Countering Orwellian Foreign Policy

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At the 2026 World Economic Forum, Mark Carney revisited Václav Havel's idea of "living within a lie" to describe how political systems endure when societies perform narratives they know to be (partially) untrue. He applied this logic to the international order: states maintained the fiction of a rules-based system even as enforcement remained shaped by power. The moment the gap between rhetoric and reality becomes too wide, the performance collapses. As this hegemonic fiction erodes and loses its stabilizing authority, civil societies find themselves drawn into a landscape where competing narratives contest what counts as legitimate action, and

foreign policy becomes a site in which meaning is actively constructed and manipulated.

In contemporary international politics, information has become a strategic domain in its own right. Authoritarian actors increasingly rely on psychological warfare to reshape how events are perceived and interpreted, to obscure accountability and destabilize shared understandings of reality. In this analysis, I employ the term Orwellian behaviour to capture a set of practices that have been increasingly materialized by autocratic actors and evolve around the draconian control of political reality through propaganda, disinformation, and the deliberate denial of truth. Foreign influence efforts have increasingly intersected with domestic populist narratives, turning debates on Ukraine, Gaza, and other contentious issues into arenas where external messaging and internal polarization reinforce one another and reshape how Europeans perceive foreign and security policy.

The core challenge for European democracies, however, is how to safeguard the integrity of foreign-policy making as contested narratives erode the societal cohesion required for effective engagement.

The Collapse of the Foreign-Policy Black Box

Drawing on these developments, the realist assumption that foreign policy operates as a black box has become untenable. Recent developments on the international stage have shown, globally and especially in Europe, that foreign and security policy has been drawn into mass politics. As Moravcsik argues, leaders must simultaneously navigate pressures from the international system, the institutional architecture of the European Union (EU), and domestic political contestation. These overlapping constraints force them to balance external credibility, internal EU compromise, and national political survival, which significantly narrows their strategic room for action. Within this playing field, the rise of identity-based contestation has become a decisive force that further restricts leaders' room for manoeuvre. Foreign and security policy has entered mass politics, and contestation is increasingly anchored in identity, creating a constraining dissensus that weakens the willingness to compromise. As a result, foreign-policy decisions are now shaped with the same volatile information environment that lately governs domestic politics, reducing the ability to pursue coherent long-term strategies.

How Authoritarian States Weaponize Information and Ambiguity

While postmodernism originally sought to expose the contingency of power, large parts of the far right have instrumentalized its core insights to advance relativism. This appropriation works because postmodern scepticism toward objective truth provides a rhetorical framework for discrediting expertise and undermining institutions. By questioning the very existence

of shared truth, they reframe politics as a competition of narratives where empirical claims matter lass than emotional resonance. This inversion turns concepts once aimed at emancipatory critique into tools for undermining factuality itself, reinforcing the broader erosion of political judgement that I describe as Orwellian behaviour.

Drawing on George Orwell's warnings in 1984, Nina Khrushcheva illustrates that Russia's repression of civil society relies on methods that go beyond silencing dissent, but try to undermine the fundamental conditions on which shared reality and meaningful political deliberation depend. Russia applies these methods both at home and abroad, and developments under Trump 2.0 point to a similar dual pattern emerging in the United States. While Trump has long sought to reshape domestic perception through systemic falsehoods and strategic distortions, the same logic has increasingly informed his external policy, visible in confrontational trade decisions, strained alliance management, and the narrative reframing to legitimize U.S. actions in Venezuela despite clear violations of international law.

In foreign policy, authoritarian actors apply metapolitical strategies that generate ambiguity about intent, legality, or causality. The result is a manufactured benefit of the doubt: even when the facts are clear, the surrounding informational fog makes it harder for observers to assign responsibility with confidence. Illegality becomes merely one narrative among many, enabling aggressive actions to be recast as defensive or inevitable. One of the tools employed in Orwellian foreign policy is what Timothy Snyder calls schizofascism. The term describes a pattern in which political actors project their own illiberal or coercive practices onto others. The irony becomes clear when Donald Trump and J.D. Vance cast the EU as illiberal in their political messaging while simultaneously hollowing out rule-of-law protections at home, a textbook display of projecting onto others what they practice themselves.

Strengthening Complexity

If authoritarian states rely on reducing political judgement to fear, simplicity, and binary oppositions, democratic resilience depends on reinforcing the opposite. Democracy cannot rely on such reductions, because this replicates the very anti-political logic on which authoritarian systems depend. As de Rougemont argued, democracy must rest on a "love for complexity, in contrast to the crude simplicity of the spirit of totalitarianism", because complexity is not an idealist luxury but the basic condition under which pluralistic judgement can function. Reinforcing this thought, Timothy Snyder's call for "three-dimensional physical politics" captures the same intuition: democratic politics must be anchored in real spaces, real participation, and shared factuality. The only sustainable antidote to Orwellian distortions is more democracy, not less. This logic extends to

foreign policy. For decision-makers, this requires restoring public spaces in which political debate can take place on the basis of shared factuality, rather than manufactured narratives. Democracies therefore need to uphold factuality and transparent judgement not only at home but also in the conduct and communication of their foreign policy, because the credibility of democratic action abroad ultimately depends on the integrity of democratic practice at home.

The challenge posed by authoritarian information strategies is not only external. Its deeper danger lies in the temptation for democracies to respond in kind. Countering Orwellian foreign policy requires strengthening the public's capacity for judgement rather than narrowing it, preserving pluralism rather than simplifying it, and expanding the realm of factual political engagement rather than retreating into narrative control. Democracies cannot outcompete authoritarianism by becoming more authoritarian. Their strength lies in political complexity – and in the imagination needed to maintain it. As Khrushcheva notes, even repressive narrative systems contain cracks in which people recognize the imposed falsehood. The question now is whether those cracks persist, or whether narrative saturation has grown so deep that many no longer perceive the lie at all.

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