

Libertarian Apologists for Ukraine's Authoritarianism

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It should not come as a surprise that U.S. officials and members of the foreign policy establishment have falsely portrayed Ukraine as a noble democracy. Such deceptions in pursuit of assorted US foreign policy objectives around the globe are nothing new. Throughout the Cold War, Washington routinely contended that ["friendly" dictatorships were members of the "free world."](#) More recently, officials in George W. Bush's administration conducted a concerted propaganda effort that Iraqi exile leader Ahmed Chalabi was the George Washington of Iraq. Obama administration officials and their allies in the news media even sought to make the case that the Islamic jihadists trying to unseat Syria's Bashar al-Assad were [really democratic freedom fighters](#).

A similar effort is taking place to portray Ukraine as a vibrant democracy and the country's leader, Volodymyr Zelensky, as a [courageous champion of freedom](#). Biden administration officials and most members of the news media have dutifully promoted those images. The [fawning reception](#) given to Zelensky as he addressed a joint session of Congress in December 2022 was an especially graphic example.

There is [extensive evidence](#), however, that Ukraine is in fact run by a corrupt, repressive oligarchy. That situation was true even before Russia's February 2022 invasion gave Zelensky and his associates a rationale for intensifying their authoritarian practices. Matters have grown steadily worse since then.

The alarming trend is evident in Freedom House's [2023 report](#) on global liberty. Ukraine received an anemic score of 50 out of 100 points in the overall freedom assessment, putting the country squarely in the middle of the "partly free" category. Kyiv's score in the "democracy" subcategory was even worse—a 39, which meant that Ukraine was considered a "hybrid" system, embodying both democratic and outright dictatorial features.

The partly free designation actually is a generous rating from an organization that has been extremely friendly to Kyiv's views and positions for years. Even Freedom House, though, was not willing to try to shoehorn Ukraine into the "free" category. Moreover, the drop in Ukraine's score from the 2022 report was among the largest of all countries measured.

It is bad enough that policymakers and journalists are willing to ignore or minimize Ukraine's ideological warts. The situation is worse when supposed libertarians are willing to do so. Jonathan Casey of Students for Liberty [states flatly](#) that "the Ukrainian people are in a fight for their freedom, and we do not advance liberty by denying that reality." One might well ask what "freedom" he is talking about.

In a February 2022 [open letter](#) signed by more than 90 European self-proclaimed advocates of free markets and individual liberty hailed Ukraine as "a young democracy" with no reference to the country's mounting authoritarian tendencies. Later, the signatories asserted that "although the road to a free society is never an easy one, we should applaud the efforts made by millions of Ukrainians to move away from the socialist past." Genuine democracies, though, do not [shutter opposition media outlets, ban opposition parties, outlaw designated churches](#), engage in arbitrary arrests and imprisonment of political opponents, or [put domestic and foreign critics on a blacklist](#), much less smear them as "disinformation terrorists" and "war criminals." The Zelensky government has committed all of those abuses.

Libertarians who ignore or excuse such conduct are being willfully blind, at best. Cato Institute Cultural Studies Fellow Cathy Young's strained apologia is an especially depressing example. In a debate with Will Ruger in the [May 2023 issue of Reason](#), Young contends that "Ukraine's liberal democracy" deserves US aid. "Ukraine has already paid its dues as a would-be liberal democracy. Unless one buys into Kremlin narratives about the 2014 'U.S.-sponsored coup,' which reduce mass protest to puppetry, it is clear Ukrainians have collectively cast their lot with liberty."

She does concede that Ukraine is not "a perfect liberal democracy," but given Kyiv's abuses of liberty, that description is akin to saying that Bonnie and Clyde were not the best, law abiding citizens. It is a monumental understatement. She also tries to excuse Ukraine's defects by attributing them to the country being "the target of eight years of low-level warfare by Russia before full-scale war began."

Such an apologia damages the credibility of the entire pro-liberty cause. Libertarians above all others should never shrink from criticizing the abuses that foreign clients of the US government commit. An unwillingness to do that makes such individuals willing tools of an unprincipled and extremely dangerous foreign policy. Ukraine is a corrupt autocracy, and people who are truly committed to the principles of liberty should not hesitate to say so.

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Featured image: President Biden with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Wednesday, December 21, 2022, in the Oval Office. / Official White House photo.

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