

When Peace is War: Authoritarian Instrumentalization of Peace

“It was a pleasure to visit President Donald Trump today. We need leaders in the world who are respected and can bring peace. He is one of them! Come back and bring us peace, Mr President!” tweeted Hungary’s Prime Minister Victor Orbán on 9 March 2024, immediately after meeting the probable Republican nominee for the US presidential [elections](#). A few days later, Pope Francis made a controversial comment calling for Ukraine to have the courage to raise the “white flag” and negotiate an end to the war with Russia.

The idea that peace is preferable to war is an axiom everyone shares. Much more than others, the Ukrainians, who feel on their flesh all the horrors of Russian aggression, desire it to the utmost. But those who, numbed by the strange fog of Stockholm syndrome, reproach Ukraine for not wanting peace, make a profound moral, political, and strategic error. By this peculiar alchemy, one blames the victim for his determination to defend himself while shrugging shoulders at the aggressor,

sighing that such would be his nature. Concluding peace with Putin without a clear Ukrainian victory means more war in coming years on the territories of more countries, with more casualties and destruction and more damage to the rules-based international order.

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Leaders as diverse as Trump, Orbán, and Pope Francis, to name but a few, support the idea of peace negotiations with Putin. One can try to explain the Pope’s words and his constant kindness towards Russia through Christian pacifism and charity. However, populist leaders with authoritarian tendencies deliberately use peace with the



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Populist leaders with authoritarian tendencies deliberately use peace with the Kremlin as a weapon in their war against liberalism and democracy. In this war, Putin's Russia is their potential ally.

Putin often talks of peace while continuing to pour out the most despicable propaganda on the Russian population via totally controlled television and media outlets. This propaganda goes so far as to call for the murder of Ukrainians, the destruction of their state, and the invasion of the Baltic states, Poland, Germany, and even the United Kingdom and America. These actions are hardly compatible with a genuine desire for peace, and one must be overly gullible not to suspect Vladimir Putin of using peaceful rhetoric as a tactical tool without ever abandoning his strategic objective: the destruction of Ukraine and the territorial expansion of Russia at the expense of its neighbors. The noble aim of peace has become a formidable propaganda weapon in the hands of its worst enemies.

When Dictatorships Call Democracies Warmongers

There is a consensus that democracies do not go to war with each other and are less prone to war than authoritarian states. Most solid democracies are also the most peaceful. Immanuel Kant, in his Perpetual Peace essay, claimed that the division of the world into "constitutional republics," in today's words - democracies, was one of the necessary conditions for global peace. Other classical authors of democracy, such as Alexis de Tocqueville and Thomas Paine, also discussed the peaceful nature of democratic/republican regimes. The

project of a United Europe, which began at the end of the Second World War, aimed to achieve lasting peace on the European continent. For the founders of the European Community and later of the European Union, war was to be banished forever, and it is all the more curious that Russian propaganda and its Georgian offshoots consider the EU to be at the forefront of the "Global War Party."

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On the other side, authoritarian regimes often need external wars, or at least the constant agitation of external threats, to keep their populations docile. They may confront other authoritarian countries, playing the nationalist or irredentist card, or attack a democratic neighbor for fear of contagion from its political system. Since Putin came to power, Russia has been at war almost non-stop: the second Chechen war was followed by the invasion of Georgia (2008), the occupation of Crimea and part of the Donbas region (2014), followed by intervention in Syria (2015) and finally by the full-scale war in Ukraine since February 2022. The aims of these wars vary, as do the justifications (from anti-terrorism to the defense of traditional values and Christianity, denazification, the right to be called Mom and Dad, etc.). Still, the wars were necessary to strengthen the regime, keep the power, and project imperial ambitions in the neighborhood and beyond.

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Democratic systems are natural enemies of authoritarian and totalitarian states. By the example of their mere existence and the freedom they project, they are naturally subversive of unfree regimes. Democracies remain constant targets of authoritarian powers and thus need to protect

themselves or help each other, including militarily. The wars are, in general, started by dictators. However, once a democratic state is involved in the war, some domestic forces coalesce against it, allowing authoritarian regimes to influence their domestic politics and affect public opinion.

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One must not think that all pacifist trends in a democratic society are prompted and fueled by an authoritarian or totalitarian enemy. Genuine pacifist movements do exist, but for the authoritarian enemy, strengthening them under the guise of promoting peace serves its interest and makes pacifists “useful idiots.” Authoritarian regimes prefer pacifism to strive abroad, while patriotism, nationalism, and militarism should dominate at home.

