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IDEAS TO BLOW YOUR MIND



MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2019

Look who's not laughing!



International politics is a daunting subject for many. Understanding what is happening requires knowledge of history, firsthand experience with various countries and cultures, some understanding of foreign languages (since the information that's available in English tends to be incomplete and

slanted in a particular direction) and much else. But there is another approach that can produce good results even for a seven-year-old: reading facial expressions and body language of world leaders.

When everything is routine, world leaders generally manage to remain poker-faced or (in the case of American politicians) grinning stupidly with a vacant-eyed stare. But when things get interesting all sorts of ticks and grimaces and strange gestures and postures start showing up. And when you see one of the "world leaders" (in quotes because I use the term facetiously) looking like his entire life is flashing before his eyes at a joint press conference, you can be sure that something very funky is going down.

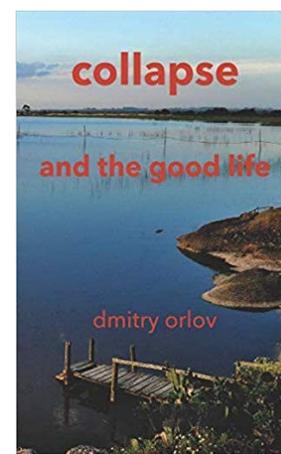
To wit: here is the Ukraine's new, popularly elected president, Vladimir Zelensky, appearing next to Donald Trump and looking for all the world as if he really doesn't want to be there. A bright seven-year-old will tell you that much (I checked) but we adults wish to know more. And so I will oblige and fill you in on some of the salient details.



So why is "Ze" (as hip young Ukrainians like to call him) looking so sad? Unless you've

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been held incommunicado in a log cabin up in the mountains, you probably know that Trump is in the process of being impeached by the lower chamber of the US parliament (or whatever they call it) which is held by his enemies. The impeachment is guaranteed to end up as a dead letter because the upper chamber (which is held by his friends) will never allow it. The rationale for the impeachment is that Trump is alleged to have coerced Zelensky to dig up dirt on his rival Joe Biden during a secret phone call, the allegation having been made in an anonymous secret memo that has turned out to contain only hearsay evidence.

Now, this is all just too funny because Joe Biden, being a senile old coot, has already voluntarily confessed, on camera and for all to see, to successfully strong-arming the Ukraine's previous horribly corrupt oligarch-president, Petro Poroshenko into firing his chief prosecutor, who was investigating various shady dealings of Joe Biden's coke fiend son Hunter with a Ukrainian gas company Burisma Holdings. And the fired prosecutor is now on record stating that he was fired for exactly that reason, so that's that.

Still, the concoction that Trump tried to coerce Zelensky to dig up dirt on Biden (rather than merely ask him nicely) could have been given some legs (by carefully filtering out all relevant information in the US mass-media). But then Trump did something unspeakable: he removed the top secret classification from the transcript of his phone call with Ze and released it, as well as the anonymous secret memo. US presidents have the authority to release secret information at their sole discretion.

Let's pause on this point for a moment. There is an excellent reason why telephone conversations between heads of state are considered top secret: if they weren't, then it would make no sense for heads of state to ever talk to one another privately. They could just make public pronouncements, no deals would ever be negotiated, and international relations would fall apart completely.

Trump's willingness to declassify and publish the transcript of a telephone conversation with the leader of a supposedly sovereign nation signals two things: the nation in question isn't sovereign, and its leader is not a real leader. Certain things Trump said during his joint press conference with Zelensky clarified his position on the Ukraine. He said that supporting the Ukraine is a European problem, not a US problem. He also said that Zelensky should sort out his problems by talking to Putin.

Clearly, Trump views the Ukraine as a bit of Obama's legacy that he is willing to sell for a dollar—except that nobody would want to buy it because it's broken. Still, Trump was nice enough to say that the Ukraine has a bright future because of all the beautiful prostitutes I mean models... beauty pageant contestants... whatever. I am sure Trump was speaking from firsthand experience.

How broken is the Ukraine? Well, here is a newsflash: the Ukraine just lost a nuclear power plant. Khmel'nitskaya Atomic Energy Station is no more. Its two reactors are down, probably permanently. One is supposedly shut down for "routine maintenance"—but nothing is particularly routine in that country these days. The other reactor has a completely totaled generator due to overheating caused by a wadded up rag that was left inside the cooling circuit for one of the shaft bearings.



