

“Politically Motivated”

During the Euromaidan protests, journalists routinely described Ukraine’s prosecution and imprisonment of Yulia Tymoshenko as “politically motivated.” The phrasing always struck me as odd. If she were innocent, you’d expect journalists to call the charges “trumped-up” or “false.” And this “politically motivated” meme is still going strong.* Which raises a general question: When people dismiss charges as “politically motivated,” what do they actually mean?

As far as I can tell, the “politically motivated” label means: “Yeah, the accusations are probably true. But so what? Either (a) the laws are stupid, or (b) they’re so broad that practically everyone is guilty, or (c) practically everyone in power is just as bad or worse than the accused.”

Now notice: If true, all three of these claims are *far* more noteworthy than any specific set of accusations. Imagine these headlines on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*:

“Ukraine Has Tons of Stupid Laws”

“Ukraine’s Draconian Laws Turn Practically Everyone into a Criminal”

“Ukraine’s Leaders Are a Pack of Crooks”

Most journalists would no doubt be horrified to see these ugly generalizations published as news. But when you casually dismiss accusations as “politically motivated,” you’re implicitly doing precisely that. The only difference: When you openly declare, “Ukraine has tons of stupid laws,” you’re expected to provide evidence and arguments. You’re expected to look for counter-evidence. And you’re expected to choose between similar yet conflicting versions of your story.

The upshot: It is the status quo that should horrify journalists, not my hypothetical. Journalists already present ugly generalizations as fact. But instead of sticking their necks out and responsibly defending these generalizations, they do so via vague innuendo and imprecise insinuation.

* According to Google’s Ngram, the “politically motivated” meme has sharply declined since its peak in 1998, but remains at historically very high levels.