

Horrible Political Jokes

In
Ukraine

Richard Murff

Author of Pothole of the Gods

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About the Author

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Before gallivanting across hell's half acre, Murff was in advertising and an investment banker specializing in capital markets. His experience and clients have spanned finance, international entrepreneurial programs, airlines and tech.

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HORRIBLE POLITICAL JOKES IN UKRAINE

Editor's Note: This is a draft chapter of Richard Murff's upcoming book, World War Three Has Started... Dress Accordingly available in 2026 from Burnaby

I was standing in Amsterdam's slick, modern Schiphol airport, looking at my boarding pass. I had for four more hours of flight time to Kyiv; and another hour onward to Kharkov, some 12 miles west of the Russian border. I hadn't realized until that moment exactly how far out into Europe's booneys I was headed.

Like getting out of a pair of zip-ties, you can always see the lingering impression when arriving in a place that used to be behind the Iron Curtain. Kyiv's Boryspil International Airport, smack in the middle of Ukraine, has made an honest attempt at slick and modern, yet it's interior still has the terminal charm of a port authority bus stop. This is a shame because it's next to a beautiful bit of country the Soviets never got around to wrecking. It looks like rural Kentucky and, like the Blue Grass state, it is horse country. The heads of dreaming Ukrainian boys used to be filled with images of the Cossacks riding over the steppes the way American boys used to think of cowboys until the Internet came along. Now, like their American counterparts, they stay inside playing video games until hoofing off to college to make themselves obvious.

I arrived in August amid Ukraine's Independence Day celebrations. After three unsuccessful attempts to vote itself out of the USSR, the 1991 vote actually stuck. Largely because Mother Russia herself threw in the towel and left the union a few months later. Predictably, cracks in Ukrainian society began to appear almost immediately, or rather one massive crack right down the middle. In Kyiv, and west of the Dnieper River that cuts the country more or less in half north to south, people began to tear down Soviet-era monuments and change the names of the streets to sound less Bolshevik. The massive city center Square of the October Revolution was recast as the now famous *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* — Independence Square.

Americans like to discuss national identity on Independence Day, but it is an abstract discussion involving freedom, immigration, and apple pie as metaphor for a lost age of plenty with golden, flaky crust. In Ukraine the talk is a little less abstract. Like America, the senior class grumble and the younger indulge in performative activism. In Ukraine these earnest youngsters are called the "Independence Generation", those who have no memory of the Soviet era. In a public square called *Hostynny Dvir* – Hospitable Courtyard – the youth were aping their American counterparts by "occupying" the place to keep it from being privatized and developed into a shopping mall. Unlike their American counterparts, however, these kids actually cleaned the place up as opposed to crapping in garbage bags. They declared it a Hospitable Republic. They hadn't completely thought out the statement they were making. One protester explained that they were focused on forging a new identity "without the Soviet aftertaste." They wanted a new, prosperous Ukraine where the government provided lots of new jobs. A better way to lose that aftertaste, I thought, would have been to quit gargling with a planned economy and build a shopping mall.

The students of the Hospitable Republic did have a point. After the independence vote, that gritty Soviet aftertaste never really went away. Almost to a man, the officials from the old government got elected to form a new one outlawed the Communist Party and confiscated all its property. The QED being that the government appropriated its own stuff in the name of change. Or rebranding. Throughout the nineties, Kyiv remained broadly pro-Russian and had the corruption to prove it. Yet the government was making a broadly

Horrible Political Jokes in Ukraine

sincere attempt at freedom of speech, and a brand of tidy civil protest the Soviets would have never allowed began to flourish. And with good reason.

That August, it turned out, would be the last one where chatter about Russia would be quite so abstract. Next year's Independence Day, the talk was "Well, that was nice while it lasted." Or words to that effect.