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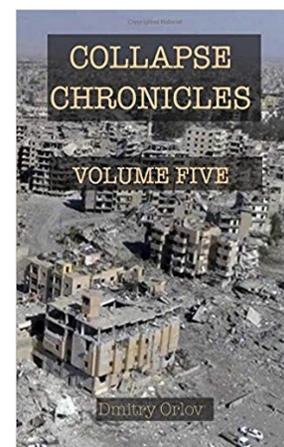


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EVERYTHING IS GOING ACCORDING TO PLAN

The Ukraine used to have six plants with 15 reactors; now it's down to five plants and just nine reactors. These have been running flat out due to shortages of gas and coal, generating over half of the country's electricity. This outage will require an additional million tonnes of coal (200-300 freight trains with 50 cars in each) and this coal can only come from... Russia, of course! Because Ukrainian coal is too low-quality—50% ash—and the Ukraine's Soviet-era power plants can only burn it by mixing it with higher-quality Russian coal. But it can't do so because Ukrainian railways are woefully short of locomotives and rolling stock and have been unable to bring the wheat harvest to the docks for shipping, never mind ship in an extra million tonnes of coal. Oh, and Russia would need to be paid for the coal, but the Ukrainians don't have any money left.

It is possible to go on and on in this vein, piling up evidence that the country is going to the dogs. Over three million Ukrainians are currently in Russia, trying to make a living as guest workers or attempting to relocate to Russia permanently. Many more are working in Poland or other parts of the EU. The previous Ukrainian president, who was voted out overwhelmingly in favor of Ze, has a stack of criminal cases pending against him... and so on.

The heating season has started but the Ukraine's natural gas reserves are far too low to last the winter and there is no agreement for new imports from Russia or any hint of an active negotiation. People in the east of the country (which was part of Russia until Lenin handed it over to the Ukraine) are scrambling to get Russian passports. The government is eager to lift the moratorium on selling farmland to foreigners; one of the few remaining Ukrainian assets is its fertile soil. The Ukraine has lost some of the most valuable parts of its territory when Crimea voted to secede and the heavily industrialized eastern regions seceded de facto. In short, this is a never-ending sob story.

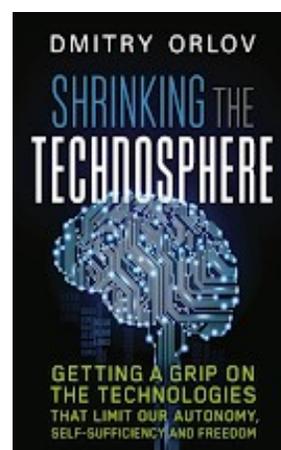
Against this backdrop, there is the Ukraine as a political construct. It is conceived of as a pro-Western, pro-American and anti-Russian entity. The use of the Russian language (which previously accounted for around 95% of all language use) has been outlawed. A fake alternative history of the Ukraine has been concocted and is being taught in schools. Ukrainian nationalists regularly march around Kiev sporting Nazi insignia and carrying torches. World War II Nazi collaborators who were responsible for massacring Poles and Jews have been enshrined as national heroes. The official narrative, from which no Ukrainian politician can ever deviate, is that the Ukraine is at war with Russia. This is most amusing, because the converse is obviously not the case: if Russia were indeed at war with the Ukraine, then the Ukraine would have ceased to exist—a point I made in an article I published five years ago.

This political construct was engineered by US officials (with Canadians pitching in) based on Zbigniew Brzezinski's "grand chessboard" theory that the loss of the Ukraine would thwart Russia's imperial ambitions. They all somehow missed two obvious points: that Russia has no imperial ambitions (it has all the land and the resources it could ever want); and that for Russia the Ukraine has been a drain and a burden, so good riddance!



