round effort. At the root of disinformation, beginning in 2014, if not before, is technology and the social media platform algorithms that are exploited to deliver disinformation. As technology improves – think deep fakes and the broader category of AI-generated synthetic media, disinformation will only become a more potent threat. These efforts are global in nature though target local audiences in local languages, and are disseminated across platforms.

The massive Russian disinformation campaign over Ukraine, for example, launched in the run-up to invasion to paint the Russians as liberators and the Ukrainian government as Nazis and as responsible for genocide, has escalated as the conflict has escalated, now eclipsing disinformation relating to the pandemic. It is not only targeting Russian-speaking audiences to rally the population, but is being distributed far more broadly to minimize support for Ukraine across the globe and, more broadly, to weaken the association between the defense of Ukraine and the defense of democracy.

None of this is new (though the surge in recent weeks was staggering). A RAND [report](#) characterizes the Russian propaganda model as a “firehose of falsehood,” that is high-volume and multi-channel, rapid, continuous and repetitive, lacking any commitment to objectivity or

consistency, with a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions. Disinformation is distributed via the internet, social media, satellite television, and traditional radio and television broadcasts, amplified by internet “trolls,” paid to undermine or challenge views or information that runs counter to Russian messaging, through online chat rooms, discussion forums and comments sections on news and other websites and facilitated by fake accounts on social media platforms. Leading the way is RT, supported by proxy news sites. (See generally, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue’s [coverage](#) of Russia-Ukraine war disinformation.)

While we face significant challenges in driving outcomes abroad, we should try to fix politics at home. That effort must start with recognizing that malign actors have weaponized disinformation. We must call it out as such, particularly when it is embraced by politicians or others with influence, and build resilience, for example, by enhancing, through education and other programs, digital awareness among policymakers, regulators, journalists and citizens.

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