CONFUSION IN THE BORDERLANDS

To be fair, defining what it means to be Ukrainian has proven trickier than just glancing at a passport. The name itself is a corruption of an old Polish word meaning "borderlands." Kyiv was the first capital of the *Rus* and is still considered it the birthplace of Russian culture. That word means "to row" which is exactly what the Swedes and other Vikings types did in their long-boats, picking up locals along the journey for resale in Constantinople's thriving slave markets. To this day we still call the indigenous people Slavs... so not a great start. Vladimir Putin and company like to refer to Ukraine as "little Russia" because its demeaning and he knows it gets their goat. But the expression is yet another old, confused term used by the Orthodox Church in Constantinople – "little" was meant in the sense of distance, not size or status. Kyiv was closer to Constantinople, and Moscow, as Big Russia, was far away.

For the last thousand years or so, however, everyone who has ruled this beautiful, fertile land – Poles, Lithuanians, Mongols, Russians – have considered it something of a dumpy borderland. The Soviets used the whole country as heavily fortified speed bump: So well armed that at independence, Ukraine became the world's third largest nuclear power. Any swagger that might have brought was short lived. The US and Western Europe were happy enough when the USSR imploded, but they could clearly see the danger in an untested, very angry nuclear dynamo. You know what former colonies are like. So the US, Great Britain and Russia pressed Ukraine to join the nuclear non-proliferation pact and give up its arsenal to the Russians, of all people, for dismantling. This near delusional optimism was drawn up as the Budapest Memorandum wherein Washington, London and Moscow agreed to respect and protect Ukraine's territorial integrity with security guarantees should Moscow change its mind about the independence vote. Or the nukes.

I trust you see the problem.

In post-Soviet Ukraine, politics don't lean left or right, but east or west. By the turn of this century, the pro-West faction was coming into its own at about the same time that European leaders were hammering out the EU to create political and market club to which they could aspire. Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin – a gangster with a big KGB axe to grind and a bold, Soviet flavor – came to power in Moscow. Cloaked in vodka-fueled visions of revivalist Imperial glory, Putin's motives regarding Ukraine focused on the practical: Borders.

Stationed at the Dresden desk in Germany Putin witnessed the collapse of the Berlin Wall on TV. And sat hopelessly at his desk and it triggered the dominos that led to the collapse of the USSR itself, Putin famously called it the “greatest catastrophe of the century.” From his point of view, the first catastrophe for post-Soviet Russia was that it had lost most of its “hard” border. The country now had some 12,000 miles of shared, prairie-flat border without the military manpower to protect it. The Soviets, like Imperial Russia, had addressed the problem of the endless, flat border by conquering everyone around them and using their natural borders along mountain ranges to rivers. Failing that, heaps of people living in the satellite states made a nice buffer zone. The second catastrophe was societal rather than political – a near fatal heroin boom. To put this in terms an American can understand – consider a million-man army made up of mostly crack or meth-babies. Not only is the Russian army not an effective fighting force, it lacks the capacity and population to become one.

Soon waves of freed up ex-spooks were explaining to both British SIS and the CIA that the USSR had never really a great modern military power in the first place. It was mostly just a bluff. Mother Russia had heaps of cannon fodder who thought they patriotic heroes.* There *was* a nuclear arsenal, but it a lot smaller than we believed and their ability to hit a target was iffy at best. This was cold comfort because with nukes, you don't have to be precise to really tear things up

For Putin, paranoid in a way only an ex-spook can be, the question of an indefensible open border with NATO, the dread enemy of his youth, was terrifying. The man is ex-KGB but he was never a master spy, more like of a fanboy of espionage. Fearing that Ukraine

* Which really is the key to good cannon fodder.

might go West, Putin and the SVR, the external espionage services rebranded from the old KGB, went to work stoking identity and regional politics east of the Dniper River, telling them that they'd been left out of Ukraine's prosperity boom, such as it was. And then he waited.

He didn't have to wait long.

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN A CIRCUS AND A KLEPTOCRACY

