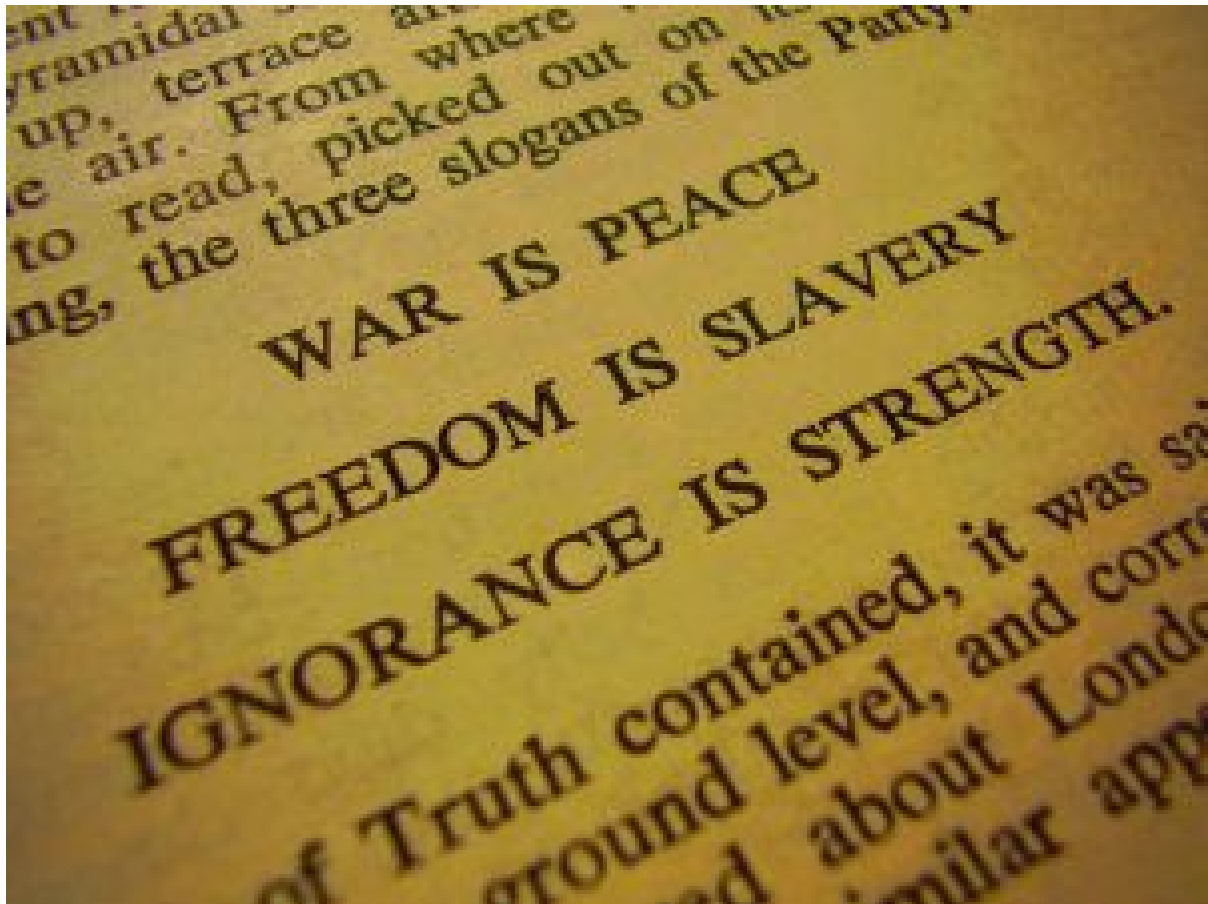


# Putin battles Andersen, and wins – at least so far



by Lev Tsitrin

**The battle between the factual** and the political is the central focus of Hans Christian Andersen's classic *"The Emperor's New Clothes."* the tale's ending assuring us that eventually, bamboozling fails.

