



Defending "Democracy?": Western Media Acknowledges Ukraine's History of Stifling Dissent

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): One of the constants when it comes to the effort by the American government and their media to sell a new war, is that we are always told the war is about much more than geostrategic considerations, or fights for money or resources or capital. We're always told that we can feel good about the war, because what we're really doing is going to war in order to fight tyranny and help defend democracy. We were told that about the war in Vietnam, that we were going to free the Vietnamese people from the government that they actually preferred. We were told that in 2003, that we were going to invade Iraq in order to liberate the people there from Saddam Hussein and bring democracy to their country and therefore to the region. We were told that about the dirty war we fought to dislodge Bashar al-Assad in Syria and Muammar Gadhafi in Libya. And, of course, we are constantly told that and have from the beginning been told that about the war in Ukraine, that among the reasons were there is because Ukraine is a pristine and important democracy that believes in freedom of speech and press, whereas the invaders are hardcore authoritarians, who throw dissidents in prison, don't allow any oppositional media. And for a long time, it's been so obvious that this is a propagandistic fraud that Ukraine itself, and Zelensky in particular, have long attacked and eroded and even shut down core basic rights of free speech and free press and dissent, even before Russia invaded in February 2022. And since then, Ukraine has basically stopped even resembling a democracy at all, and instead looks like the exact tyranny that has long been.

Now, if you had said this in February 2022, pointed out that Ukraine and Zelensky are not Democrats, with a small d, or pointed this out all throughout 2023, you would be immediately accused of being a Russian propagandist or a Kremlin agent because you're spreading Kremlin propaganda by attacking Zelensky in Ukraine, something that was so prohibited. And now here we are, two and a half years into this war, and even the very media outlets that rendered those views taboo, criticism of Zelensky and Ukraine, arguments that there's no democracy in Ukraine at all, are now finally having to acknowledge it and cover it, because even many people inside Ukraine are screaming and yelling and denouncing Zelensky for attacking basic free press rights, including journalists who had long supported Zelensky in the

war. Here from the New York Times, the paper of record. On June 18th, quote: *"A big Step Back": in Ukraine, Concerns Mount Over Narrowing Press Freedoms*. Quote "Journalists say they are subject to increasing restrictions and pressure from the government of President Volodymyr Zelensky, adding that the measures go beyond wartime security needs". Quote, "A Ukrainian reporter who revealed that a state news agency tried to bar interviews with opposition politicians, said he received a draft notification the very next day. Ukraine's domestic spy agency spied on staff members of an investigative news outlet through peepholes in their hotel rooms. The public broadcaster has decried what it says is political pressure on its reporting. Journalists and groups monitoring press freedoms are raising alarms over what they say are increasing restrictions and pressures on the media in Ukraine, under the government of President Volodymyr Zelensky that go well beyond the country's wartime needs. Journalists and media groups say that a string of recent cases have pointed to an increasingly restrictive reporting environment. Analysts say the government's effort to control the media appears to be aimed at crimping positive coverage of the opposition and suppressing negative coverage of the government and the military. Reporter for the state news agency Ukrinform, which is supposed to be non-partisan, received a list from their management late last year of opposition figures and local elected officials labelled, quote, 'undesirable' for quoting in articles. In the city of Odessa, reporters were instructed to cite only presidential appointees in some cases. In Lviv, reporters were told to avoid quoting the elected mayor, Andriy Sadovyi, a prominent politician seen as a possible future candidate for the presidency. Ukraine's raucous and competitive television news landscape before the war was consolidated by Mr. Zelensky's government into a single, state controlled broadcast after Russia's invasion. The government presented the arrangement, known as the Telemarathon, as necessary for airing reliable news during the war. But it excluded opposition channels and ran such consistently upbeat reports even as fighting bogged down that a majority of Ukrainians now say they do not trust it. A U.S. State Department report said the program had, quote, 'enabled an unprecedented level of control over prime-time television news' in Ukraine."