Politics in these parts have always been a blood sport and in 2004 it got bloody. Victor Yushenchenko, a banker who aimed to orient Ukraine towards Europe and the West was running for president against Viktor Yanukovych, a pro-Russian governor of the Dnipro Oblast.* Yanukovych's Russian-speaking constituency earned their living mostly from heavy manufacturing and sitting atop one of the world's largest coal deposits. It was easy to convince them that they'd had it better spooned up with the Russians. To help Yanukovych, Moscow got off the sidelines and waded in with the vote rigging, media smears and the rest of what the Kremlin calls "active measures." Had the dirty tricks stopped there, Putin's guy would have likely won the election without too much fuss. Old habits die hard, though, and the SVR dosed (pro-Western) Yushenchenko with a poison called dioxin – a component of agent orange – leaving him permanently disfigured. Officially speaking, (pro-Russian) Yanukovych won, but on a raft of more or less open fraud. Which likely wasn't the final trigger, but the fact that Moscow was so baldly behind it. The election result triggered the Ukraine's Orange Revolution in the aptly named Independence Square. The protests were largely peaceful, but they were *very* large. The Ukrainian courts ruled that vote be retaken. Without time to properly re-rig, the pro-Western Yushenchenko won with 52% of the vote. He proceeded to prove himself as corrupt as anyone else.

Sleaze aside, as President Yushenchenko kept at his pro-Western leanings. As promised, his government immediately started hammering out the details of a free-trade and association agreement with the EU, as well as starting talks about joining NATO. Evidently, the guy didn't put too much faith in those security guarantees from Washington, London and, if he drew any lessons from getting poisoned, certainly not Moscow. Both the

* A province or state, only more foreign.

EU and NATO would require Kyiv to do something about government corruption before moving on. So while those slow wheels were moving, Putin's started putting his security services into sabotage mode.

Meanwhile (pro-Russian) Yanukovych nursed his wounds and resented all the corruption that he wasn't allowed to play around in. His Party of Regions signed a collaboration agreement with Putin's United Russia party, and with that backing, threw his hat in the ring in the 2009 elections. This time he positioned himself as less pro-Russian and more pro-united Ukraine. Moscow operated with a lighter touch and squeezed its man into office with elections that were, more or less, declared fair(ish) by international observers.

The problem for Putin wasn't that his boy was pro-Ukrainian, but that he lacks an understanding of the core concept behind a parliament, called *Verkhovna Rada* in Ukraine. With the country \$17 billion in debt to foreign creditors and staring down the barrel of default, crumbling industries and government somewhere between a circus and a kleptocracy, the EU free trade deal wasn't a lifestyle choice, but a lifeline. And the voters knew it. The newly elected Yanukovych may have been a broadly pro-Russian, but he was a politician and could see which way the winds were blowing. While Yanukovych continued engineering a bail-out from European creditors, Putin cut off the gas to the country, forcing the president to withdraw from the EU agreement. Moscow made its own *offer-you-can't-refuse* bail-out on undisclosed terms. The place exploded. Again.

And once again the center of gravity of the protests was *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* – this time dubbed *Euromaidan*. The local press called foul so the president cracked down on journalists. Which a lot of Ukrainians thought is a very Russian thing to do. Having been ousted once by protest, President Yanukovych wasn't about to let it happen again. New Anti-Protest Laws were enacted, and the police began to beat young protestors who dug in and fought back. Then the snipers moved in, and that really got the crowd worked up.

What happened next was called the Revolution of Dignity, and its *cause célèbre* was that Ukraine wouldn't be a Russia puppet against its will. Yanukovych made motions at forming a unity government to quiet things down, but the rage had gone too far. On the night of 21-22 February 2014, Yanukovych secretly made his way to Russian-speaking Kharkov where the mob was less likely to murder him. That right there tells you a lot about the fractured state of Ukrainian society. Desperate not to look like he was running away,

Horrible Political Jokes in Ukraine

Yanukoych asked to Governor of Kharkov oblast, Mykhalio Dobkin, to “find a few factories to visit” so he could still look presidential during what he described as a “temporarily difficultly.” Governor Dobkin later told a reporter from the BBC that Yanukoych was acting like “a guy from another planet.”