By way of comparison, pacifists in the autocracy are non-existent, as they are repressed and, in the best case, expelled from the country. This is illustrated by the fate of war critics and peace advocates in Russia, arrested and sentenced to long prison terms since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Peace as a Diversion

Long before Putin’s Russia, peace was already one of the Soviet Union’s favorite propaganda tools. Those who lived in the USSR remember “Miru Mir” (Peace to the World) and “SSSR Oplot Mira” (USSR Is a Stronghold of Peace) written in large letters on almost every other building. The country that invaded half of Europe, Afghanistan, quelled Eastern German, Hungarian, and Czechoslovak uprisings

in blood, led dozens of conflicts on every continent through its proxies, engaged in a frantic global arms race, and turned its entire industry into military manufacturing, shamelessly presented itself as a white dove of peace at home. Soviet citizens were convinced that America and its allies wanted war at any price, while Moscow was spearheading the global Peace Camp together with the other socialist nations. The USSR maintained dozens of organizations abroad whose declared aim was to defend world peace. These organizations protested against military spending in Western countries, demanded disarmament, and fiercely criticized the actions of NATO, American imperialism, and the “arms race.”

One of the most prominent organizations aimed at achieving Soviet foreign policy objectives was the World Peace Council, founded in 1948. This and a few dozen smaller organizations based in Western countries took the line that the world was divided between the peace-loving Soviet Union and the warmongering United States. From the 1950s until the late 1980s, the Soviet Union used numerous organizations associated with the WPC to spread its view of peace. In 1979, the World Peace Council explained the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as an act of solidarity with the Afghan People, while it fiercely opposed America’s war in Vietnam. GRU defector Stanislav Lunev wrote in his [autobiography](#) that “the GRU and the KGB helped to fund just about every anti-war movement and organization in America and abroad” and that the Soviet Union spent more money between 1965 and 1975 in financing the peace movements in the West and particularly in the US than helping the Viet-Cong.

Soviet efforts to weaken the West through peace propaganda were dubbed the “Soviet Peace Offensive” by some Cold War specialists. The climax of this process was reached at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s when the US deployed cruise missiles in the countries of Western Europe in the face of previously installed Soviet

SS-20s in Warsaw pact countries. The most apt rejoinder to the mass peace rallies in Germany, France, and the UK [came](#) from the socialist (!) French President François Mitterrand - “The pacifists are in the West, the missiles are in the East.”

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Peace is also a favorite propaganda tool of collaborationist or proxy regimes. The Vichy government in France (1940-1944), the pinnacle of collaboration with the enemy, put the theme of peace with Germany at the center of its ideology: While Europe was at war, France had chosen the path of peace to safeguard its population and its economic potential and had entered into collaboration with Nazi Germany. Numerous Vichy posters, such as the famous [“Laissez nous tranquilles”](#) (Let Us Be Peaceful), showed peaceful France, represented by a man planting a tree with a shovel, harassed by the “enemies of peace” - the Global War Party of the period: the Anglo-Saxons, the Jews, the Free Masons and La Résistance under the leadership of Charles De Gaulle.

Use and Misuse of Peace in Georgian Politics

The theme of peace is one of the central tools of the Georgian government’s pro-Russian narrative. The Georgian Dream (GD) manipulated it masterfully, presenting its loyal policy toward Russia as a success in the eyes of public opinion.

Peace with Russia is not a new narrative in Georgian politics, just as the GD’s political campaign argument is not new. It has been used continuously since 2012 and more intensively over the last few years. From the very first day of ascending to power, the GD boasted of being the only Georgian government since independence that has not had a war with Russia. For the GD, the

war of 2008 was provoked by Georgia’s “reckless previous government” - the GD’s archenemy, the United National Movement (UNM), and its leader, ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili. The GD’s reading of the war in Ukraine is essentially the same: Zelensky did not manage to avoid the war; on the contrary, he precipitated it, undoubtedly by his imprudent rapprochement with NATO. This was notably the meaning of the [statement](#) made by former PM Gharibashvili at the GLOBSEC conference in 2023.

However, with the large-scale war in Ukraine, the theme of peace took on a new dimension. It has become Georgia’s ruling party’s favorite subject and main asset, allowing it to respond to several challenges.

For the internal public, it allows a contrast to be drawn with the war-torn Ukraine. The government wants to demonstrate that while Ukraine is being destroyed and bleeding, Georgia is living peacefully. It has a record economic growth rate thanks to its “intelligent” and “prudent” policy towards Russia. Playing on the fear of war is particularly effective in a society traumatized by the memory of the wars of the 1990s and 2008. “Support us and our wise foreign policy; otherwise, you will have Mariupol” - is the government’s message in a nutshell.