Does any of that sound remotely like a democracy? Now, of course, the argument that Zelensky is making is one that all tyrants and authoritarians make, namely that you can't afford to give freedom to the citizenry whenever there's a threat to national security. That was, of course, the argument that George Bush and Dick Cheney constantly made for eroding the basic constitutional rights and liberties of American citizens by saying, we're involved in a war, a global war on terror, and we can't have the same kind of rights, like the right not to be spied on by our government without warrants, the right to due process if we're going to be arrested. And it was all justified by the war. I think one of the lessons we've learned as Americans, in fact, over many decades, going back to World War Two, when Japanese-Americans were interned in camps and all the way back to World War One, when Woodrow Wilson succeeded in enacting the Espionage Act of 1917 that criminalised dissent against his policy of involving the US in World War One, and people were actually imprisoned for questioning Woodrow Wilson's war policies, is that even in times of crises and in times of war, the Constitution is not suspended. Elections still get held. People still have basic rights of due process and free speech. But even if you want to believe, if you want to give Zelensky credit – Oh, yes, he has turned Ukraine into something other than a democracy,

it's now a tyranny, but that's only because there's a war going on, it'll revert right back to the freedom loving country that it was under Zelensky before the Russian invasion – you should recognise that even before the Russian invasion Zelensky was exhibiting all kinds of tyrannical behaviours, including cracking down and closing media outlets by accusing them of being too sympathetic to Russia.

Here from Reuters on December 15th, 2021. So that is three months before the Russian invasion, there you see the headline: *Ukraine's crackdown on media, assembly violates rights – says the UN*. Quote, "Ukraine's government has restricted media and freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, violating international law, the UN Human Rights Office said on Wednesday... The finding by the UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Nada Al-Nashif was presented in a debate at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva amid mounting tensions between Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine's closure of television channels and online media outlets were, quote, 'not in line with international human rights law'. Activists, journalists and critics have been persecuted for challenging Kyiv government narratives or investigating corruption, and opposition political parties were under attack, she said in a report documenting incidents since 2019. It's three years, three years, before the Russian invasion. Now again, does anyone believe that we're actually in Ukraine to save democracy?! If we don't go to war in order to save democracy or defend democracy, we have no problem at all with tyranny, as long as the tyrants are pro-American. That's why we are allies and partners with some of the most tyrannical regimes on the planet, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the Gulf states, and many more. And that's exactly what our position is regarding Ukraine. The idea that we're fighting for Ukrainian democracy is the pretext for the war. It is never the actual reason. In part because Ukraine and Zelensky are not democratically inclined at all. In fact, you can go back all the way to February of 2021, more than a year before the Russian invasion in 2022. And here is DW, the German news site: *Ukraine bans pro-Russian TV stations*. "Three pro-Russian TV channels have gone off the air in Kyiv after pro-Western President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a Ukrainian security council decree imposing sanctions for five years on eight media and TV companies. The Kyiv stations affected were the ZIK, NewsOne and 112 Ukraine. Their broadcasts were only available Tuesday night via the video hosting platform YouTube, reported the Russian news agency TASS. It identified the channel's owner as Taras Kozak, a lawmaker and member of the pro-Russian Opposition Platform for Life party, quoting him as describing Zelensky's move as, quote, 'an act of blatant censorship'."

Now remember that the eastern part of Ukraine and the people who live there are overwhelmingly pro-Moscow and pro-Russia. And of course, their views should be represented in oppositional media outlets that have a different view to the pro-Western inclinations of Zelensky. But long before the Russians invaded, he banned all those media outlets. He closed them. He decreed them no longer online. The idea that this war was sold to us as going to protect Ukrainian democracy and Volodymyr Zelensky as a flourishing democracy is laughable. Now on top of that, in June of 2023, this was not very well discussed, Zelensky himself announced that there will be no more elections in Ukraine indefinitely, until he decides that elections can be safely held once the war is over. In other

words, Zelensky, who was in power, declared himself indefinitely in power, not able to be removed by the Ukrainian people because he has banned elections in Ukraine and cited a constitutional provision that he says allows that. Whether that's true or not, banning elections indefinitely, declaring yourself in power, no matter what people think, especially when polls show that there's a lot of discontent with Zelensky, is the very opposite of what democracy entails. Here's the video where Zelensky, in June of 2023, announces that there will be no more Ukrainian elections for the indefinite future. "Will there be elections in Ukraine next year?", is the question. The answer: "This is a global question", Zelensky says. "If we win, there will be". "So there will be no war time martial law, no war. Elections should be held in peacetime, when there is no war, according to the law. And that's why this is so". In other words, no, there won't be any elections at all. We basically have martial law. We're under a state of war, and therefore I'll be the president for the indefinite future.

