

FINAL Is Ukraine Forgotten? Note: This Interview took place on 1/23/26

VC: I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: The relationship between the US and Ukraine, and the European allies, is precarious. Russia shows no interest in wanting to end the war. They are hammering Ukraine's infrastructure, leaving many without power. Peace negotiations are going nowhere. What recourse does Ukraine have? Our Ukraine/Russia expert, Professor Alexander Motyl of Rutgers University, breaks it down.

AM: As always, ladies, thank you very much for having me.

VC: First of all, Putin did not weigh in on Trump's actions in Venezuela and his designs on Greenland. So how does this affect the war in Ukraine?

AM: It's a sign of the fact that Putin feels awkward. Trump has caught him, as it were, flat-footed. Venezuela was an ally of the Russians. Greenland of course isn't an ally but nevertheless America's desires to incorporate Greenland in some fashion or other is on the one hand something that Putin would be inclined to criticize but on the other hand it actually meets his own desires because in a way it legitimizes and justifies the seizure of territory by a great power which immediately has implications for Russia's relationship to Ukraine. So, whereas the Venezuela business I think Putin was cautious simply because he didn't want to annoy his pal, Don. There is something resembling negotiations taking place. They're faux negotiations, they're not real, be that as it may, and there would be nothing gained from criticizing American actions kidnapping Maduro. On the other hand, do keep in mind that Russian propagandists and spokespersons did criticize the US. So basically, Putin had it both ways and was able to express his criticism of America's actions but at the same time not take full responsibility for anything that was stated. But the Greenland business, that coincides with Putin's view of the world. The stronger power has the right to dominate the weaker power, and if the United States could do it vis a vis Greenland, why can't Russia do it, well, it's already doing it, vis a vis Ukraine (KK: Absolutely), why not Estonia, why not Finland, why not Kazakhstan (KK: There you go) or any other place.

AM: And it's a green light to the Chinese. Basically, you want Taiwan? It's yours.

KK: My question is, after hearing what you just said, what are the European allies doing now to support Ukraine? What is the status of the United States' aid to Ukraine? Because, with everything going on, you don't hear anything about Ukraine in the news.

AM: Right, it's because everything is going on. There's just so many other competing sources of interest that Ukraine has gone to page two or page three. The US is still providing Ukraine with intelligence information which is important. But basically, the weaponry and ammunition have fallen to zero. On the other hand, the United States is selling weapons, not with the greatest enthusiasm, but nevertheless is selling weapons to the Europeans who in turn are transferring weapons to the Ukrainians. So, if you look at the statistics the amount that the Europeans are buying is roughly similar to what the US is providing on average. In general, I think the

Ukrainians are getting what they need, well, certainly what they want. What they need more of, and that has only recently been forthcoming, is anti-aircraft missiles. And of course, as you know, Russians are bombing Ukraine civilians, Ukrainian cities and of course Ukraine energy infrastructure. And again, the Ukrainians are regularly shooting down something like 60 to 70, sometimes 80%. But that still means that 20 to 30% of these rockets are coming through. So, the Ukrainian commitment is significant. What's been lacking, and Zelensky made a point of this, in his speech at Davos, is a commitment on the part of the Europeans to bolster their own security needs. They've increased their spending on NATO which is good, they've increased their spending on security which is also good, but their armies are still inadequate, they still don't have a strategy, they're not coordinating their efforts. They haven't taken any bold steps in terms of integrating Ukraine into their defense strategies so in that particular respect, the Europeans still have some way to go. On the other hand, keep in mind they did form the so-called Coalition of the Willing, which is an effort to bypass the obstructionism of Mr. Orban of Hungary and Mr. Fico of Slovakia and it's conceivable that this Coalition of the Willing could eventually become a bedrock or the institutional foundation of an ancillary NATO alternative, alternative to NATO. Again, it's unclear because we just don't know what's going to happen with NATO. But it does suggest that the Europeans are getting their act together. They do have a long way to go but they do seem to be getting their act together. And in this regard, Trump bears most of the responsibility, both in terms of his insistence that they spend more on security, and that was fully justified, but also in his insulting behavior vis a vis the Europeans. Basically, what he's done, is set fire to the bridges that connected the United States with the Europeans. And unless something is done very quickly, they're going to collapse, and I think it's Trump's desire that they do collapse. We don't know for sure because who the hell knows what the guy is thinking at any particular point in time.

VC: Now talk to us a bit about these recent internal shakeups in Ukraine and how that is affecting their ability to fight the war, number one, and number two, their relationships with other countries.

