

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: The war in Ukraine has taken a turn due to political and other events worldwide. To help clarify the current situation, Ukraine/Russia expert Professor Alexander Motyl of Rutgers University joins us today. Welcome, Alex, thanks for joining us.

VC: Let's start off here. Despite some support from the allies the US is the principal supplier of critical weaponry such as ammunition if the United States does not approve funding for Ukraine, what do you see as the eventual outcome? I mean the US congress, actually led by the Republicans, appears to be siding with Russia by failing to approve this funding.

AM: Well, you're certainly right on that score. The Republicans in general but the MAGA Republicans in particular and then Mike Johnson, the Speaker of the House in particular in particular so to speak, they're the ones who are holding up the vote on this particular bill. Everybody pretty much agrees that if there were to be a vote in the House that the bill would pass ultimately comes down to Johnson who alas, for better or for worse is beholden to Donald Trump so in the final analysis it's all in the hands of Donald Trump. That said, the situation isn't quite as gloom as it's often presented in the press, quite as gloomy, rather. (VC: How so?) On the one hand, as you know, I'm sure you know, Mike Johnson came out with a statement yesterday saying that he supports Ukraine. And the Republicans are working on their version of the bill and so on and so forth. And the key difference in the bills seems to be—again, I haven't seen the draft—seems to be that rather than providing Ukraine with an outright grant, 90% of which goes back to the US, by the way, but that's beside the point.

VC: In the purchase of weapons, correct?

AM: Yeah. Instead of that Ukraine would reasonably take out a loan from the US, possibly lend lease would be revived, in other words there would be the expectation of some eventual payback. Now, will that happen? Who knows. Will the two committees, Republicans and Democrats in the Senate, be able to iron out the differences in time or is this simply a procedural trick on the part of Mike Johnson to make him look good? But at the same time give the Republicans an opportunity to

drag this out ad infinitum. Not inconceivable, no one knows at this point. That said, the fact that he's made this statement and that they are supposedly working on a bill is better than the alternative which is what we had until now, no statement of support, no work on the bill. As you know a number of congress people are also working on collecting sufficient number of signatures to bypass the speaker. Anyway, I suspect this is one of the main reasons for Johnson's decision to become so mellow. The last thing he wants is to be bypassed because that makes him look bad in the House, it makes him look bad in Trump's eyes and just makes him look powerless. But at the same time the Europeans are kicking in so there's talk of essentially taking all of the interest, Russia has something like 300 billion in frozen assets in the West and there's now serious talk on the part of the US, but mostly in Europe, on taking the interest that's being produced on that money and apparently it may come out to about 25 billion Euros and give that to Ukraine or in any case enable Ukraine to borrow, or something along those lines.

VC: Would this be a last resort in the event that the US did not approve the funding in spite of all these efforts?

AM: To some degree both sides are playing a game of chicken, who will provide the money first, that too isn't terribly useful for Ukraine. But the conversation in Europe seems to have turned quite serious. They know they need to do this because the alternative is that Trump may simply cut off all assistance to them and again this is a reality they're all living with, the possibility of a second Trump administration so this way they can protect Ukraine, protect themselves, do something useful, take the wind out of Trump's sails or at least some of the wind out of the MAGA Republicans' sails. All of that is pretty good, again it hasn't yet resulted in anything concrete but at least it's all pointing in the right direction. And most important perhaps is the fact that the Czechs have started an initiative to raise something like 800,000 to a million shells and they seem to be pretty close to coming to that coming to fruition. Now those won't be delivered tomorrow but presumably within the next few months. So, in that sense what this means is that Ukraine faces a critical one or two months, maybe three where, let's work on the worst-case scenario, there is little to no assistance, they're essentially relying on their own forces, their own resources. If they can get over that hump all should be well. So, the question is can they get over that hump? Thus far the bottom line is, at least the bottom-line answer probably is yes. They've managed to stop the Russian assaults. They were very intense over the last two months with very little territory lost. And at this point the Russians have stopped assaulting in a major way. They're always engaging in skirmishes of various kinds which may mean that they have, they're licking their wounds and it may mean that they are preparing for another

assault sometime in April or May, perhaps even in June when the ground solidifies. The next few months are just not very good for any kind of assault because everything is going to be muddy and rainy so that's a possibility. But in any case, if they do start their assault in June Ukraine should have, the requisite number of shells with which it can then defend itself. Again, these are all imponderables, we don't know, they're question marks.