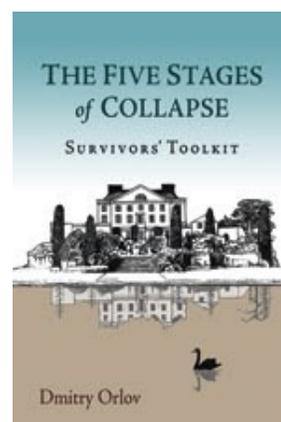
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THE FIVE STAGES OF COLLAPSE



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THE PITFALLS OF ENGLISH

In previous eras the Ukrainian territory had been essential in military terms—as a land buffer between Russia and a hostile West. But now that a hypersonic rocket launched from the middle of Siberia can reliably blow up the Pentagon 18 minutes later, Russia does not need any land buffers to defend its territory. If attacked, Russia will obliterate those who ordered the attack, no matter where in the world they live.

While the Ukraine, as part of the Russian world, is important, an important requirement for being part of the Russian world is willingness to die for it. The people in Eastern Ukraine have demonstrated such valor, and so they are given humanitarian aid and other forms of assistance and are issued Russian passports soon after they ask for them (and submit all of the required paperwork). As far as the rest, they have demonstrated quite a bit of anti-Russian hostility and an overwhelming willingness to sit around and do nothing while their country is being looted and destroyed, and so they will get nothing.

The last remaining use Russia has for the Ukraine is as a natural gas conduit to Europe. But given the political situation and the decrepit state of the Ukrainian gas transit network, Russia has worked hard to build pipelines that circumvent the Ukraine. These are now close to completion, obviating the need for Ukrainian gas transit. It should be kept in mind that while Europe would freeze and go dark if deprived of Russian natural gas, Russia could stop its natural gas exports altogether and still run a trade surplus. The existing gas transit deal expires at the end of 2019, and the new deal has been stuck at the stage of general discussions and is unlikely to ever advance to the stage of actual negotiations.

Given all of this, let's try to put ourselves in Zelensky's shoes. He is a Russian Jew. His native language is Russian, as is the case for all Russian Jews, wherever they happen to live, Israel and the Ukraine included. He speaks passable Ukrainian, as a second language, but often lapses into Russian while trying to speak Ukrainian. His English is rudimentary. Good, native knowledge of Ukrainian is rare among Russian Jews. The Ukraine's large Jewish population, centered on Odessa, is educated, middle-class and for at least the last century has been an integral part of the greater Russian culture. Historically there has been little love lost between the city-dwelling Jews and the Ukrainian-speaking peasants inhabiting the rural hinterlands, who weren't even allowed into the cities until after the Russian Revolution.

Isn't it hilarious that a Russian Jew has been elected to rule over a bunch of Russia-hating Nazis? Add to this the fact that Zelensky is a comedic actor. He starred in a television show called "Servant of the People" in which he played the Ukrainian president. His election campaign was a continuation of the show in real life, made effortless by the loathsome nature of his predecessor, and he was elected in a landslide and granted a large parliamentary majority.

But then his presidency turned into a continuation of his comedy show, with predictable results. In fact, this is all predictable. During the Ukraine's few brief periods of political independence, Ukrainian politics has never failed to degenerate into a farce. A bunch of Ukrainian Nazi-worshiping nationalists being presided over by a Russian Jew (who is a professional comedian to boot) is, you must concede, a

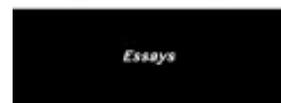


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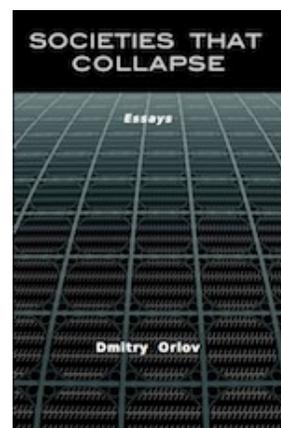


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thoroughly farcical state of affairs.

