

FINAL Ukrainian War Update, Alex Motyl, 3/1/23

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: February marks the first anniversary of the Ukraine war. To bring us up to date, our guest today is Professor Alexander Motyl, Ukraine and Russia expert at Rutgers University. Welcome, Alex. Thanks for joining us. It's always good to have you with us.

AM: Thank you, Vanessa, thank you Kathleen for having me.

VC: So, both Biden and Putin have made strong speeches affirming their respective countries' support for the war and Putin suspended Russia's participation in the NEW START Treaty. Is this really a surprise? And is there any hope for a timely end?

AM: Remember with regard to the NEW START Treaty, essentially Russia hasn't been permitting American inspectors to look at their sites for a number of months. So technically they're in violation of the treaty. They haven't as such officially, legally ended the treaty. They simply suspended it. Which is another way of saying it's business as usual because we haven't been doing what the treaty requires of us anyway. But there's always the possibility of sometime in the future, as things improve and so on, that the treaty could be reactivated, be brought back to life, OK, so it sounds worse than it really is. As to the speeches themselves, it's the overwhelming consensus on the part of Russia analysts, the people who are democrats either in the West or in Russia, that the speech was a big nothing. They were expecting some kind of momentous announcements instead he didn't say anything. Basically, he said oh, the West hates us and they're out to get us and that's why we need to defend ourselves. (snore) We've heard that before many times. Then there was the bit about the START treaty and the bit about Ukraine and then he spent a lot of time talking about internal issues within Russia. So, again it was heralded as this big thing and instead it was pretty much a sleeper. And in contrast, Biden's speech, both the one he gave in Ukraine and the one he gave in Poland, those two speeches, rather, they were forceful. Essentially, he said, well he said, the United States and the West will continue to support Ukraine pretty much unconditionally, I believe the phrase is "as long as necessary."

KK: I'm curious, in reading, there are even more sanctions against Russia but some reports, true or not, say the ruble is still strong and that the Russian people feel that the economy is like, status quo, fine. Is that true?

AM: Well, no, and yes, and a little bit of maybe. Yes inasmuch as the ruble is strong and people in places like Petersburg and Moscow have not felt the economic consequences of the war to the degree that their compatriots outside of these two metropolises. Living standards have declined. GDP has declined. Certain branches of industry have basically been wiped out, so car making, automobile manufacturing, airplane manufacturing, things like that have essentially ceased. Well, there's no market. And, or alternatively, the components they import from the West are no longer importable, right? But, that said, there were higher expectations a year ago that the sanctions would immediately hit, and they haven't. Not immediately. They've led to a progressive decline in living standards, and it's the sort of decline that you can always rationalize on a month-to-month basis. Well, things are a little worse but not much worse. And we're used to this. And then they get a little worse but that's OK, we're used to this too. According to again, Russian economists, subjective Russian economists as well as some in the West, the sanctions will hit hard this particular year. They've already hit hard in the sense that in January of this year Russian expenditures rose by about 55%, that is to say government expenditures and revenues, which are primarily due to oil and gas, dropped by something like one third. So the

revenues have fallen, expenditures are rising so there's a huge deficit which will have to be covered, well, higher taxes on the population, perhaps a crackdown on some of the oligarchs. Many of them have already lost enormous amounts of money and from what I hear from Russian analysts, and there seems to be growing discontent among the affluent, the oligarch types. A couple of them have lost half their entire fortunes. And, of course they can't travel to the Riviera, they can't do all these sorts of things to which they've become accustomed over the last 20 to 30 years. So, the expectation is that these sanctions will hit much harder this year

VC: Putin now is reaching out to China for support. Xi is set to visit Russia to discuss the possibility of China providing military aid which could potentially enable Russia to win the war. Your thoughts on this?