AM: Well, you may recall several months ago, there was this big scandal concerning the misappropriation of funds that were allocated for the military. And interestingly, by the way, news on that, reporting on that, has pretty much vanished. Not just in the US and Western press, but even in Ukraine. I try to follow as much as I can. Three months ago, it was headline news and now no one's really writing about it anymore. So, for better or for worse, Zelensky seems to have neutralized, or at least he's the recipient of a neutralization of that reporting. And of course, it was embarrassing for him because the top ringleader was his friend, so it all kind of suggested that there might be guilt by association, if not indeed by means of behavior. So Zelensky needed to do something. It seems to be at this point it may be a little premature but it seems to be a way of making the security issues within Ukraine more cohesive, coherent and comprehensible. Zelensky fired his chief of staff, a man by the name of Andriy Yermak, who was basically an empire builder. He had his own interests which may or may not have coincided with Ukraine's, which may or may not have coincided with Zelensky's or at least that's what his critics argued. So, this guy was fired and that's already a sign-something, because he was basically Zelensky's right hand man for the last five years, so this was big. But bigger still was the fact that he was replaced by a man called Kyrylo Budanov who was the head of Ukraine's military intelligence service which has been responsible for a whole bunch of targeted attacks on Russian infrastructure energy. And you may recall there was this fantastic attack launched against a Russian air field out in Siberia about three months ago. The operation was called Spider Web, and the Ukrainians managed to load a whole bunch of cruise

missiles onto trucks, take them several thousand kilometers into Russia and fire them on these planes. Well, Budanov was the guy responsible for that, and he's young, he's about, early 30s if I'm not mistaken. Very young, very highly respected, very competent, and clearly a security guy. Yermak isn't and never was. So having a security guy like Budanov, who presumably still has his contacts with military intelligence and probably has excellent contacts with military intelligence in other countries is a way of promoting Ukraine's security interests with its partners in the West. That's a good sign. There is also a new minister of defense who is considered to be competent and again, relatively young. So, there is a hope and an expectation that there will now be a more coordinated response in the war.

KK: I'm a little bit confused. Russia hit Ukraine with a nuclear capable missile. But on the other hand, are we saying that Russia is ill-equipped on the battlefield?

AM: Well, the fact that they sent that missile, it's called an Oreshnik, it hit the city of Lviv, apparently missing any important targets but nevertheless that seems to have been a reminder partly to Ukraine that Russia has a nuclear capacity but the Ukrainians know that. If anybody knows that it's the Ukrainians. It's was more a reminder to the Europeans that they shouldn't mess around too much with these peace negotiations. It came right after the Europeans declared that they would be providing Ukraine with military presence after a cease fire was signed. Technically this was kind of a warning shot. The problem is that Russia's nuclear threats are no longer credible. No one quite believes that they would actually do this. They seemed credible back in 2022, but nothing happened. Basically, it's saber rattling. Again, we don't know. Who knows what's in Putin's mind? But he's been doing this for the last four or five years and each time they've resulted in nothing. So why should this time be any different? He also understands that if he were to engage in a nuclear exchange of some kind that the United States, even under Trump's leadership, would respond with some degree of military effectiveness. The threat during the Biden administration was that we would take out some army with conventional weapons, not nuclear weapons. So, Putin has to understand that that would certainly be a possibility. Does he want World War III, given the miserable condition of his armed forces? That's the other point. What Putin has is a whole bunch of nuclear weapons and it just goes back to the way in which Russia is often described by people in Washington, DC that it's Guinea Bissau with a nuclear weapon, or it's Ghana with a nuclear weapon, basically a third world country with a very large nuclear arsenal and until the Ukrainian war there was always the belief that Russia also had a strong military. Now we know that the military is at least to some great degree incompetent. They've lost 1.2 million soldiers dead and wounded. (KK: Wow) They're losing roughly 1,000 soldiers a day, which comes out to about 30,000 a month and they're recruiting about 30,000 a month. So basically, they're just filling in the gaps that are immediately arising. And there's evidence to suggest that there's a lack of morale. The commanders at the lower level are mistreating their soldiers, and they're making very incremental advances. Very incremental. Less than 1% of Ukrainian territory has been seized, and they're suffering, this is the adjective that's always used, staggering losses and ultimately that's unsustainable.

VC: Now, can they, as we have been saying, the army is ill-equipped to fight today's war, you know, with drones, and the Ukrainians seem to excel at that. But because the Russians are bombing the infrastructure and destroying it, how long can Ukraine hold up under this?