BEARS, FURRY HATS AND SUSHI

Kharkov is a city of about 1.5mm people about 12 or so miles from the Russian border. In fact, at the time, most of the population claimed *to be* Russian. I had inexplicably been bumped up to first class on the Antonov 148-100, a 78-passenger jet that, thanks to Soviet design, still managed to look hulking. It's an odd quirk of socialism that a system to designed to turn everyone middle class is so good at poverty and, honestly, they aren't half bad a luxury either. The eight first-class seats were wide and comfy and the fantastic stewardess, who looked like a Bond Girl, bent forward and asked me in heavily accented English if I'd like brandy with my coffee. I sort of remember saying something suave like, “Why yes, that would be lovely.” But I also sort of remember fairly screaming in her face, “Boy howdy! Would I?” In the throes of that sort of euphoria, who can tell? Yet old world luxury tends to hide old world efficiency. My plane arrived at Kharkov's airport, which in looked like someone had built budget repro of Peter the Great's Winter Palace... and then used it as a high school gym. I was only five hours late. Assuming that the clocks were reasonably correct.

A local photographer I'll call Irina and her mother left a sushi bar to pick me up. The place isn't all vodka, bears and furry hats. Nowadays it is vodka and a lot of other stuff, like sushi. At night, if you are tired, it can be beautiful. The streets are wide and public spaces enormous. The few buildings that pre-date the Soviets and the World War are glorious — by night. Irena assured me that not all of Kharkov is like this.

It's not. In the daylight the place can be dismal — and it's a very Bolshevik kind of dismal. How the Soviets managed to make something so boring look so sinister at the same time is a mystery: Apartment buildings take up entire city blocks and have absolutely no regard of the humans living there. In mad juxtaposition, the trees and bushes that line the sidewalks are wild and unkempt like a counter-offensive to the standardization of the

buildings. Like in Kyiv, Kharkov has the Modern European Affordable school of architecture scattered around, but those blocky, Orwellian Soviet ones still sit around like the drunk at a party who won't leave. Some of the old buildings have been painted and refitted, but there is only so much make-up can do for the fundamentally ugly.

The aesthetic comes from the desperate love affair Marxists and other socialist sorts have with heavy industry and standardization — a system that requires countless cogs and only a few lever pullers. The result is both sturdy and badly built. Like America's rustbelt, many in the East have a suicidal nostalgia for a manufacturing golden age whose lack of adaptability is the main cause for said golden age's collapse. They saw a faded glory in soulless grey boulevards where Bolshie street names like "Lenin" and "23rd of August" remain. I asked one local in Kharkov why they hadn't taken down the six-story monument to the Russian soldier rendered in Marvel Comics proportions in the city center. It was one of the more practical responses to a political question I'd ever heard: "How would we? It's very big..." he thought for a moment, "What would we *do* with it?"

He wasn't being funny, but like most grim places, Kharkov is not without its sense of humor: Old Soviet-era posters and images are used to the same kitschy affect that American use the stylized images of the 1950's. I asked Irina about the transformation of the old Soviet big brother spy-state into a cartoon. "I remember nothing of the Soviets..." she said with a disinterested shrug.

"What about your mother," I pestered, "does she talk about it?"

"I suppose." The only thing a she found more boring than a foreign journalist, apparently, was her mother. And so an empire that sought to suppress all human individuality into a collective, soulless economic puree had, in one generation, become the local variant on America's *In my day I walked to school, uphill... both ways* story. I asked if she was worried that the government was still spying on the people. She seemed genuinely amused that I thought a) the politicians in Kyiv were competent enough to pull off a spy program and b) had a desire to do anything other than get rich. She waved her smartphone at me, "Everyone knows where I am anyway."

Irina thought that the language debate in the East was absurd. "Everything is in Russian already!" she said pointing to a billboard. I had to take her word for it. In western-leaning Kyiv, the language debate was an affront to all those "ethnic" Ukrainians who fought

Horrible Political Jokes in Ukraine

to preserve their heritage under the Soviets. In the east the retort was—in short—is that being forced to listen to Ukrainians speak Ukrainian in Ukraine is a violation of their civil rights as Ukrainians who'd rather hear Russian in Ukraine. Once you start making arguments like that, it's bound to end badly.

Then Irina said something that caught me off guard. "America... it is bilingual. Yes?"

"No."

"Spanish?"

"Ah, well." I said, "Not officially, no. I mean, sure...pretty much every government agency prints documents in both languages. And well, I don;t suppose you've every been to Miami... but no, the United States isn't bilingual."

"How is that NOT bilingual?"

Well, she had me there.