KK: What you're saying is, I have kind of a two-part question here. The support among the European allies still seems to be very strong for Ukraine, but do you think the Israeli-Hamas war has lessened the United States interest?

AM: Oh, absolutely. The question is exactly right on. It's another war. It's a war that involves one of our key allies, Israel, and as you know the United States has a commitment to support Israel's survival and security so the fact that there's a war that is already in its sixth month, seventh month and doesn't seem like it's going to end anytime soon, even if there is something like a cease fire, even if there is something like an exchange of prisoners for hostages. Clearly Hamas isn't going away so the threat will remain for a long time, if not for always. So, it's in the nature of policy makers and bureaucracies to be able to focus on one thing at a time and Ukraine was the key focus for two years and now it's sharing the focus and sometimes it's lost the focus to the Israeli conflict with Hamas. So, in a way it's just a natural kind of diminishment of interest but obviously the war in Gaza has played a significant role in the US but also in Europe.

VC: Indeed, indeed. Now how about this recent capture of Avdiivka, how has that changed the war?

AM: Not really. The Russians have been trying to capture Avdiivka for about ten years because it was also in their sights back in 2014 and then they spent something like ten months over the last year trying to capture it again and then finally it happened and they captured it. Within the last one or two months when they made the big push, they lost something like 16 to 20,000 soldiers in the process. They turned the town, it's like a small city, big town, they turned it into rubble so it's essentially of no use to anyone at this point. It's not as if it's a strategic victory, it's not as if it sits on oil deposits or anything like that. Basically, it's just a few more square kilometers of rubble at an enormous cost.

KK: I learned that today, which is kind of funny, is election day in Russia. And Putin has three opponents. What does this mean? What does it mean for the Russian people and the war in Ukraine? Obviously, nothing's going to happen, but will they be killed immediately?

AM: You mean the opponents?

KK: Yeah, the opponents.

AM: Putin has always had opponents. One of them is from the Communist party and it's basically a pro-Putin opposition, if one could call it that. They basically agree with everything he says or does except that they probably want to spend a little more on certain things that matter to Communists. But they're a loyal opposition. Not even opposition. They're a loyal quasi-opposition. The other party that's campaigning is the so-called Liberal Democratic Party founded by Vladimir Zhirinovsky. He was Russia's answer to Adolf Hitler until Putin came along. This is a fascist party, they don't hide it, other than the fact that they call themselves Liberal Democrats. So, they too are loyal. If anything, they criticize Putin for being a little too soft in terms of the genocidal war, so they're OK. And then there's a third party, I forget the name but the candidate is a man by the name of Davanikov. He's young, I've seen a number of his press conferences. He's actually come out against the war. He doesn't say the war is a bad thing, it's a bad idea, Putin is an idiot, Putin is a war criminal. He says we need peace; we need to get out of this as soon as possible. And it's been suggested by some that he's the real deal and then it's been suggested by others who are obviously more cynical, namely that Putin is permitting this to create the illusion of a debate.

KK: When people go to vote, I mean they actually go, (AM: Yeah), what happens to those votes? Do they just get thrown away, because it doesn't mean anything.

AM: The opposition, the Democratic opposition, has been, has a number of strategies. They say, at the very least, vote for anybody but Putin so if nothing else to suggest that his share of the vote is smaller than what he would like. Now mind you, ultimately the Central Election Commission in Russia decides these things, can simply decide that he got 99% of the vote anyway. Others say you could destroy the ballot, mark it up or something like that, that's a possibility so it could be ruined. And then again none of that is likely to make much of a difference because in the final analysis Putin can simply raise the numbers or lower the numbers any way he likes. But the most interesting thing, and this has been recently proposed by the democratic opposition, is a so-called movement, called Noon Against Putin. And what that entails is everybody should come out at noon and just basically hang out. To simply come out and hang out around the electoral districts where the people are actually doing the voting. Again, technically it's legal, they wouldn't be shouting anything, they wouldn't be carrying, they wouldn't necessarily be carrying any kind of banners or placards, but nevertheless