AM: The Russo-Chinese bromance, as it's often referred to, was at its height in January of last year when Putin went to Beijing and there was this love fest and they were singing Kumbaya and talking about the fact that this relationship had no limits, would be boundless, eternal and everything else. And then, surprise, surprise, a month later Putin invades without having told Xi that he was going to invade so it was a big surprise and a shock to the Chinese, who didn't take to this very well. They had extensive economic relations with Ukraine and of course with Russia and more generally they have serious economic and political interests in Eurasia, and a war is the last thing they need. So, they've been fairly reticent in their support of Russia. They're generally, they're sitting on the fence, so in a recent vote at the General Assembly at the United Nations something like 147 countries voted in favor of a resolution supporting Ukraine, something like seven countries, Syria, North Korea, Venezuela, supported Russia and about 20 or 30 countries abstained and of those 20 or 30 countries, one of which was China. Now they could easily have supported Russia. Essentially these resolutions are kind of meaningless. But they were obviously making a point and in the recent so-called Chinese Peace Plan, it has 12 points and again, it's this mixture of indisputably nice sentiments. It's like saying yes, we should love each other and yes, we won't do bad things. It's not a plan, it doesn't have any step-by-step component but be that as it may, one of the key points that they make is that the sovereignty of all states should be respected. They don't specify that Ukraine sovereignty has been violated and Russia is the violator but as a general principle what they're saying applies to Ukraine as much as it does to Russia and many people have interpreted that particular point as reflecting Chinese ambivalence toward Russia. They've also been very adamant in stating – and this is one of the 12 points as well—that nuclear weapons should not be used. And as you know it's been the Russians for the last year who have been threatening to use them if and when things get out of hand. So that having been said, I'd be personally very surprised if China agrees to give Russia masses of really significant kinds of weapons. It wouldn't fit the pattern of their behavior and their statements thus far. I could see them providing K-rations, helmets, bulletproof vests, you know, those sorts of things, tents, I don't know. That kind of stuff. Sleeping bags possibly. But actual military hardware, tanks, rockets, that would be tipping the—well not necessarily tipping the balance but potentially tipping the balance and I don't think they want to go there.

KK: Secretary of State Blinken during the recent Munich Security Conference talked to one of China's top diplomat representatives, I'm hoping you'll let us know, do you think those meetings are productive?

AM: The meetings are certainly useful. It doesn't hurt unless they start throwing shoes at each other but if they actually have a sit-down and a discussion, why not? Could they be useful and could they be very productive? It could. Logically, what the United States should be doing at the moment, rather than alienating China, which we've been doing, and of course the Chinese have helped, especially with the balloon business and so on, this is the point where an attempt to form a détente with the Chinese would make so much sense. Right? I mean the Chinese were hoping that they would have this partnership with the Russians. That's basically been a bust. And if Russia loses, as it probably will, it'll be worse than a bust because suddenly there will be this enormous country on the verge of collapse on China's borders and where will all these Russian refugees be going to? China, of course. So, it makes sense for the US to take advantage of the situation and ease

tensions between China and Russia and try to forge closer ties with the Chinese which is basically what Nixon did. The Soviets and the Chinese were arguing. They were even at war in the late 60s, and Nixon and Kissinger go to China and they formed this relationship which is the thing to do. Surely the US doesn't want to be engaging in war with China and China certainly doesn't want to be engaged in a war with the United States. And both of them have an interest in somehow fixing the Russia problem, so why not? And I'm hoping, but I don't have any insider knowledge, I'm hoping that Blinken and his Chinese counterpart discuss something along those lines.

KK: In the papers, on television, they don't give you that feeling of coming together. It's always, even the allies in Europe are expressing warnings that (if) China provides weaponry to Russia we're in big trouble.

AM: They shouldn't want to and based on everything that they've said over the last year they don't appear to want to. It's so contrary to Chinese behavior which, the Chinese pride themselves on reliable, reliant, foreseeable, and responsible. Then again, surprises do occur, and maybe they've got some sort of nefarious plans in mind.

VC: So, do you view this meeting between Blinken and Wang Yi maybe a start to this kind of dialogue that could be productive?

AM: It looks like it. It certainly looks like it. Again, I say this on the basis of not having been privy to the meeting and we'll see what happens in the next few weeks or months. Presumably, again normally under such circumstances, it's never the top two leaders who meet. They only meet after the underlings have already met and basically have agreed on everything and the two top people, they just appear and sign papers, shake hands, do photo ops and go away. So, we shouldn't expect Xi to meet with Biden. (KK: Or Zelensky, right?). Well, that's interesting (KK: He wants to speak to Xi.) Yeah, and I can see why. Again, the Chinese made these proposals, these 12-point peace proposals, and they're not exactly unfavorable to the Ukrainian side. Ukraine fully appreciates this, I should say Zelensky appreciates that China is a major player that could affect Russian behavior. There's been no bone of contention between China and Ukraine, they're not fighting over territory, identity, economic resources, and I'm sure Zelensky hopes to go to Beijing or at least have a Zoom conversation in which he would make these points and probably ask for some kind of, not assistance because that would put the Chinese on the spot but some kind of mediation, could you guys call Putin and tell him this ain't going nowhere and maybe it's time to end this thing, on everybody's behalf. I'm not sure that Putin will listen. But if he would listen to anybody, he might be most inclined to listen to the Chinese. He's certainly not going to listen to the Americans, that's pretty sure.