The discussion was never really dialectical, but political: Would Ukraine get back together with its domineering and manipulative ex, Russia? A full year before the *Euromaidan* protest got so out of hand, the debate was an obvious attempt at whining about the trivial to avoid the larger, nastier issue that lay beneath.

The Soviets didn't allow discussion about the *Holodomor*, the Soviet engineered famine in the early thirties that killed about 7mm Ukrainians. The term is a contraction of two Ukrainian words, *Holod* (hunger) and *Mor* (death or extermination). It was one of Joseph Stalin's efforts to keep the locals from thinking of themselves as Ukrainians. Soviet bureaucrats assigned ethnicities based on criteria like neighborhood, language and other slipperier measures; those famed put upon Kulaks were merely peasants who'd managed to hold onto a decent savings account. Imagine the silly identity politics that would come out of being ethically "Middlebrow Kansan." Once classed, Moscow proceeded to set the groups on each other like cats in an overwarm sack. The ethnically Russian anxiety of oppression by the Ukrainians is not some the ancient hatred, it's fear of payback.

I asked Irina how the Russians and Ukrainians—all of whom look like tall, pale first cousins—could even tell each other apart. She couldn't say how she could discern one from the other, only that she could—like some niche-market ESP. As near as I could tell it was predicated on where you'd rather say you are from, or more to the point, bullshit.

Crimea, however, is another matter. Despite the best efforts of the Soviets, large chunk of the population are still ethnically Tartar – a Turkic people who have lived in the neighborhood before the *Rus* settled. I may not have been able to tell a Ukrainian from a Russian, but the Crimean Tartars don't look much like either. They had periodically given Kyiv hell – ironically by selling heaps of Ukrainians to the Arab slave markets along with the odd sacking for good measure. The Tartars are at least partly responsible of a period of violence that was appalling by Ukrainian grim standards. They call it simply, “The Ruin.” Then the Czars annexed the peninsula in 1793, when people were more mellow about this sort of thing. Moscow kept hold of it after the Bolsheviks broke up the old empire until 1954, when Nikita Khrushchev ceded the Crimean oblast to Ukraine. As it was all part of the Soviet Union the question was academic. Until it wasn't. Since independence in 1991, Kyiv and Russia had tussled over territory, with the Tartars having pretty strong opinions on the question as well. The result was the Autonomous Republic of Crimean that didn't really want to be either.

LITTLE GREEN MEN

In February of 2014, Ukraine's pro-Russian President Yanukovich was AWOL in Kharkov searching for a factory to tour and thinking that a photo-op would save the situation. Yet for reasons of personal safety, he hadn't told anyone he was going into hiding. The Rada, thinking the man had fled his post to leave them to deal with the enraged mob he'd created, started motions have Yanukovich removed from office for refusing to come into the office. The Rada termed it “self-removal.” Yanukovich declared it a *coup d'état* while making his way to Crimea where Russian forces helped get him on a plane to where he could do Putin absolutely no good.

Once in Moscow, Yanukovich gave a BBC interview saying that Russian troops would *not* be welcome in Ukraine to calm things down. Maybe. A member of Russia's delegation at the UN produced a document signed and dated by the man the next day asking for Moscow for a military intervention.

After that, Putin moved faster than the speed of diplomacy. The man might not be a grand strategist, but he is an absolute king-hell of an opportunist. Three days after

Horrible Political Jokes in Ukraine

Yanukoych arrived in Russia, the “little green men” – soldiers in unmarked Russian uniforms loaded with Russian kit – arrived in Crimea. They occupied government buildings, dismissed the local government and surrounded Ukrainian military bases. A new government for the autonomous republic was installed and it immediately announced a referendum on rejoining the Russian Federation. This was a clever bit of legal deniability on the part of Putin. If you closed one eye and squinted, you could argue that, as an autonomous republic, Crimea wasn’t technically part of Ukraine and free to leave. If the result of the 18 March vote is to be believed there was strong support for joining Russia. How much of this was vote-rigging or simply that the pro-Western sorts had all fled to the mainland is debatable. The referendum was predictably labeled illegal by an international community that was adamant in both its condemnation of the action as well as its intention to do nothing about it. Now on a roll, Putin sent the little green men into the Donbas region to engineer a separatist movement and seize government buildings and territory.