inasmuch as everybody would be there at the same time, they'd be sending a very clear message to Putin and to the regime that there is something like a critical mass of opposition. When Navalny was killed (KK: That's what I was just going to ask you. VC: Yeah.) During his funeral, it's been estimated that up to 50,000 people showed up. And you can see the long, long lines of people that apparently extended for a couple of kilometers. And a month and a half ago when the candidates for the presidency were only just being announced Putin did have a more or less bona fide opponent who is a genuine peacenik, a man by the name of Boris Nadezhdin and he was garnering support left and right, roughly five percentage points per week and he was able to acquire something like 200,000 signatures supporting his candidacy and his places were the only ones that had long lines of people waiting for hours to put their signatures onto these documents. So, the election, despite the fact that it's meaningless in the sense that we know Putin will win it's quite potentially possibly very interesting. It could lead to something.

KK: I just have to say this about Navalny. It killed me when I heard that he died, and they wouldn't even release the body for a while. His poor mother was begging for his body. Now it's obvious that he was killed by Putin, and I have like mixed feelings. Why did he go back to Russia? Couldn't he have done so much more outside of Russia? Keep it going that way? And since we know Putin killed him will that make Navalny even a bigger hero?

AM: Well, starting with your last question the answer is yes. The worst thing for a dictator is a symbol and a martyr. You can't jail a martyr because you already did. You can't kill a martyr because you already have, and Navalny has become a symbol of all these wonderful things. And he became a heroic figure at precisely the right time, just before the elections. And he's not going away, that symbol of resistance isn't going away. So, Putin did himself a real disfavor in killing him. The timing was simply all wrong. He should have waited until after the elections or have done this a year ago which brings me to the second question, why did he return? I don't know the answer. The answers that I've heard from Russian analysts, and this may or may not be true but it makes sense. He was expecting that his arrival at the airport would be greeted by thousands of supporters who would come out and would then shield him and at the same time manifest their opposition to the regime. That didn't happen. It's not because he doesn't have support, presumably because they were cowed, because they were fearful, I don't know. That makes sense. Now the real mystery isn't even Navalny because he came back two years ago, but a year later, after Navalny returned his second most prominent democratic opposition, Vladimir Kara-Murza, he's less well known but he's equally democratic, more democratic, arguably, than Navalny, he boarded a plane knowing that he'd be

arrested, arrived in Moscow, was arrested and is now in a penal colony. That mystifies me. Navalny, he may have had certain expectations which proved wrong but Kara-Murza was obviously going for martyrdom. And the fear amongst people nowadays is that having killed Navalny, will Putin stop? And given his track record the answer is likely to be no. Kara-Murza could be next, a bunch of others.

VC: Speaking of the opposition now, in your view, what are the chances of the opposition movement being successful going forward now because Navalny was such a powerful, charismatic leader so there's a big void there to be filled. What are your thoughts on that?

AM: Well, remember, he was a powerful leader in jail so once every couple of months he would produce some statement but he wasn't there, he couldn't organize, he couldn't speechify, he couldn't meet, he couldn't take part in demonstrations. So, his absence, in a way, will be felt but at the same time his transformation into a martyr will actually strengthen the movement. Now there's also the hope expressed by his wife that she will be able to step into his shoes. At the same time, she's not Navalny so it will take a bit of time for her to establish street creds with the opposition. On the other hand, she claims, she wants to unite the opposition because they're fragmented, and she could pull it off. The bottom line, though, is that the opposition, it's not like they are actively involved in Russian politics, probably 15, 20, 25 percent of the population shares those views. My own guess is that the opposition, the Democrats, will be able to play a more significant role in Russian politics if and when Russia experiences a defeat in the war or if and when Putin is either dead or killed or retires or leaves. And in both instances, there will be a power struggle of some kind and it's only then that the Democrats will be able to assert themselves into that struggle and perhaps form a coalition or form an alternative. In any case I think at this point they're just too weak, too dispersed, too weak but in those circumstances, they could conceivably be a player.

VC: Zelensky has invited Trump to visit Ukraine and see what the war is really like and Trump of course did not go. Do you think Americans see Trump as a coward because of this? Do Americans see that the MAGA folks and Trump are holding up the funding decision?

