

# Current Controversies

## Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Your slogans tell a story

By Robin Collins

Sending military aid and broadening the Ukraine conflict is a bad idea, **NOT** because Putin isn't guilty of atrocities or might commit more that could lead to a nuclear exchange, but because he is, and he probably will.

**W**e mostly seem to agree on the necessity to end the war and stop the violence. The disagreements are over priorities and points of view, particularly in terms of who the real culprits are.

In the demonstration in Ottawa on February 27, organized by Ukrainian-Canadians, the calls were for peace, ending the war and stopping the invasion, and they blamed Putin. Among the hundreds marching, the flags were mostly yellow and blue, but also Canada's, Lithuania's and Latvia's, with not a red and black (far right nationalist) ensign to be found. The slogans were generally consistent with what the UN General Assembly is calling for.

### AT THE UN

The United Nations General Assembly Emergency Session, March 2, was the result of a "Uniting for Peace" referral from the UN Security Council following a Russian veto. The Resolution was unambiguous in its assess-



Demonstration in Ottawa against Russian invasion of Ukraine

ment. This was: "Aggression Against Ukraine". Among the demands: Deplore the aggression by Russia against Ukraine; Russia must "immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw" all of its military forces; condemn the decision of the Russian Federation to hype up its nuclear forces; call upon the parties to abide by the Minsk agreements and work towards their full implementation.

There were 141 states voting in favour of the motion, five against, with 35 abstentions. And yet few peace groups have even alluded to this resolution from the world body. How can this be? Is it because the UNGA resolution was lopsided, too critical of Russia or too deferential to the US and NATO?

### Explanations cannot be justifications

A recent hard-hitting article in *Open Democracy* by Taras Bilous, a Ukrainian historian and activist, criticized a segment of the left-wing peace movement for their acquiescence to Vladimir Putin's justifications for intervention – those "who imagined 'NATO aggression in Ukraine', [but] who could not see Russian aggression, [and those] who exaggerated the influence of the far-Right in Ukraine, but did not notice the far-Right in the 'People's Republics'."

"Part of the responsibility for what

is happening," he accuses, "rests with you." He ends with a call to Russians to overthrow the Putin regime, as a service to Ukrainians and Russians alike.

On the other hand, one of the clearest Leftist statements condemning Putin comes from Noam Chomsky, who famously compares "our" and "their" crimes and punishments, but he is unequivocal on Ukraine: "There is nothing to say about Putin's attempt to offer legal justification for his aggression. Its merit is zero."

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Closer to home, different "anti-imperialist" style peace groupings have been reluctant to condemn Putin outright nor to allow he might have broader geographical ambitions. Instead, the language has been conciliatory towards Russia's predicament, some calling on "all foreign militaries" to exit or describing the conflict as a "Russia-NATO" war (despite NATO's adamant refusal to participate). Focus is on Russia's grievances over NATO expansion, treatment of Russian minorities, and Nazis in the Ukraine government.



Noam Chomsky, Toronto 2011 | © Andrew Rusk

There are even nods to spheres of influence as if these are inherently legitimate geographical divisions.

Much of this language is mirrored in a letter released on March 1 by the Russian Embassy in Ottawa, which unabashedly defends Putin's "special military operation to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine", using "high precision weapons" that were targeting "military facilities only". The problem, they state, is "Goebbels-style Western propaganda. It cannot be trusted. The Canadian population should understand that" and, of course, there's "fake news." The Ukrainians, the embassy claims, are using civilians as human shields and firing on "hospitals, schools and kindergartens." The Ukrainians hold "full responsibility for the destruction and in-

## Canada, Out of NATO!

nocent victims." It ends: "Russia is not starting wars, Russia is ending them."

A handful of Putin apologists within our ranks will deny there's been aggression by Russia. But what also compromises a commitment to peace is fishing to show how "both sides" are similarly complicit (even when they aren't.) Add to that: "anti-imperialism" ideology. This partisanship always degrades into picking sides. Where the villain is American, it is easy to shout: "Invaders, Out!" and to agree to punishment of the perpetrators. When it is Russia, enemy of the enemy, and far weaker economically than the USA, the drift is towards explaining bad behaviour rather than

condemning it. This can come painfully close to *justifying* aggression.

Ukrainians are livid because NATO isn't coming, and (at this writing, two weeks after the invasion) not establishing a no-fly zone. Some peace groups are blaming NATO anyway. "Canada, Out of NATO!" can be a legitimate position to hold. But it is also a longer project, and with respect to Russia's current invasion, it is mostly irrelevant. NATO's expansion eastward really is a problem, and while it is a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty to deny them the possibility of entry into the alliance, nevertheless it is a necessary imposition. Timothy Garton Ash has suggested that a face-saving bargain might be to offer Ukraine expedited entry into the European Union, in exchange for their "giving up" on NATO membership, access that some alliance members won't agree to anyway.

## Remember Minsk?

There are primary concessions that Ukraine Prime Minister Zelensky (if he survives) needs to swallow. One is non-membership in NATO with neutrality for Ukraine. Another is the already agreed Minsk Accords granting autonomy within Ukraine to the two Donbass oblasts. The Accords have been ignored by the media, many Western governments, and to a large degree, until now, also many peace organizations. Canadian Pugwash Group, an exception, picked up on the issue back in 2015: "As a contribution to both regional and global security, Canada should support the full implementation

## Ukraine sovereignty may have to be sacrificed to prevent catastrophe

of the Minsk Accords and the material enhancement of the OSCE monitoring mission in Eastern Ukraine."

Agreed but not implemented by Ukraine (due to a resurgence of opposition by Ukrainian nationalists), the Accords have now been dismissed by

Vladimir Putin when he recognized the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk. This may lead to absorption of the Donbass into Russia (which was one concern of Minsk Accords skeptics from the start).

## Nuclear War?

Some conclusions can be drawn from the hands-off approach that NATO is taking toward Putin's war. NATO is reluctant to enter the war for fear of a geographical or vertical spiraling to either world war or nuclear war. This means that *nuclear deterrence appears to sometimes work* and may have prevented escalation, a good thing. This could also inspire the hawks and their military industrial complex to enshrine a nuclear role permanently. But, paradoxically, the inherent instability of nuclear deterrence could also hasten abolition and consideration of much improved cooperative security arrangements.

While Putin's folly seems a high-risk strategic blunder, he also holds many of the cards. The exit of Russia's military from Ukraine may yet be on his terms. Something most are unwilling to say publicly: Ukraine sovereignty may have to be sacrificed to prevent catastrophe. Heroic Ukrainian resistance may prolong the conflict and force a better negotiations result, but it may also mean only more bloodshed.

Is this the price to be paid for not implementing Minsk as agreed years ago, and for refusing to stop expansion of NATO eastward? The least bad route, Noam Chomsky pragmatically argues, may be "Austrian-style neutralization of Ukraine, some version of Minsk II federalism within", but also a back door exit (impunity) for Putin. That's most of what he wants, but it may still not be enough. ■

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