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Politics, Bullshit, and Ukraine

By Vladimir Golstein

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Once in a while a book appears that forces us to rethink the previous cognitive patterns. To use the celebrated phrase from Thomas S. Kuhn's influential, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), it introduces the paradigm shift. Kuhn's explored scientific revolutions and the shifts produced by, say, Newtonian or quantum physics. The realm of social ideas is not immune to similar breakthroughs. In the twentieth century, Orwell's analysis of a doublespeak and the mutual corruption of politics and language has clearly changed the way we look at modern politics.

Recently, Harry C. Frankfurt's little pamphlet, with its beguilingly simple title, *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press, 2005) has pushed Orwell's insights into a higher degree of conceptualization. While written in Orwellian vein and addressing the abuse and manipulation of language, Frankfurt's analysis offers a new way of looking at the old problem. The book open with the following, by now well-known observation: "One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows it. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted. Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and avoid being taken in by it. So the phenomenon has not aroused much deliberate concern, nor attracted much sustained inquiry. In consequence, we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves."

Without proper understanding of its functions and purposes, we are left, frankly, unarmed to confront and understand bullshit, despite our confidence to recognize it. For Frankfurt, BS is a

greater enemy of truth than a lie because a liar *does* care about truth and thus tries to pass falsehood for truth, while BS artists do not really care about the truthfulness of their statements – they just make assertions to impress, while disguising their real agenda. There are obvious mechanisms to challenge lies: just produce facts. But how does one challenge bullshit and understand its secret agenda? There is no cognitive frame, no intellectual traps into which the bullshitter can be caught.

Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, the novel written at the height of Stalin's bullshit, reveals Bulgakov's awareness that one, in fact, needs to possess supernatural abilities to expose it. Devil, called Voland in the novel, visits Moscow and appears to be scandalized by the amount of "claptrap" ("bullshit" would surely be a better term) that he encounters. A liar himself, Voland does show a peculiar fondness for facts. It is the bullshitters with their blatant disregard for the very concept of truth, that illicit Voland's particular ire. Such is the barman, Andrei Fokich, whose head is clawed by a demonic cat, and who is punished by the factual, nonnegotiable knowledge of his impending death from cancer. One of the barman's crimes was to sell "the sturgeon of the second degree of freshness." Second degree of freshness is a misleading concept deliberately intended to deflect the accusations of lying, while achieving the goal of selling rotten product.

Now we can understand why there is so much bullshit in politics. To be caught in lying is tantamount to political suicide. But why lie when one can bullshit one's way to the top? Frankfurt quotes a hero of Eric Ambler's novel, whose father has indeed taught him: "never tell a lie when you can bullshit your way through."

Before we proceed further, let me point to a pattern of bullshit that dominates the western coverage of the Ukrainian crisis. For starters, Russian policy toward Ukraine – as Secretary Kerry pointed out – is still rooted in 19th century. It recognizes truths and lies. There are no green men in Crimea; yes, there were green men in Crimea. There are no military supplies; yes we provide military supplies to the Eastern Ukraine. These statements clearly operate on the level of truths or lies. Secretary of State, however, drenched in American bullshit, was clearly surprised that Russian president still resorts to lies. Why lie, when you can bullshit: this is twenty first century, after all.

Let's consider on the other hand, the statements that dominate the western coverage of the crisis. US involvement in Ukrainian affairs is well documented, from Asst. Sec. of State, Victoria Nuland's assertion that US invested 5 billion dollars into Ukrainian project, to the conversation between Nuland and Ambassador Pyatt on who should be in charge of the new Ukraine, to the current decision to provide Ukraine with military equipment and training. What are we doing in Ukraine and why – could and should be the subject of public debate; what we get instead is the endless criticism of Putin and Russian politics. This is clearly intended to obfuscate. How else does one interpret this explosion of interest in ethnic or sexual minorities' rights, whose violations we never bothered to criticize in our close allies, such as Israel or Saudi Arabia? But more importantly, how does one challenge this obfuscation? It is hard to call criticism directed at Russia a lie: Russian politics and domestic situation is clearly far from perfect, and the country is mired in most of the things that the critics attribute to it. But yet, these accusations are nothing but political bullshit, exactly of the kind that I experienced in Soviet Russia, when Soviet

military would interfere in, say, Czechoslovakia, but would deflect the criticism of its actions by attacking US racism, its policy in Vietnam and so on. Of course, there was a blatant racism in US, and of course, US was engaged in various military adventures, but what does it have to do with Soviet invasions?