AM: A very good question. Well, certainly for the duration of this winter. We're talking about another month or so. People are adapting. Some are staying in their apartments, and there is occasional electricity. I know of one family in Kyiv, they had electricity from 2 in the morning till 7 in the morning. So, they're adjusted in the sense that they sleep during the day and do their laundry and do their washing at night. Many people have left the cities, and the mayor of Kyiv has said that, he reported that about 600,000 people have already left Kyiv, and even telling people that if they can they should leave the city. So, they're coping under terrible circumstances. Some people, especially those in high rises, can you imagine, you're living on the 15th floor, you have no electricity, no heat and no water on occasions. And yet somehow or other they survive. They survive mostly because they have to. Because the alternative, as many Ukrainians, at this point I think it's most Ukrainians, understand that it's not just subjugation, it's extermination. Putin has made it perfectly clear that he's more than happy to kill Ukrainians. Civilians, Women, children, old people, men, young, anybody. And he's doing so on a daily basis. That's genocide, clearly an intentional attempt to destroy a nation in whole or in part. And that's pretty much the definition of genocide that you find in the UN genocide convention. And of course, that also means that when American leaders talk to him or shake hands with him, they are shaking hands with a genocidal terrorist. (KK: Exactly.) And that's really the bottom line. I understand, you need to talk to leaders even if they are totally crazy terrorists, but do you need to call them your friend? I wonder about that.

KK: In Davos, the secretary general of NATO, Mark Rutte said, there are more important things than the Nobel Peace Prize. And then he said Ukraine is our top priority. Do you think that's true?

AM: Well, probably. First of all, why should he be lying? (KK Yeah) This is a respectable individual who understands that he speaks for a huge organization so I'm inclined to believe him. I would also be inclined to believe him simply because it is in fact the case that Ukraine is NATO's priority. It may not be Trump's priority but it is certainly the priority of most Europeans. Not everybody. I'm not sure how worried Portugal is about Ukraine because it's just so far away. The Baltic states, the Scandinavians, Poles, the Germans for sure, the Brits, the French, to a certain degree the Italians and others so we're talking about a significant component of NATO that is very much concerned with Ukraine and is very much devoted to helping Ukraine in various ways. I think he's right. Then here the question is, coming back to Zelensky, is their assistance sufficient, are they sufficiently concerned, could they be doing more and the answer to all those questions is they're probably they're not quite sufficiently concerned, they could be doing more, but at least compared to where the Europeans were three years ago it's been a sea change. Ukraine pretty much didn't exist for Europe until the war began and then people suddenly started waking up, kinda scratching their heads and saying huh, you mean there's this place called Ukraine? And then maybe it matters? And now everybody understands not only that it's there and that it matters immensely. (KK: Yes.)

VC: Now also in Davos, Trump signed this document establishing a so-called "Board of Peace," which a lot of the European allies did not sign. And Putin was invited to join. Now this is where the members have to pay a billion dollars to be on the board, and Putin said, oh yeah, I'll pay up if the Russian assets [held in the West] are unfrozen. So, what are your thoughts on that and what does this mean for Ukraine?

AM: Personally, I think the whole thing is just a joke, to be honest. With all due respect to Donald Trump. But here's this guy, president of the US who considers he's God's gift to mankind and he decides to form something called the Board of Peace with himself as the permanent chairman as well as the US representative and from what I read of the charter he can basically decide everything on his own and he's extending invitations, many of which, some of which have been accepted and some of which have been ignored. It has stellar defenders of peace such as Belorussia, I believe Albania, Saudi Arabia, Egypt is on this so the whole thing is absurd. And then of course the bottom line is what's the point? What are they supposed to do? Witkoff said at one point this will be an opportunity for the leaders of the world to come together and share their opinions. Now if that's the whole point of this institution, to share opinions, basically what we're talking about is a three-day drinking bout where they're just going to... it'll be a repetition of Davos, or a repetition of the worst kinds of (KK: Ho, God!) international institutions. Assume for the sake of argument that they all agree on, oh we gotta do something about Gaza. Imagine that the Saudis and the Albanians and the Byelorussians and the Mexicans, since they're on this, imagine will ever agree on what should be done? No, of course not. And even if they were to agree, can you really imagine for the sake of argument that everybody agrees, yes, we should be developing the Gaza Strip, making it into the Riviera, next question is great, how do we do it? (KK: Call Trump, he'll tell you!) Trump will presumably say, I'll do it on my own. In which case, what's the point of having a board if he's going to do things on his own. Anyway, I'm not just skeptical, I'm deeply dismissive. This seems to be pretty much just another one of Trump's antics, a way of putting himself on center stage of the media and creating something that is pretty much doomed.

KK: After, I guess, signing this, board of peace, Trump met with Zelensky and they agreed to a meeting, which I think is happening now, (AM: Yes) with representatives of Ukraine and Russia in the United Arab Emirates-what does this mean?