Now again, if you had talked about Ukraine and its government as attacking basic constitutional rights at any point over the last two years, even though it was commonly acknowledged over and over in the Western press before that, you would be instantly stigmatised as a Russian agent if you are a professor with the speciality in Ukraine, as some of our guests have been, and you didn't support this idea that Zelensky was this noble, patriotic leader fighting for Ukrainian democracy, you just wouldn't be heard from the media in the New York Times and NPR on any news stations. You'd be excluded, as John Mearsheimer has talked about, as he was, as other Ukrainian specialists have talked about, they were, for simply having a dissident view. It was a one view Western media narrative and nothing else was allowed. Now, one of the other key facts about this war that has been utterly suppressed in Western media discussions is the fact that Ukraine and Russia were negotiating a peace deal very early on in the war in February and March of 2022, and those negotiations were ongoing and extensive and came very, very close to actually a peace deal to averting the need for this war. Ukraine would have just simply declared itself neutral, that they weren't going to join NATO, that they would be a neutral buffer zone between Russia on the one hand and the West on the other. And that would have satisfied the Russians, along with granting certain forms of liberty and autonomy to the Russian speaking ethnic Russians in the eastern part of Ukraine, who don't want to be part of the centralised government in Kyiv, which is why they've been declaring and fighting a war of independence, a separatist war since 2014, when there was this coup, when the elected Ukrainian president was removed with the support of the United States.

Now here is finally the New York Times June 15th, not only admitting that these negotiations took place, but describing in detail how close they actually got. The headline was: *Ukraine-Russia Peace Is as Elusive as Ever. But in 2022 They Were Talking*. Quote, "Representatives from the warring nations held peace talks in the early weeks of the Russian invasion. They fizzled. Documents from those talks show why any new ones will face major obstacles". "An examination of the document shows that the two sides clashed over issues involving weapons levels, the terms of Ukraine's potential membership in the EU, and specifically Ukrainian laws on language and culture that Russia wanted repealed. Ukraine's negotiators offered to forgo NATO membership and to accept Russian occupation of parts of

their territory. But they refused to recognise Russian sovereignty over them. In Istanbul, the Russians seemed to endorse Ukraine's model of neutrality and security guarantees, and put less emphasis on their territorial demands". That is extremely close to a full agreement on all major issues. "Afterward, Mr. Medinsky, Russia's lead negotiator, said Ukraine's offer of neutrality meant it was, quote, 'ready to fulfil those principal demands that Russia insisted on for all the past years.'" That they were hearing from Ukraine: We're willing to give you the key things you want in order to avert this war. "Ukraine summarised the proposed deal in a two-page document called the Istanbul Communiqué, which it never published. The status of Crimea was to be decided over a 10 to 15 year period, with Ukraine promising not to try to retake the peninsula by force. Mr. Zelensky and Mr. Putin would meet in person to finalise a peace treaty and strike a deal on how much Ukrainian territory Russia would continue to occupy". Think about what would happen if Ukraine and Russia had entered a peace deal in February and March of 2022, as they got very close to doing. Think about hundreds of thousands of lives, Ukrainian lives and Russian lives, that would have been saved. Massive destruction in Ukraine could have been averted. The United States and other Western countries, spending hundreds of billions of dollars to keep this war fuelled and arming it would have been unnecessary and Russia wouldn't have been dragged into a war, an enduring, sustained war, that caused them to focus all their attention on building their military. The problem, of course, was that that was exactly what the West wanted. Whether you believe it or not that the West provoked Russia to interfere in eastern Ukraine, there are documents at the highest levels of the US government that made very clear for a long time that everyone in Washington knew that if you talk too much about Ukrainian membership in NATO, it will provoke the Russians to invade eastern Ukraine in Crimea. Leave aside that question of whether the West provoked it, deliberately or even unintentionally, the reality is there was a serious chance to avoid a horrific and destructive war, and the New York Times is finally acknowledging how close the Ukrainians and Russians got to that kind of a deal. They showed you the documents where both sides seemed very pleased with how much progress was being made, with concessions from the other side.