The reasoning for all this foolishness wasn’t so much conquest but control. Putin’s “Plan A” was to use the threat of separatist referendums to force the unitary government in Kyiv to change to a federal structure like the United States – where oblasts have greater sway than the executive. Then Moscow would only have to dominate the pro-Russian eastern oblasts to block any concerted effort by Kyiv to go Western. That would give Russia its NATO buffer-zone without the expense and bother of having to run the place.

While pure speculation on my part, it seems likely that with pro-Russian Victor Yanukoych mooning around feeding the Kremlin information and local color, Putin did think that the Crimea and the Donbas were so pro-Russia that they’d embrace a low-key invasion. It is very easy to occupy a country that wants to be occupied. Just look at Hitler in the Sudetenland or ISIS in northern Sunni Iraq.

On 25 May, Ukrainians plugged the vacuum left by the AWOL president by electing businessman and oligarch Petro Poroshenko. He immediately went to the Donbas region and vowed to keep fighting the separatists and the Russians supporting them. Back in Kyiv, the Rada dusted off and passed that EU Association Agreement without waiting for the president-elect to be inaugurated. Poroshenko passed laws changing the Soviet-era street names and removing monuments. He told anyone who’d listen that the Soviet repression was as bad as the Nazis.

What he didn't do was squash the separatists or get rid of the Russian troops.

A COMEDIAN WALKS INTO A WAR

In a place as corrupt as Ukraine, being the incumbent is not actually an advantage. Voters here are very touchy about election rigging and churn through presidents quickly. So there is a perfectly sane reason why Ukraine would elect a comedian as president: If you can't laugh at your country's politics, you'll cry. Or go to jail. Or be horribly disfigured in an acid attack. So, you laugh. It's a grim sense of humor, I'll grant you, but there we are.

And yet, the election of 2019 felt different: In the aftermath of the Orange Revolution, the *Euromaidan* protests and the Revolution of Dignity, a new future for Ukraine was tantalizingly up for grabs in a way they country hadn't seen since Independence Day. Everyone seemed to think so because no fewer than 39 candidates entered the presidential race. This was a bit of a problem for Moscow and the SVR's election management operation. You can't kill *all* 38 candidates running against your guy. Or at least you can't get away with it. The last time these goons had poisoned the opposition, the blowback had been hell. Again, some speculation on my part: The SVR focused on a handful of likely winners, then decided how to help the acceptable ones, hobble the unacceptable ones and simply ignore the no-chance-in-hell ones. For example, the star of rom-coms like *Office Romance* and *Love in the Big City* 1, 2, and 3. That guy seemed to be running as a publicity stunt.

Every serious politician in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin and the SVT were all caught off guard when the incumbent Petro Poroshenko found himself in the run off with one Volodymyr Zelenskyy, star of the popular show *Servant of the People*, where he played a likable, 30ish high school history teacher who is filmed by one of his students ranting against government corruption. Predictably, the video goes viral and the teacher is elected president Ukraine. As satire, this is about as bang-on as you can get: It's an only slightly foreshortened description of how Zelenskyy himself got elected as the sixth president of Ukraine.

Surreal is an overused word, but a more apt one escapes me. On 21 May, Volodymyr Zelenskyy assumed the presidency of a country where a fussy debate on language had shifted

into an occupation by its former overlords who were holding snap referendums for parts of the country to vote themselves back into the cabbage-scented arms of Mother Russia. Meanwhile Mama Rus was passive-aggressively insisting she wasn't involved and only wanted to help anyway. While the all-powerful West – well aware the old gal was lying – fussed about plausible deniability. Which was a convenient excuse for spooked Western governments to keep doing nothing. To American ears, even Zelenskyy's campaign promises seemed slightly surreal in their optimism: He wanted to make government operations transparent to make it harder for crooked politicians to line their pockets. This would not only save money, but raise revenues because the average Ukrainian would be more inclined to pay his taxes if the goons in the Rada weren't skimming it all.

Zelenskyy also vowed to get the Russians out of the back yard. He called Putin personally on 11 July to plead with the man to enter into negotiations with the EU. This wasn't the Hail Mary it seemed – Zelenskyy was aware that the US Congress had approved \$400mm in arms aid to help deal with the little green men and the separatists. Or at least he thought that for precisely two weeks. Then the phone rang.