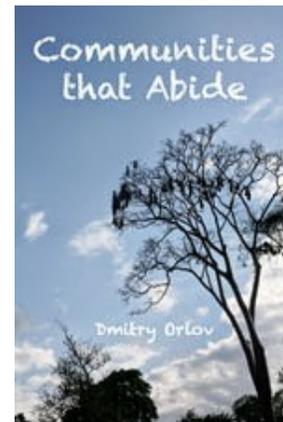
But Zelensky isn't laughing; in fact, seated next to Trump, he projected abject misery. Why is that? The reasons are clear. By publishing the transcript of their telephone conversation, Trump treated him as a nonentity to whom the usual rules of secrecy governing private communications between leaders of sovereign nations do not apply. And then upon reading the transcript it becomes clear that Zelensky had grovelled shamefully before Trump, had bad-mouthed Merkel and Macron and had generally made a fool of himself. The context in which the transcript was released thrust Zelensky into the middle of a bitter partisan fight within the United States, in which he has no good moves: if he refuses to investigate Burisma Holdings, which is at the heart of the Biden scandal, Trump will never talk to him again; if he allows the investigation to proceed, Trump's sworn enemies will go after his scalp.

And then there is the fact that Trump, in a few short sentences, completely demolished the entire political construct of modern Ukraine. For Trump, it was an Obama/Clinton legacy project, and, as with everything those two had ever touched, a failure and an embarrassment. Therefore, Trump's message is, you are dismissed, and if you want help, then talk to the Europeans (whom you just insulted). Then, Trump wants good relations with Russia and has no need for a Russophobic Ukraine remote-controlled by elements of the Deep State. In telling Zelensky to go and talk to Putin, Trump stymied an entire unproductive and harmful direction of US foreign policy. The fallout was quick: US special envoy to the Ukraine Kurt Volker swiftly resigned.

Zelensky is now completely isolated. He can't talk to Trump because Trump isn't interested. He can't talk to the Europeans because he had just insulted them. And he's been told to talk to Putin... except he can't. First, Putin has been endlessly painted as the image of the enemy in the Ukrainian press, and if Zelensky tries to make peace with Putin he will be made to look like a traitor and may face rebellion from within his own ranks.

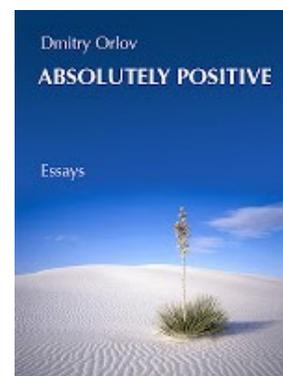
Second, Putin has made it clear that there is nothing for them to discuss until Zelensky fulfills his promises, as spelled out in the Minsk agreements. Namely, the Ukrainian side has to stand down militarily and pass legislation to put in place a federalized structure in which Donetsk and Lugansk, and other regions if they so wish, are granted wide autonomy. But if this were to happen, then the Ukraine, in its current conception as a monoethnic unitary state, will cease to exist because there is no common ground between the pro-Western Nazis and the Russians in the east.

Previously, the Ukrainian government thrashed between these two extremes as a sort of bipolar disorder. But over the past five years the battle lines between the two sides have hardened into actual battle lines, with actual trenches and redoubts and real military weapons being fired from both sides, and the only plausible way forward is through divorce due to irreconcilable differences. But here too is a problem: while the Russian east of the Ukraine can hope for some amount of Russian support, although even there it won't be given unconditionally, the chance that the European Union, in its current state of disunity, and given the politically unsavory nature of Ukrainian Nazis, will step up and help western Ukraine, is virtually nil.



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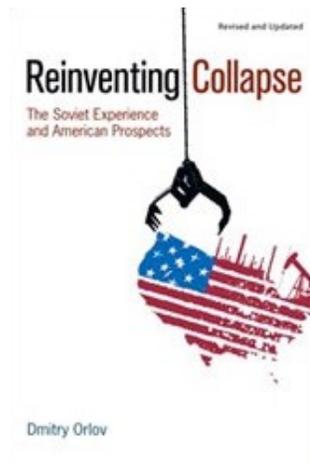
Given all of this, it seems perfectly clear why the clown-cum-president "Ze" is now a sad clown. It's a sad situation for him. He is quite talented as an actor, and quite funny (but only when speaking Russian) but now he has been cast in a distinctly unfunny role, which he will nevertheless be forced to play for five long eye-watering, nose-bleeding years! What a fate!

This is a sad story about a sad president, but not every president in the world is sad. To compensate, next I will tell you the story of a happy, smiling, laughing president: Hassan Rouhani of Iran. I haven't seen such a happy president in a long time, and will explain what must be making him so happy.



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