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The same message condemns the opposition and all forces that demand greater support for Ukraine, more measures to move closer to NATO, and an end to the submissive posture towards Moscow. The GD claims that in the event of a change of power, war would be guaranteed because Moscow will not accept a Western-friendly government.



The Georgian Dream also wants to convince Georgian citizens that there is a [“Global War Party”](#) that would like to distract Georgia from its peaceful path. The United States, the EU, NATO, and all countries and governments that support Ukraine are in this ephemeral alliance, while the Georgian Dream’s political opposition, civil society organizations, and the free media are the “Global War Party’s” local proxies and agents of influence. The alleged global objective of this force is the destruction of Russia, and just like Ukraine is used for this purpose, Georgia too has its function – to open a [second front](#) against Moscow.

The peace narrative is also used by the Georgian Dream to [cover](#) its authoritarian tendencies. All the criticism from the West towards the Georgian government, its participation in circumventing the sanctions against Russia, and every condemnation of the absence of the rule of law or the lack of independence of the judiciary are presented by the government as, in fact, the West’s dissatisfaction with Georgia’s “neutrality” in the Russia-Ukraine war. The same applies to the concerns from Brussels about the non-compliance with the conditions set by the EU to begin accession negotiations with Tbilisi. The Georgian Dream explains that, in reality, this is an external pressure to drag Tbilisi into the war against Russia. More amusingly, we cannot exclude that even this very article will be presented by their propaganda as proof of the “Global War Party” conspiracy against peace in Georgia.

Many of these propaganda narratives seem inspired by Hungarian, Serbian, or other historical Vichy or Soviet playbooks. But there are additional local colors and personal touches. For example, throughout 2022, the government explained to Georgian citizens that the private commercial dispute between Credit Suisse and the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili (who at that time did not hold

any public office) was, in reality, the American and Western policy of punishing Georgia for its pacifist [position](#).

These statements by Georgian officials about Western pressure for the country’s involvement in the war against Russia were described as “delusion” by Josep [Borrell](#), but the propaganda continued unabated.

In this context, the Georgian government wants to appear as wanting to heroically defend the interests of the Georgian people and their aspiration for peace against the warmonger West, represented on the spot by the opposition parties, NGOs, and the media. In the medium term, this propaganda is supposed to undermine the still high popularity of the EU, NATO, and Ukraine among the population and to prepare the ground for a more frank and explicit rapprochement with Russia.

As implausible as it may seem, these manipulations of peace enjoy some success among the population. Even if the images broadcast by the PRO-GD TV channels of crowds thanking the Georgian PM “for peace” and “the absence of corpses” in Georgia seem exaggerated and staged, polls show that the population is afraid of the extension of the Ukrainian conflict on its soil and as a whole is not dissatisfied with the government’s “pro-peace policy.”

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As for its external dimension, through criticism of the West and denunciation of its “aggressive

plans,” Georgia further demonstrates its loyalty to the Kremlin. Moscow never forgets to publicly encourage Georgian “moderation,” especially in comparison with the governments of the region, e.g., Moldova and even Armenia, more “submitted to the *diktat* of the ‘Global War Party.’” Sergey Lavrov, Russia’s top diplomat, recently [praised](#) Georgian authorities for their “responsible approach” and resistance to Western pressure to open a second front.

In regions such as the Caucasus, which have experienced periods of instability and recent violence, peace resonates with the fears and desires of the people. It is, therefore, not surprising that it is the object of all manipulations, especially from actors who quickly learn proven practices from Russia. It is paradoxical to note that while all the wars in the region were led or at least instigated by Russia (two Chechen wars, Karabakh,

the wars in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region in the 1990s, the 2008 invasion, etc.), the peace narrative presented by Moscow and its proxies completely ignores the role of Moscow and blames its rival forces for being war propagators. One should also remember that these wars were often followed by Russian “peacekeeping” (nicknamed at the time “piece-keeping”) and Russian “peace enforcement” operations, while the local populations still enjoy all the “delights” of Pax Russica. Those who oppose Russian narratives should build a counter-narrative based on these facts.

One can define propaganda by reversing Clausewitz’s famous definition of war as a continuation of policy by other means and describing it as a continuation of war by other means. Consequently, it is a matter of principle and mental sanity to prevent the continuation of war by using peace as one of the main propaganda tools ■