Zelenskyy was desperate for the arms aid from the US when he took the call on from President Donald Trump on 25 July. With Democrats circling around former Vice-President Joe Biden for the 2020 election, Trump needed a favor. It would be tremendous if Zelenskyy would publicly launch an investigation into Biden's wayward son, Hunter, for conflict of interest issues from being inexplicably on the board of a Ukrainian gas company, Burisma Holdings. And while he was at it, let's take a look at big Joe Biden's attempts to cover the investigation up. Trump, being a fan of Al Capone's dictum, that a kind word and a gun get you further than a kind word alone, implied that the \$400mm in congressionally authorized arms-aid would be withheld unless Zenlenskyy agreed. It's hard to know what Zelenskyy felt about this. On the surface at least, this sort of *quid pro quo* lawfare was exactly the sort of corruption the people of Ukraine knew well. And found so objectionable that they'd elected a stand-up comedian as president. If this was how the America's president carried on, why the hell were the EU and NATO being such little bitches about Ukrainian corruption?

Sleaze aside, the US *was* Zelenskyy's prime security guarantor. So he claimed that everything looked above board to him. Before anything could really happen, a US whistle blower complaint over the phone call snow-balled into a domestic scandal. By September,

the White House quietly released the promised aid, but the cat was out of the bag. The affair exploded across the global press and Nancy Pelosi announced an impeachment inquiry. The next day Zelenskyy addressed the UN General Assembly pleading Ukraine's dire security situation and desperately trying to stay on the sidelines as the story took on a life of its own.

One gets the impression that Trump still doesn't like the guy.

PUNCHLINE FANCY BEAR...

And there things awkwardly sat in a menacing limbo with separatists backed by Russian forces digging in and declaring independent republics along the borders. The idea of a Russian aftertaste may not have been abstract any longer, but the concept of Independence Day was getting hazy. Zelenskyy understood the corrupt joke that was Ukrainian politics, but he couldn't get his head around the theatrical nonsense that was making a terrible joke of American foreign policy.

Unfortunately, Putin got the punchline. Hell, his active measures campaign in the US – Operation Fancy Bear – had play apart in it. How effective a part is debatable. Trump claims it was a hoax and nothing else, while the Kremlin or the Democrats would have you believe Fancy Bear swung an election. The truth is that most active measures campaigns aren't that effective. And yet, the chaos in the US had taken on a life of its own with the "Stop the Steal" foolishness that exploded in January of 2021.

While Kyiv couldn't get the Russians out, the separatists and the little green men weren't making any progress either. In April 2021, Zelenskyy was getting nervous about the build-up of Russian troops on the impossible-to-defend border. He went to Washington to speak with now President Biden about speeding up the process of joining NATO. And that was the part that spooked Putin down to his formative years. That boogey man had loomed so large in his life that when Putin first tried to join the KGB, they thought he was too eager and told him to go away. Now the childhood fear was moving in next door - without a fence.

The next shot in the farce came from the other side of the world. Biden had been office a scant eight months when the Taliban jumped the gun on the scheduled US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August. The CIA's original estimate was that, without the

Horrible Political Jokes in Ukraine

US, the Afghan government would last five years. Then as the date drew near, that was revised to 90 days. It turned out to be five. As the Taliban seized control of Kabul, triggering the chaotic withdrawal of US personnel and the appalling treatment of its allies in-country. The world watched what looked like a reboot of 1975's Fall of Saigon.

Putin now knew what he needed to know. The US was retiring as global policeman. Europe was bending over backwards to avoid decisive action. His plan was revised from oblasts voting themselves free to just knocking out the government Kyiv and installing their own man. So naturally Putin started carrying on about Nazis in Ukraine attacking the Russian-speakers.

In the early hours of 24 February 2022 – Russian tanks started rolling into Ukraine. So confident was Moscow in a quick victory that a pre-taped victory announcement was played by accident the next day on Russian television. The announcement was premature. It also made a punchline out of the biggest army in Europe.

And that pretty much gets you up to speed.