Once again, my purpose is not to discuss Putin's politics. One can approve of it, or condemn it, but it is squarely rooted in rather traditional concepts – Russia was unhappy about Western expanding of NATO into its backyard, and it was clear about it, both in case of Georgia and Ukraine. Russian politics might be discussed as legal or illegal, rational or irrational, but anyone free of hysterical russophobia would hardly detect any secret agenda in Putin's actions. Does anyone really believe that he set up a whole overthrow of Yanukovich government to establish an excuse for land grabbing? Being a shrewd politician, Putin clearly utilizes the escalation of hostilities for his purposes. But only a fool would claim that Putin started his Ukrainian campaign simply to camouflage his domestic record. Why did he get Crimea and not Donbass if that raises the popularity? Why get anything? If his intent was to deflect the scrutiny of bad domestic situation; saber-rattling and amplifying Western threats would do.

In other words, while one can catch Russian president in lies, it is much harder to detect bullshit in his words. With the west, the very opposite is true. To label as "lies" western media' and politicians' attempt to camouflage their involvement in Ukraine through Putin-bashing would be wrong and therefore ineffective. To call this deflecting tactics "propaganda" would be imprecise. Nor does the word "doublespeak" really capture it. That's why we need the term introduced into modern political discourse by professor Frankfurt.

Since it is vested in language and obfuscations, bullshit is not a new phenomenon. When a Biblical Devil tempted Eve with an apple, did he really want her to try the fruit, or be like gods, or know good and evil? Of course not! The nature of his enterprise was to engineer the fall, to provoke an act of disobedience punished by exile and death. But this enterprise must have been couched into beautiful bullshit rhetoric, giving rise to Milton's or Byron's flights of fancy.

King Lear's older daughters – when asked about their love for their father –embarked on a classic manifestation of bullshit. Cordelia, who loved her father, was so shocked by their verbal pyrotechnics that she couldn't come up with anything better than to remain silent. Hers was a perfectly reasonable response. Seeing the language abused to such a degree that there was no way to catch her sisters in lies, she decided to avoid language altogether. But understandable as her behavior is, it is hardly ineffective. When Cordelias are silenced, the treacherous Gonerils and Regans take over. In the absence of supernatural interference – as was the case with Bulgakov's Volland, – the only way to see the end of bullshitters appears to let them destroy each other, as did Goneril and Regan. King Lear, the sovereign of England, proved helpless when confronted with demagogues. Are the sovereigns of this land, also known as "we, the people" better equipped to deal with Gonerils, Regans, Clintons and other demagogues? If we don't have a visiting devil on call, nor do we want to wait, what do we do? How do we challenge bullshit?

Frankfurt stresses that "bullshit need not be false, it differs from lies in its representational intent. The bullshitter may not deceive us, or even intend to do so, either about the facts or about what

he takes the facts to be. *What he does necessarily attempt to deceive us about is his enterprise. His only indispensably distinctive characteristic is that in a certain way he misrepresents what he is up to...* Bullshitter is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are... he does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up to suit his purpose.”