Now, what the New York Times did not mention is the reason that peace deal never happened. And that was because Western leaders, particularly the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and President Joe Biden, intervened to impede, prevent and even ban Ukraine from pursuing that kind of peace deal. Here from *Ukrainska Pravda* on October 21st, 2023. Quote: *Former German Chancellor claims he, quote, 'mediated' the situation between Ukraine and Russia in 2022.* "Gerhard Schröder, former Social Democrat Chancellor, known for his friendship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, has claimed that the US disrupted, quote, 'peace talks' between Ukraine and Russia at the beginning of the full scale invasion and that Kyiv invited him to mediate. The former chancellor also mentioned the five points of what was supposedly a peace plan being discussed at the time: Ukraine's rejection of NATO membership, two official languages in Ukraine, Donbas autonomy, security guarantees for Ukraine, and negotiations on the status of Crimea." – which is very similar to what the New York Times reported – quote, "The only people who could resolve the war over Ukraine are the Americans. During the peace talks in March of 2022 in Istanbul Ukrainians did not agree to peace because they were not allowed to. 'They had to coordinate everything they talked

about with the Americans first', Schröder said". And then in February 2023, CGTN reported, and this was reported in many different outlets, quote: *Former Israeli PM says the West quote, 'interrupted' Russia-Ukraine peace talks.* "Former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett revealed to Israeli media that he travelled to Moscow as Israeli prime minister last March to broker an early cease fire between Russia and Ukraine, and that the two sides agreed to make compromises, but the cease fire talks were, quote, 'interrupted' by the West. The West decided to, quote, 'crush Putin rather than to negotiate', he said. Speaking on a podcast with Israeli television Channel 12, which lasted for almost five hours and was published on Sunday, Bennett said that after the outbreak of the Russia Ukraine conflict last February, he tried to act as a mediator as he believed that there was still a chance to end the conflict by diplomatic means. Bennett said that during his mediation, Zelensky promised not to join NATO, and Putin dropped his main goals of special military operations: seeking, quote, 'disarmament' and 'denazification' of Ukraine, adding in his impression, both Russia and Ukraine want a cease fire and have drawn about 17 or 18 cease fire drafts, but at some point the West decided, quote, 'to crush Putin rather than to negotiate', the Israeli prime minister said. The former Israeli prime minister also said that all of his actions had been agreed in detail with the U.S., Germany and France. Quote, 'They interrupted the talks', he said."

Now, we've covered this many times. There's a lot of other aspects to this war, including the increasing levels of violent Ukrainian resistance to being drafted. Ukrainians increasingly are hiding in their own apartments, avoiding taking the bus. Hiding and fleeing from Ukrainian recruitment officers because of how unwilling they are to go to war. We've heard anecdotes and anecdotes and anecdotes. The BBC have a video report that they published just last week, extensively documenting how pervasive this has become. Again, all things that have been visible and obvious for quite some time. And I think the most important one is how close Ukraine and Russia got to a peace deal two and a half years ago that the United States and NATO allies, specifically Britain, purposely disrupted because they wanted Russia to be entrapped in a war. Or as Naftali Bennett put it, they preferred to crush Putin than to allow the Ukrainians to forge a peace deal. That is morally repugnant. And even if you believe that the Russians are to blame for having invaded, the failure of the two sides to come to a peace deal when they were so close is obviously on the ladder of Joe Biden. Another thing that's on his ledger. He wanted this war to be prolonged indefinitely. That's why he funded it and armed it to the very end. And of course, the people who paid the largest price are the very people that we were told we were going there to save, which are the Ukrainians in defence of a democracy which under Zelensky has long ceased to exist.

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