

Marginal Gains

A PolSoc publication

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Putin's war in Ukraine

By Luca Mazibrada

Ukraine. A nation now at war. As the second largest country in Europe, Ukraine's 40 million people share deep religious, cultural and linguistic ties with Russia, which on February 24th declared war on its neighbour. The ensuing destruction is something the likes of which Europe has not seen in nearly 8 decades.

It is worth remembering just how closely linked these two now enemies are. They are both Slavic nations, speaking two closely linked Slavic languages. They share an Eastern Orthodox faith. Many Ukrainians have family in Russia - they are Russia's largest minority community, with around 5 million of them living in the country. Similarly, around 8 million Russians live in Ukraine. And their links go further than this. While Moscow is the capital of Russia, it was Kiev that was capital of the 13th century Kievan Rus, one of the first Russian

states. And despite this fraternal bond, and having lived together and fought side by side in countless wars under the yokes of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, they are now two peoples at war with *each other*. It all begs the question, **why?**

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 came the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, a military alliance of socialist nations designed in part to counter NATO during the cold war. The new Russian state was left without the sphere of influence it had enjoyed not only for the decades following the Second World War, but for centuries, through Tsarist Russia and then the Soviet Union. Russia at this stage was the smallest, and weakest it had been for hundreds of years. With a significantly reduced landmass, population and world standing, the continued existence of the west's sphere of influence, NATO,

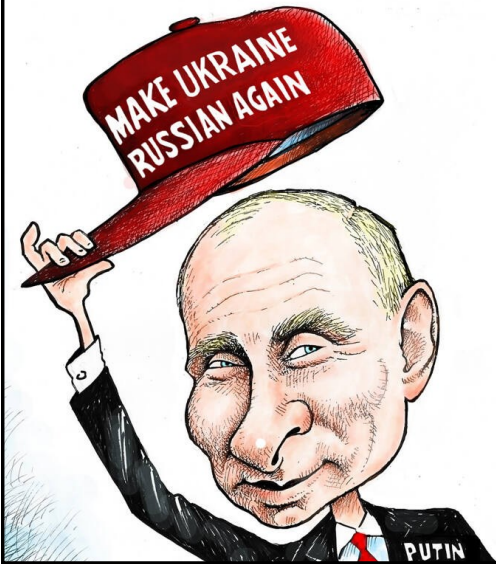
was seen as a security threat by some, and by others as an insult to the Russian nation itself. None more so than by future president Vladimir Putin. But why is this so significant in today's crisis?

The concept of a sphere of influence is key to understanding the complex mind of the Russian nation. Invaded from the west twice in one century, at the expense of 20 million of its citizens in the Second World War alone, the Soviet Union was keen to establish a permanent zone of influence. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 one of Russia's key aims has been to rebuild a sphere of influence, so it can regain the perceived safety it once had. But since 1997 more and more nations which had once been part of the Soviet Union's sphere of influence have joined that of the West's in joining NATO. The alliance has expanded eastwards taking in the

likes of Poland, Romania and Hungary amongst others. Then former members of the USSR itself joined, with the likes of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia.

Georgia, a former Soviet state, was invaded in 2008 after pondering the idea of joining NATO. Now, with what he sees as Russia's cultural and historical jewel Ukraine having also become ever more inclined to the West and NATO since the overthrowing of a pro-Moscow





regime in 2014, Vladimir Putin has chosen aggression. Time appears to be running out for him to secure the legacy of national restorer that he so desires. In invading Ukraine, he hopes to achieve a career long goal, something he sees as essential to the continued existence of the Russian nation. Described as a 'special military operation' to 'de-militarise' and 'de-nazify' Ukraine, the invasion's untold destruction in cities such as Kharkiv and Kherson tell a starkly different story. President Putin publicly intends to overthrow the pro-western government of Volodymyr Zelenskyy. In private, there is no knowing what he intends.

However, events are not going Putin's way. The bravery and fighting spirit of the Ukrainian people appears to have been grossly underestimated. Despite its superior manpower, Russia has so far struggled to gain a significant foothold in the country. Its military has been hit by supply issues, low morale and even desertions. Globally, the unity and strength of opposition has been remarkably robust, perhaps more so than initially expected by the Kremlin. And at home, Russians are making their opposition to Putin's war loud and clear, at great expense to their own freedom. This leaves the president vulnerable to ever dwindling public support, international humiliation, and ultimately makes his goal much harder to achieve. The question with which the world now holds its breath is, how far will he go?

How democratic is the UK?

By Lauren Jones-Brown

We are told that we live in a democratic civilisation where we are able to vote and elect members of parliament but does this mean that we have a true democracy. Democracy is defined as a system of government by which the whole population or all eligible members of a state make decisions through elected representatives. This definition seems to be a good description of the system we have in the UK today.