AM: You mean Americans or Ukrainians?

VC: Americans and Ukrainians, let's go with yes, both.

AM: The major concern regarding Trump both in the US among people who are critical of Trump as well as among many Ukrainians is of course the fact that he's been playing this negative role vis a vis funding. That's the major concern, the fact that he did or did not come to Ukraine is something that elites would talk about, talking heads like you and me, this is a concern to us. I think most Americans, they may have heard about this but it sort of came in one ear and out the other. Ukrainians are, again, for them, based on the blogs I read, the conversations they have, the interviews and so on, it's my impression that they were aware of this, they were critical that he didn't come, they laughed at him for not coming but again their major concern is the assistance, the 60 billion dollars that are currently in abeyance as a result of Trump.

KK Recently Trump met with prime minister Viktor Orban of Hungary. Now is Orban Putin's mouthpiece? What did you think of this meeting?

AM: Well, the meeting was scandalous. For one thing, for Orban to come to the United States and meet with Joe Biden's opponent is at best diplomatic bad taste. You're not supposed to do that kind of stuff. If he met with everybody including Biden that's fair enough, but you don't do these sorts of things, not if you're a serious policymaker. This suggests that Orban is what he is, a tin pot dictator. That said, he did meet with Putin, well he has met with Putin, but he did meet with Trump and the major news item from that meeting was that he said that Trump told him explicitly that if and when he becomes president, he won't give Ukraine a cent. And afterwards Trump affirmed that Orban was right. So not only is this diplomatic faux pas, it turns out to be a real bad signal for Ukraine. If Trump gets elected then a lot of things will have to be reconsidered and rethought.

VC: Indeed. Now another meeting recently was Tucker Carlson's interview with Trump where both of them believe that Putin is just great. Do you think these folks are in the minority in the US?

AM: I think the answer is yes but it's a very large minority. Essentially, we're talking about one third of the population, the people who support Trump unconditionally and have a soft spot for Putin including people like Tucker Carlson...

KK: Who probably will be Trump's vice president.

AM: Yes, I've heard rumors to that effect (VC: What a team!). It sounds like the punch line to a really bad joke, unfortunately you're quite right. The bad news is that it's probably about a third, the

good news is that two thirds probably disagree and we'll just have to see what happens in November. Speaking of interviews though, Tucker Carlson's interview with Putin was one of these landmark disasters both for Carlson and for Putin.

KK: Tell us about it.

AM: Well, as you may recall, Carlson begins the interview with a statement something to the effect of, are you really fearful that the United States will attack, something along those lines, and that was a perfect opening, that salvo. All Putin had to do was say yes, we are for the following reasons or no we're not because everybody loves us, it's a no brainer, it's like he was lobbed a ball. (VC: Totally). Instead, he starts his narrative, 862 AD, with Vikings and drones on for 30 minutes. And at the same time, it was clear from watching Carlson's face that he was completely bamboozled. He had no idea what was going on, no idea who these people were, what these events were (laughter). And at the same time, Putin just drones on and on.

VC: I believe Putin was quoted as saying, commenting on the interview, that Carlson didn't ask him any tough questions.

AM: Right. Well, he did, later on they were semi-tough. There were a couple that required serious answers but Putin evaded them all. Or at least he responded in the standard propaganda style. Putin, in any case, he had an ideal opportunity. Here he's got a two-hour interview with one of the leading TV personalities in the United States. He could have addressed the American people. Instead, he embarks on a 30-minute history lesson and I have no doubt that whichever Americans, even from the MAGA Republican side, turned on their TVs to listen turned them off within about 30 seconds. This is absurd. (VC: Yeah, yeah.) It was painful for me, and I get paid to do this.

VC: Right, right.

VC: As we were editing this interview, on March 22 ISIS terrorists took responsibility for their attack on a popular entertainment venue outside of Moscow, killing over 130 and wounding more than 100. Putin said the attack was an "attempt to destabilize Russian society" and accused Ukraine of being complicit in this attack. Alex, thanks for returning. Now, weeks before the attack, Russia was warned by the US that an attack was likely. Do you think the Russian intelligence agencies deliberately chose to ignore the warnings of the attack and if so, why?