In other words, if we really want to debunk a bullshitter we need to forget the concepts of lies or truths, and concentrate on the “nature of bullshitter enterprise.” Of course, people have been doing it ever since the proliferation of BS began. Such people are known as “conspiracy theorists.” One therefore, can complement Frankfurt observation on the growth of bullshit with the parallel observation on the growth of conspiracy theories. What is a conspiracy theory, after all, as not an attempt to decipher the nature of a bullshitter’s agenda? One proof of this correlation between bullshit and conspiracy theories is the tendency of politicians themselves to look for “vast conspiracies.” Of all people, politicians should know. Their search for secrete agendas should alert us that it is precisely hidden agenda that generates so much bullshit in politics.

If we trust Frankfurt observation on BS proliferation, we should not be surprised to read about corresponding growth of conspiracy theories, as observed in a recent essay on the subject: "Experts say the number and significance of conspiracy theories are reaching levels unheard-of in recent times, in part because of ubiquitous and faster communications offered by Internet chat rooms, Twitter and other social media... 'We seem to have crossed a threshold,' says Eric Oliver, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago.”

In fact, the amount of bullshit generated by a political event seem to provoke a similar amount of conspiracy theories in response. Thus, the overabundance of conspiracy theories connected with 9/11. The ensuing War on Terror, generated the flood of conspiracy theories precisely because it was accompanied by a similar deluge of political and military actions and concomitant bullshit. Are we really fighting terrorists in all the countries that we invade or help to invade? If not, what are we up to? From a distance the war on terror reminds me of the war on fat bellies. There is a giant diet industry that thrives on our insecurity, and while claiming to accomplish its mission, it generates as many fatties, as it does the amount of diets. I would not be surprised that the battle on the bulge and the battle on terror are waged from the same headquarters.

I, for example, believe that the hidden agenda in Ukrainian crisis is the one that has always the case of the US European foreign policy, formulated from the start of the Cold War: “to keep Germany down and Russia out.” Thus, the main epicenter of the Ukrainian crisis has been Angela Merkel and her policies. But we rarely hear about it, behind the barrage of anti-Putin bullshit.

Besides Germany, there might be thousands of other reasons for US to get involved in the Ukraine, and conspiracy theorists are clearly busy coming up with theories: be it a defense of a weakening dollar, or the needs of military-industrial complex, or the desire to outsmart China, or the need to punish Russia for harboring Snowden or for interfering in the Middle East, or the need for Vice President Biden to provide his son with a cushy job. Unfortunately, by the time

some records would be leaked and some light shed on the project, the power players, whoever they are, will be off to Libya, Cuba, Iran, or Yemen.

What remains clear about Ukraine, however, is all the talk about expanding democracy into Ukraine, or letting Ukrainian people join the free markets of Europe, or the need to stand up to non-existing threat from Russia and defend the recently NATO-cized East European countries from the Russian expansion, is just that – bullshit. Not a lie, not a true, but a politically useful rhetoric based on our country's values and ideals, the rhetoric that could be easily generated by a computer.

While examples of political bullshit peddled by the mainstream media abound, it is worthy to recall in this context the revelations of one of the great practitioners of the trade (later identified as Karl Rove), who confessed to the reporter Ron Suskind: “We are an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you are studying that reality – judiciously, as you will –we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.” Another Bush advisor explains: “Let me clue you in. We don’t care.”

Frankfurt reminded us that: “one who is concerned to report or to conceal the facts assumes that there are indeed facts that are in some way both determinate and knowable.” Modern politicians of the type quoted above, do not really care about facts. They act like admen who sell products, and by the time public discover that a particular product contains a health-damaging ingredient, the admen have moved to peddling another product.

How do we then go about trying to detect the hidden intention behind the words? In good old days of Cold war, there were scholars of Soviet politics, known as "Kremlinologists," whose task to decipher what the Soviet leadership was up to. These Kremlinologists were, in fact, conspiracy theorists on the payroll of universities and think tanks. Maybe it is time to resurrect this honorable profession, capable of unraveling any kind of political demagoguery. Come to think of it, maybe we all should become Kremlinologists diligently studying the words, actions, and agendas of our politicians. After all, that's what the clause, “we, the people,” demands, if it is to remain truth, and not bullshit.