The word democracy comes from two Greek words 'dēmos' meaning the people and 'kratia' meaning power or rule. It is easy to argue that the people of the UK don't truly have power because we use a system that hands over power to allow MPs to make decisions on our behalf which many argue is a clear violation of the point of democracy as it means the people of the UK don't truly make their own decisions over the country. This would include referendums where it appears that we are being allowed to make decisions but in fact the public never got to decide what the question was that we should be voting on.

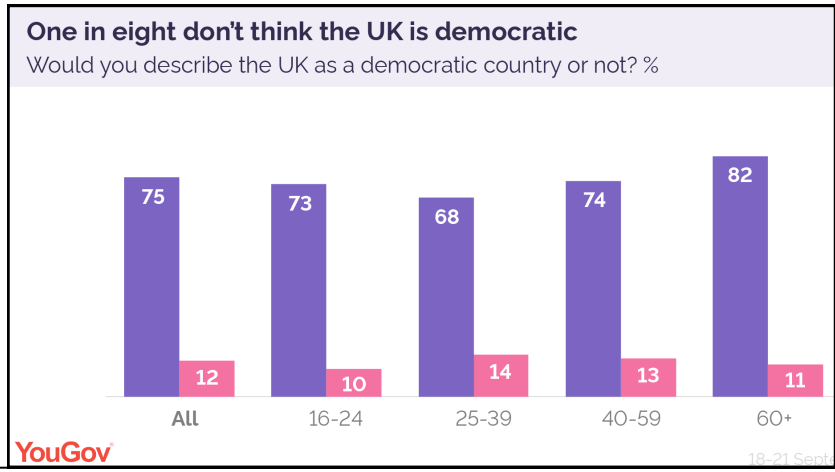
However, due to the fact that it would be highly time consuming and the general public doesn't know enough about most decisions that MPs make on our behalf, it seems more effective to have our current system than the truest form

of democracy where everyone votes on all issues.

However, Lord Hailsham coined the term elective dictatorship in 1976, and it is a more accurate description for today's politics in the UK than it was when it was said. One reason is the increasing unwillingness of the executive to respect the authority of the judiciary, the civil service, local government and parliament. Another reason is the willingness of government to introduce key changes with little oversight from Parliament.

However, the UK is 17th on the democratic index (2020) with a score of 0.892 which may not sound promising but is a very good ranking. Denmark is the most democratic according to the same index with a score of 0.958 which is not that different to the UK.

However, despite all the evidence that we do live in a democratic society it is hard to believe this when many people would argue that we have a prime minister who doesn't follow basic principles of individual ministerial responsibility as shown with the partygate scandal, and yet there is nothing we as the people could actually do to make him lose this position (until the next election!).



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The State of the Union

By Hana Ali

After the 46th inauguration, America was portrayed as being optimistic, hopeful and expecting reform. But to what extent has the shape of American politics changed?

Despite the impression given in the media, Biden didn't begin with an exceptionally high rating in the polls, with a 56% approval across the country. However, compared to the previous extreme Trump administration, Capitol Hill riots and high case, death and unemployment rates after the pandemic, many people were happy to settle for a milder alternative even if he was not their ideal candidate.

Through Biden's first term, ratings in the polls have dropped. The biggest political hit he took was after the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Many people felt the method of Biden's withdrawal (leaving a power vacuum which the Taliban filled) undermined the 20-year military effort against Taliban who were viewed as supporting or aiding acts of terrorism.

Biden had also had a fairly rough time within his own party as the current standing of the legislative branch of the federal government has made it difficult to pass legislation. Currently, the Democrats have a very slight majority in Congress: with the Senate in a 50-50 split, Vice President Kamala Harris (who is President of the Senate) has the tiebreaker vote. And they are in similar position in the House of Representatives with 51% of 435 seats. This means in order to pass federal laws every single Democrat has to support the bill, which rarely



Biden addressing Congress in his State of the Union speech, 1 March 2022

happens, shown when Joe Manchin, the senator for West Virginia, prevented the passage of the 'Build Back Better' bill.

So how is the rest of Biden's term looking? He will most likely be focusing on passing bills like The American Rescue Plan Act, Infra-structure Investment and Jobs Act and a proposal to abolish filibusters. Biden has also nominated a new Supreme Court justice, Ketanji Brown Jackson, who will be the first Black woman on the court. The

situation in Ukraine has had a unifying effect in in US politics but this is unlikely to last and it will be a challenge to govern after the mid-term elections in November. Can the Biden administration flourish in its second year?