AM: Well, the bottom line is that we don't know, so it's a question of speculating. So, it's perfectly possible that this was a very serious and embarrassing intelligence failure. You have to keep in mind that most of Russia is dysfunctional. And as efficient as the FSB, the security service, can be, on occasion, especially when it's going after gays and liberals and democrats, there it does a fabulous job, but there's no reason to think that its efficiency applies equally to everything it does. On the other hand, in March alone something like three incidents involving radical Islamists took place and each of these incidents involved the FSB, the security service. They were warned by the Americans so it's at least somewhat implausible to argue that they were completely unprepared. They could have mistrusted the Americans. So, it's also conceivable that Putin pretty much laid down the law and told his minions, including those in the security service, that, listen, this is all a joke, just a provocation, if you see any evidence, forget it, it's not going to happen, it's perfectly possible. It is possible that they were simply incompetent. It is possible that they were more or less competent but were essentially told not to intervene. And then the more nefarious and to my mind not implausible, is as you suggested, that the security service and Putin knew that something was afoot and decided to let it happen. There's also the possibility that they were actually involved in bringing this about. So, it's not hard to imagine that Putin needed an excuse to escalate against the Ukrainians because of course almost immediately after the attack took place, even after ISIS said they did it, everybody in Russia, from Putin down to the lowliest bloggers got on the same page pointing fingers on Ukraine, even though there wasn't a shred of evidence.

KK: I was going to ask you, do you think that ISIS deliberately waited until after the so-called elections to do this attack but now I'm wondering, was he in on it and said, wait until after the elections?

AM: My guess is that if they were... I mean, assuming that ISIS did this, and again the evidence certainly points in that direction as much as it points to Putin. Waiting until after the elections would be reasonable because it spoils his party. Here he is, elected with a landslide vote, 88% of the population loves him and then suddenly 140 or however many people are killed, this arena is burned down and it looks like he's totally out of control, like things are out of control and Putin is seems weak. That said, just yesterday there appeared an announcement that was published in an Iranian news site that is sort of the propaganda arm of this ISIS-K group in which they said that because the Russians had tortured those four individuals who had been captured. So, this group accused Putin and his people of being savages, and this is like a triple irony, savages accusing savages, and said that they would pay back in ways that would make this thing look like child's play. So that suggests that ISIS is behind this. On the other hand, not necessarily because these four individuals

could have been recruited by the Secret Service, the Russians, and ISIS is now taking, is angry at the fact that they're simply being tortured. This is the murky world of Russian politics. You don't really know what's going on until after it's happened.

VC: Exactly. And then Putin waited kind of a long time to publicly address this attack. What was up with that, why do you think he took his time?

AM: Two possibilities occurred to me. So, it's perfectly possible that he was simply caught by surprise. After all, on March 19, he denied validity of American suggestions that an attack was imminent and he may have been completely in shock. That's one possible answer. The other possibility is that he looked at this event, realized that he and his minions were somehow responsible for it and needed some time to catch his breath and converse with his colleagues to determine how they are going to explain this to the people and then of course they use this opportunity to agree that they would point every possible finger at Ukraine.

VC: Absolutely, absolutely. Now how do you think this is affecting the war with Ukraine?

AM: Well, at the moment the Russians have been doing whatever is that they have been doing, there hasn't been any significant change. But everybody in Russia, from Putin down to the lowliest military blogger has pointed fingers at Ukraine. So, does this bespeak an escalation? Probably. On the other hand, the Russians have been escalating all along so I'm not exactly sure what room they have for that much more escalation. Putin knows that he needs more soldiers. Two years ago, when they introduced a full-scale military mobilization conscription drive for draftees, that led something like half a million to two million young Russians to flee the country. So, he's been reluctant to do a second wave of mobilization. But this is the kind of thing that would enable him to say look, the country is in danger, we need, everybody needs to rally around me and the flag and we're going to force you to be a patriot even if you don't want to do it. So, we'll see. A. Mobilization, the conscription drive, will that take place? Many Russian analysts say it will. My guess is it probably will as well. And then what kind of escalation, if any, vis-à-vis Ukraine.

VC: Alex, thank you, thank you so much. As always, your comments, your analyses are insightful and help us put this conflict into some kind of context.

AM: It's always a pleasure, ladies. END