AM: Well again, it means very little. They've supposedly agreed on 90%. But that's meaningless because the remaining 10% are the key issues. And Russia has made it very clear over and over again, most recently today or yesterday. These are Putin's people. They say very simply, we will not agree to any kind of agreement unless Ukraine agrees to give up territory that it still controls, (KK: Exactly) And Ukraine can't agree to that. No one would agree to that. And the Ukrainian position is pretty much, well if he wants this territory come and get it. It'll take the Russians two years to get it, maybe three and if you're willing to lose another million men in the process then so be it, OK? So, in any case the Russians are not just unwilling to compromise, they're actually making excessive demands. The Ukrainians, in contrast, are willing to compromise. They said, we are willing to accept the fact that de facto, not de jure but de facto, that Russia controls these territories. They've even gone so far as to say that we will not try to liberate them using force which is to say that we'll only use diplomatic means. So, the Ukrainians are basically saying that they are willing to give away these territories in a de facto manner for the foreseeable future. That is an enormous concession. They could if they wanted to, simply say no way, no how, unless we get everything back, we're not willing to talk but the Russians aren't willing to compromise whatsoever and as long as Putin is around... again, I'm firmly in the belief that as long as he's around, nothing, zero, zilch will happen.

KK: Just more lives lost.

VC: What role, if any, do you see, like non-Western powers like China, Iran, or Saudi Arabia play in the Ukraine conflict going forward?

AM: Well, Iran is pretty much out of the picture, it has its own problems and if there is a revolution in Iran, which is conceivable despite the crackdown, that would be another slap in the face for Putin. The Saudis aren't really; they don't seem to be interested in playing any kind of role. The Chinese are standing on the sidelines as well, though they're providing the Russians with some assistance, but they're also taking advantage of Russian weakness to buy energy at lower prices. The Chinese could, if they wanted to, they could twist Putin's arm. Because he's in a position of extreme dependence, I think he knows, essentially, that Russia has become a satellite state of China and if China wanted to exert pressure on Russia, just as the United States is exerting pressure on the Europeans, it could, and it could do so pretty much successfully. But it hasn't done so and whether it will, hard to say. Thus far after four years it hasn't done what it could do. It would be a real feather in China's cap. It would probably get Xi Jinping a Nobel Peace Prize, but thus far he's resisted that particular temptation.

VC: Going forward, where do you see the war going? It's at an impasse now, but what do you see going forward?

AM: The President of Finland, Alexander Stubb, today or yesterday said that this notion that Russia is winning is totally crazy. Those aren't exactly his words but it was to that effect. And he said that in every sense Russia has been a strategic loser. It's lost Finland, it's lost Sweden, it's lost NATO, it's lost Ukraine, it's lost a million and a half soldiers so there is no way you could argue that Russia is winning. I think there's a way in which you could argue that Ukraine is winning. Not fabulously obviously but in as much as it's been able to hold its own and inasmuch as it's still around and inflicting enormous losses on the Russians, I think there's a case to be made for Ukrainian victory. A genuine victory will require more than just what's going on at present. Stubb said this in his speech, that it will require two things: More assistance, military assistance, which technically is perfectly possible. We're not talking about rocket science here; it's just a question of more stuff being given to the Ukrainians. And at the same time, more economic pressure on the Russians and there the Europeans can do a lot. They can impose sanctions on those ghost tankers. As the Trump administration has rightly said. They could stop buying oil from the Russians. There's the American market, there's Venezuela, for heaven's sake, so the Europeans could add economic pressure, Ukraine could provide the military muscle. Again, it might not end the war immediately, but it could create a potentially insuperable problem for Putin. He needs to be able to claim that he's winning. And by any reasonable definition of winning, he ain't. And many Russians know that. His supporters have known that. Various military bloggers have taken him to town for basically losing so many men and gaining very little in exchange. There was a retired general, by the name of Ivachov, he had a YouTube presentation which was widely distributed in Russia a few weeks ago in which he just castigated Putin for his mistakes and for the ill-conceived manner in which he has been fighting this war. So, there is criticism. There probably is opposition. There certainly is dissatisfaction and if the war goes badly, or even worse than it's going, if the economy begins to suffer even more, it's perfectly possible that Russian elites will say enough is enough. It's time that you took a long hike off a short pier. This has happened many times in Russian and Soviet history. It's happened many times in world history so why shouldn't it happen

again? So, I'm (KK: It's positive!) cautiously positive. I was asked this question by a Ukrainian interviewer and I said I think there's a 25% chance that Putin might be evicted this year. Now again 25% means it's possible, probably not likely, but it's something we should be thinking about because if it happens it would have enormous consequences. For Russia, for Ukraine and most importantly for the war. And for us, for the West as well. (VC: For the world, for the world)

VC: Well, this is an ever-changing volatile situation. And we'll see what 2026 brings.

AM: Let's hope for the best.

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