VC: Zelensky has said that victory is all about getting territory back, meaning Crimea. He is quoted as having said, "Crimea is Ukrainian and we will never give it up." So, your thoughts on this?

AM: I'm sure he's being sincere. I don't think he would have said this three years ago when he was far more wishy washy about these sorts of issues. He really didn't have much of a foreign policy orientation, he was kind of, he was sort of the opinion that if we all just try hard everything will work out. But now, because of the war and because of what Russia has done to Ukraine he's adopted this kind of maximalist language, namely, we want Crimea, we want the Donbas and we want everything you've occupied since and that's basically the bottom line. We want it all. Can Ukraine get it all? We'll see. I mean, everybody says that the next three or four months are going to be critical. But the Russians are currently engaged in a fairly significant offensive on Ukrainian territory, on Ukrainian positions, on five particular positions, mostly in the East and one of them is in the South. Thus far it hasn't been working out too well. They've made incremental territorial gains but have lost fantastic numbers of soldiers, 20, 30, 40,000 so it's been at best pyrrhic advances so they're losing a lot. Assume that happens, that the offensive is a bust and then assume that the Ukrainians start their counter-

offensive, say, March, April, May, something like that when the weather will have turned advantageous, no more mud, no more snow, they will get a whole bunch of Western weapons by then including tanks and things like that, they might be, and again this is the hypothetical, certainly the Ukrainians are hoping and expecting that at that point they might be able to drive a wedge into the southern part of Ukraine that's occupied and then go through that wedge into Crimea. The expectation is that it's easier to seize Crimea than the Donbas because the Russians have concentrated enormous numbers of soldiers in the Donbas basically line after line of defense, soldier after soldier. In the Crimea it's far less densely packed, so militarily, technically, it seems like it might be easier. They will want to do that. Will they succeed? At this point it depends on the weapons.

KK: What about the F-16s, Alex? He's desperate for them and Biden says not.

AM: Well, from what I've been told by military people it takes something like a year and a half to two years to train a pilot for an F-16. Let's assume that's true. Let's assume it's only a year, they could do it in a year. Well, even if the Ukrainians got the aircraft today that means that they'd be ready to be deployed in February or March of next year. More useful for the Ukrainian perspectives would be the Migs, the Soviet-made aircraft that a whole bunch of Eastern European countries still have. Those are exactly the same kind of planes the Ukrainians have. So, if you simply took them from Poland, Slovakia, maybe the Czechs, Bulgaria, and kind of ship them eastwards, lo and behold, a part of your problem is solved. The planes aren't as advanced as the F-16s but they are planes. And in terms of a military offensive, again, I've been told by military people the primary function of planes would be to defend the tanks involved in the advances, so it wouldn't be so much bombing the Russian positions, the Ukrainians have the artillery for that, it would be more a question of protecting the tank advances. So that could be done.

VC: So that would fill the bill if they could get the Migs.

AM: In principle that would be an enormous advance. Would the Ukrainians be able to conquer the Crimea? Again, if the advance comes in from the North and you figure the peninsula is less densely populated with soldiers and it's very much reliant on supplies on that bridge that goes across the Kerch straits in the East, so the Ukrainians take out the bridge, as they already have to some degree, but they've shown that they could do it. The question is, at that point, would or would not Putin be tempted to use the ultimate weapon and at that point no one really knows, right? Certainly, if he loses Crimea, he's likely to lose his head because that might be the last straw for many of the political and economic elites who are looking at the war thinking the country's going down the toilet, we've got nothing to show for it, and then this guy has lost Crimea? Which we could have held onto and never started the war. So, again there are just too many imponderables, it's impossible to say what will happen. The only thing we can say with some certainty, that I could say with some certainty is that if Crimea is lost, Putin is likely to be overthrown, or killed, or something like that precisely because his own supporters will finally realize this is a losing proposition. That I would bet on. I'd be inclined to think the Ukrainians could seize Crimea. It depends on how the Russians would respond because they could airlift a whole bunch of forces and that might stall any Ukrainian advance so it's too many imponderables, in a word.