Well, here comes the reality check. Compare Andersen's optimistic conclusion that a clear-eyed, truth-speaking individual can open the eyes of the many, and break the spell of a deceitful political ideology, with this headline from the New York Times, [\*"Ukrainians Find That Relatives in Russia Don't Believe It's a War"\*](#) subtitled "Many Ukrainians are encountering a confounding and frustrating backlash from family members in Russia who have bought into the official

Kremlin messaging.”

According to Andersen, facts trump politics, and a voice of one small child speaking the truth is sufficient to destroy the web of deliberate deceit that roots itself in one’s fear of straying away from the commonly held opinion, no matter how untrue and how manifestly ridiculous. Well, that may work in a fairy tale. The real life is different. “As Ukrainians deal with the devastation of the Russian attacks in their homeland, many are also encountering a confounding and almost surreal backlash from family members in Russia, who refuse to believe that Russian soldiers could bomb innocent people, or even that a war is taking place at all” tells us that actual reality is far more complicated. Above all, people want to be safe – and because safety is in numbers, conforming to the common narrative is the safest option. Sticking one’s head out by doubting the official version of events – even to save a close relative from bombardment – is a risky proposition; conformism and denial of reality are much simpler and safer.

Clearly, Mr. Andersen’s little parable should have had a very different conclusion: upon hearing the little child uttering the simple statement of fact, the crowd, instead of murmuring that they have been deceived by charlatans, should have drowned the little chap’s voice with the ever-louder shouts of “how wonderful are our Emperor’s clothes!”

That propaganda is a highly efficient tool of governance is well-known. Every ideology-based regime, Nazi, Communist, or Islamist, is a proof of that simple fact. Without brainwashing, without deceit, without drowning the occasional protest in noisy propaganda, such regimes would not have survived for a day. People are highly attuned to the majority’s opinion, and tend to keep their own opinion – when it goes counter to that of the community, or officialdom – private. “Don’t make trouble” is a very basic rule of survival. Russians – that is, the bulk of Russians, for there are reports of courageous demonstrators getting arrested –

prefer to toe the official line. It is infinitely safer that way, and easier on the mind.

Conformism is a basic survival technique. Take America, for instance. I talked in-person to at least a few dozen (and e-mailed hundreds) of American journalists and professors of law, asking them to shed the “disinfecting light of public scrutiny” on the bizarre fact that the full third of US government – the federal judiciary – scandalously give itself in *Pierson v Ray* the right to act from the bench “maliciously and corruptly” so as to be free to violate “due process of the law” and obstruct justice right from the bench, with total impunity and zero repercussions. Yet, impartiality of federal judges is the dominant myth that apparently needs to be maintained at all costs, so journalists stop their ears when I talk to them – and adamantly refuse to look at the facts. Seeing no evil where no evil is supposed to exist is apparently an iron-clad journalistic principle. Since Trump is inherently evil, he should be investigated with abandon; but since judges are by definition saintly, public scrutiny cannot be applied to them.

Russian journalists follow the same universal pattern. To them, the dominant, official myth that Ukraine is run by drug-addicted neo-Nazis who are on American payroll, being but foot-soldiers in US’ diabolical design to tear Holy Russia to pieces, and that the Ukrainian people crave liberation from the oppressive rule of Zelinsky’s thugs and pray for unity with their Russian brothers, is sacrosanct. Hearing this litany day in and day out, Russia’s wider public falls for that narrative en masse, and takes their Ukrainian relatives’ eyewitness accounts as a sign that Ukrainian propaganda befuddled their kin into misinterpreting what they actually see, mistaking intact buildings for dreadful ruins, mistaking happy children for dead bodies – in short, mistaking the selfless, fraternal Russian help for brutal aggression.

Even the greatest of writers, like Hans Christian Andersen,

occasionally gets it wrong. That, most certainly, was the case with "*The Emperor's New Clothes*." One would think, by reading Andersen that the Russians, upon learning from their Ukrainian relatives that what is shown on Russian TVs about Ukraine is a lie, would go on a general strike to protest the Ukraine war, forcing Putin to stop it. But given that Andersen was wrong, and that propaganda is stronger than the fact, such course of action on the part of Russians is unlikely – though, needless to say, is greatly to be desired.