VC: So, moving on to the situation here in the States, according to the Washington Post and some other reporting, there is a Republican divide about funding Ukraine as well as even criticism from some Democrats and some voter polls even indicate a lessening of support for Ukraine. The question is, obviously some people feel we should send Ukraine what they are requesting and some people feel ok, we should maybe lessen what we're doing. What are your thoughts on this and do you think in the current House, do you think the Republicans could stop the funding?

AM: I don't think it would come to that. You recall there was a resolution proposed about a week or two or three ago about stopping funding and as I recall it was signed by all of 10 or 15 Republicans. You know, that's

not really serious. The vast majority of Republicans, like the vast majority of Democrats still support Ukraine pretty much unreservedly. Now obviously that could change. I don't think it's likely to change, however, because the support is genuine. Putin's behavior makes it very easy to support Ukraine. Every time it looks like we're getting tired of Ukraine he commits a new atrocity reminding people that this is really what the war is about, killing civilians, killing women and children, old men, old women, right? He's a constant reminder as well. And at the same time, once you're on a roll and you're supporting a country of any kind of cause for a number of months or a number of years there's a kind of in-built momentum to continue that. My own feeling is that Ukraine deserves the support. I'm somewhat bullish on that. I don't think the West in general, the US in particular is going to cut them off from support. Obviously, everybody wants the war to end ASAP, preferably on our terms as opposed to Putin's terms. As I said that's unlikely to happen unless Putin goes but certainly that's the expressed hope of everybody. And I think people appreciate that in order for that to happen Putin needs to lose the war. He's not going to leave on his own. For the war to be ended, the Ukrainians need to defeat the Russians. Now what that means can be debated but it certainly means more than what they have achieved so far, they would at least have to expel the Russians from the territories that the Russians occupied after February 24th. That would be the minimum. If that happened, those two provinces in the south, if that happened the Ukrainians could claim very legitimately that this was in fact a defeat and it would be hard for the Russians to argue that they really came away with anything out of this because basically they would have reverted to the starting point except for one year or more of death and destruction basically nothing, zero, has been achieved. That could bring Putin down and if he goes then all sorts of possibilities open up. And then peace could actually be possible. If you listen to Russian democrats in the US, people like XXX, Gary Kasparov and others in Europe, there's still a bunch in Russia, they're not perfect in what they want to aspire to but basically, they all agree that Russia has to withdraw. Most of them also agree that Russia will have to pay Ukraine serious reparations of some kind. But again, Putin has to go. That's really the bottom line.

KK: Especially what you said about Crimea, if they take over Crimea, it's over.

AM: Then it would seem to be, that would be such a black mark on Putin (VC/KK Yeah, yeah) it's hard to imagine that he could survive that.

KK: From what we understand it says the Russian military are suffering staggering losses but then all of a sudden-well, maybe not all of a sudden, Russia is getting mercenaries to join. Can you tell us about the Wagner mercenary group? Like he said something about 50,000 fighters are headed for Ukraine?

AM: It's called a private military company. It was established some five or ten years ago by a guy called Yevgeny Prigozhin who used to be a cook or a chef for Putin, by the way, (VC: Oh, seriously?) Yes, yes. I mean he wasn't a short order cook (laughter) but be that as it may, and he also apparently has some criminal background. The guy is a bit of a slime. Anyway, he set up this group. He likes the music of Richard Wagner and therefore, the Wagner group. (VC/KK: Ah, oh) They've been essentially involved in places like Syria, they've been involved in Africa, they have mining interests, they have business interests. They're a motivated bunch of guys, they are well trained, well equipped. These aren't just flunkies who have been drafted at the last moment.

VC: They're professionals, right, paid professionals.

AM: They're paid professionals and they're paid well. And they've been involved in the war pretty much from the start and certainly within the last half year. And they've been focused primarily on the part of Eastern Ukraine, the front around the city of Bakhmut, and it was the Wagner people who a number of years ago started recruiting inmates from a whole bunch of Russian prisons, they recruited 40,000, 50,000, they gave these guys a bunch of guns, a helmet, and said, now you just attack in these human waves, and of the 40 or 50,000 something

like 25 or 30,000 were killed in a few weeks because they were the front lines and then the experienced Wagner guys were in the second, third or other lines behind them. So, the Wagner people have suffered great losses, but again it's been primarily these inmates. At the same time, in the last few weeks, there's been a whole bunch of criticism and conflict between Prigozhin, the Wagner guy, and the Minister of Defense, a man by the name of Shoygu. And Prigozhin had, he seems to have had, and presumably still has political ambitions of some kind. People in the Wagner group had been very critical of the Ministry of Defense, the General staff. They accused him of not supplying him with enough troops, there are even videos. They film these videos where they're accusing the ministry of not supplying them with enough weaponry and then the camera pans to the background and it's stacked with corpses and they say these guys are dead because of you. So, there's obviously a conflict there. But at the same time the Wagner people are indispensable because they are well trained and well-motivated. These guys are pros. But at the same time, they too have been suffering extensive losses and the conflict between Prigozhin and the ministry as well as the general staff hasn't helped things. Again, the general view amongst analysts is that this bespeaks a serious deficiency in the Russian armed forces. You wouldn't normally rely on mercenaries unless you were desperate. And you would never rely on criminals unless you're totally desperate. It just doesn't make any sense. Especially, because a number of Russian journalists have reported, some of these criminals have been released after having served for a number of months. They still have their weapons and they've gone back to their old ways. And the very, very last thing you want to do is to release an inmate and give him a gun. That just doesn't really make any sense. So, all this suggests that the Russian armed forces are in very bad shape. They've lost a lot of men. The Ukrainian estimate at this point, is about 150,000. I was recently reading a Ukrainian analyst, military analyst who looked at Russian sources, open sources, and he estimated that according to them the Russians had lost around 135,000 men. (VC: Wow) This is an estimate based on Russian sources.

VC: Now recently the NYT reported that there is interest among a number of businesses worldwide in positioning themselves to be a part of what could possibly be a multi-billion-dollar effort to reconstruct Ukraine once the war ends and Zelensky himself has likened the effort needed to the Marshall Plan that followed the end of World War II. Given the current situation, do you think it's too soon to be thinking about this?

AM: You know, if I were a businessman, I would be thinking about it now because you want to get your ducks all lined up in a row, you want to establish contacts with the relevant ministries, with the relevant corporations, you want to start forming relationships of various kinds with the people who might be able to expedite your involvement. And then I would hope that this obviously starts tomorrow but if it starts in a year, maybe within two years I would certainly be in a position to hit the ground running. So, I would certainly do that. They're smart because it's true, how many billions will go in no one knows but certainly billions will go in. There's no question about that. Some of that will be government money, a lot of it will be private money, some of it will be partnerships of various kinds that will come from various sources. It'll be like a gold rush in a manner of speaking and the firms that would be most inclined to benefit would obviously be in construction and infrastructure. So housing, apartments, railroads, roads, telephone networks, all the things that were destroyed will obviously have to be reconstructed in some fashion or other and one could imagine that the consequence of that could be a major economic boom within Ukraine because of course the Ukrainians are not going to be sitting on the sidelines while all this business is taking place. Will it change conditions overnight? Obviously not. Give it five, ten years and I would imagine there would be a significant modernization and transformation of the Ukrainian country.

KK: Well, this again has been amazing; you've given us so much information, made things clearer for the average non-political person.

VC: It is great information and we always appreciate your shedding light on this tragic and ever-changing situation. (KK: Exactly, exactly)

AM: Thank you for having me. The good news is that Ukraine has a good president who turned out to be just what the country needs, and if Zelensky can continue performing as he's been performing this last year then the prognosis is good. (KK: Yes.) I think there's every indication that he will. In any case, thank you, ladies for having me. It's (VC/KK: Our pleasure)

VC: Alex, we understand that you have an exhibit in New York City and why don't you tell the listeners about that so those who live in New York, can go see...

AM: It's a series of 19 acrylic paintings done in black and white from photographs. Six of them are of Kyiv in 1941 when it was destroyed, parts of it were destroyed by the Soviets and another 13 are of Ukraine in 2022 depicting scenes of destruction. These were all photographs and I tried to reproduce them as exactly as possible. They're all depictions of ruins and the show is entitled "Ukraine in Ruins." The exhibit will run through March 10th and it's held at the Harriman institute, that's the post-Soviet and Soviet studies institute at Columbia University and that's on the 12th floor of the International Affairs building which is on the corner of Amsterdam and 118th Street. No admission. You get off the elevators and go straight and make a right and you can't miss it.

VC: Excellent. We will certainly go check it out.

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