

# War in Ukraine Backstories You Don't Hear (Part Four)

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

Episode UYL2409

Podcast Date: March 28, 2024



The media has been reminding us lately that the war in Ukraine entered its third year this month. And as you know, further funding for Ukraine is a topic of major political debate in Washington and elsewhere.

I try to pay attention to both sides of the debate, because strong arguments can be made on both sides. As I listen to the back-and-forth, however, I often hear views which are inadequately informed – or even erroneously informed – about critical factors in this war. And these misinformed statements occur on both sides of the discussion.

Therefore, I want to set the record straight today on some issues which have been ignored in reporting on the war. Listeners will gain perspectives today that they are unlikely to hear anywhere else.

And these are not perspectives formed at a distance. They come from years of personal engagement with common, everyday citizens in both Russia and Ukraine. Once you have these perspectives, you will see complexities in this war that you may have never recognized before.

And for those listeners who are leaders, this episode will be a reminder of the power that culture and back-stories exert in shaping individual and group behavior. Greater sensitivity to that dynamic is sure to upsize your leadership.

---

In recent weeks, the battles between Israel and Hamas have taken both media and public attention off of the war in Ukraine. But the slugfest between Ukraine and Russia continues. And with the spring thaw, Russia has prepositioned men and equipment to launch a massive late spring offensive. Meanwhile, Congress continues to drag its heels on the question of what kind of aid and how much of it to provide to Ukraine.

At the heart of the Congressional debate is the question of whether an infusion of further American aid will have a telling effect on the final outcome of the war. And that question then leads to debates about what the final outcome is likely to look like – not just for the two nations at war, but for the U.S. and Europe, as well.

---

As these debates protract themselves, I'm intrigued that in the political arena and elsewhere, no one ever mentions a particular backstory that is almost lost to public awareness. And since this series of podcasts is about backstories to the war, I feel compelled to mention this one.

When Ukraine became independent from Russia in 1991, the world's third largest nuclear arsenal was within its borders. It consisted of 1900 strategic warheads, 176 intercontinental ballistic missiles, and 44 strategic bombers capable of delivering nuclear weapons, all left behind when the Soviet Union collapsed. The Bush Administration and later the Clinton Administration were concerned with keeping this nuclear capability under proper security controls.

Therefore, with U.S.-Russian relations rapidly warming up, the U.S. spearheaded a multi-year effort to secure an agreement from Ukraine to turn its nuclear stockpile over to the Russians for dismantling. The proposal was controversial in Ukraine, as you might imagine, because even then there were many who feared a future attack from Russia. So long as Ukraine had nuclear weapons at its disposal, some believed, it would serve as a deterrent against Russian aggression.

Over the next few years, a number of diplomatic protocols were hammered out in a joint effort between the U.S., Great Britain, Russia, and Ukraine. These included agreements, signed by Russia, to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and its borders. And the agreements provided security assurances aimed at protecting Ukraine's territory and political independence.

When the last of these protocols was negotiated, Boris Yeltsin was the president of Russia. A reformer and something of a populist political figure, he personally respected Ukraine's separate identity from Russia. That's why Russia signed the protocols recognizing the integrity of Ukraine's borders.

When Yeltsin was toppled, however, the door opened for Putin to make his meteoric rise to power. He completely rejected Yeltsin's view of and policies toward Ukraine. As a result, Putin's Russia has never lived up to any of its obligations under the language of the protocols.

That language had avoided guaranteeing that the U.S. and Great Britain would provide a security shield for Ukraine in the event of attack. Diplomatically, a guarantee would have required them to put their own soldiers into the fray if the protocols were violated. Instead of guarantees, therefore, the protocols offered language which assured that the Anglo-American alliance would stand with Ukraine should it be invaded. However, the protocols did not specify the steps that they would take to assure that security.

On the basis of these assurances and American financial and technical assistance in dismantling their nuclear capabilities, the Ukrainians agreed to these protocols. That's why Ukraine continues to look to the U.S. for support in its war with Russia. Kyiv also looks to Europe for assistance, of course, but on a different basis from their requests to Washington.

The Russian invasion stemmed from Putin's calculation that the U.S. would not risk nuclear war with Russia to fulfill its assurances to Ukraine. Once his initial incursion was pushed back, he made some wholesale recalculations. From his speeches since then, we know that he concluded that time was on his side. The longer the war was protracted, he believed, the more that popular and political support for assistance would dissipate in the U.S. He has therefore been satisfied to take up defensive positions in the territories he still controls and settle for limited offensive gains, even at great cost in terms of personnel losses and equipment

destruction. In his view, all he merely has to do is mark time until U.S. aid tapers off or arrives too slowly or too late for the Ukrainians to sustain military momentum.

Thus, while there are unmistakable consequences for Ukraine if Russia prevails in this war, there are also consequences for the U.S. Its credibility on the world stage comes into question. In the future, when the U.S. asks a nation to make concessions to an adversary in exchange for American security assurances, how much faith will that nation be willing to put in our promises? I'm not arguing that this credibility consideration is so paramount that it alone should determine our level of support. But our ability to be a peace broker in the future will no doubt either be strengthened or impaired by the international community's memory of how we upheld our assurances to Ukraine.

Meanwhile, calls for a negotiated settlement continue to be voiced from capitals around the globe. In the second episode in this series, I laid out the cultural and psychological reasons that the Ukrainians are, and will remain, determined to drive Russia out completely. The question now is whether such an outcome is possible, however much assistance we might provide.

And my concern is not so much related to whether the Ukrainians have sufficient manpower and equipment to push Russia back. The greater question in my judgment is whether, having regained their original borders, postwar Ukraine will be able to adequately defend that border long term. Ukraine's border touches seven nations and extends for more than 4300 miles. The border with Russia alone is nearly 1300 miles long by land and stretches across another 200 miles by sea. The border with Belarus, Russia's closest ally in the region, adds another 200 miles of border.

The question in my mind is whether Ukraine will have the manpower and the economic wherewithal after the war to secure a border of that length. Six million people have fled Ukraine since the war began. The longer they live in other nations and acculturate there, the less likely they are to return home when the war is over.

Besides, many of them have no homes to which they can return. The complete obliteration of entire cities means that years of reconstruction will be required before even basic infrastructure is back in place. And without immense amounts of foreign aid, it could be decades before many of these destroyed neighborhoods and towns can support their pre-war population. Moreover, even if the war were to end today, Ukraine's economy would be in such shambles that the government could only make a feeble attempt at reconstruction anytime soon.

At some point, the challenge of border defense, the protracted loss of population, and the financial challenge of rebuilding may soften Ukrainian determination not to surrender a square centimeter of territory to Russia. What waits to be seen is whether Ukraine would retain any of its seaports in the wake of a negotiated settlement. Of its 18 seaports, for all practical purposes, Ukraine presently controls only Odessa.

Before the war, Ukraine accounted for ten percent of the global grain market, most of that moving to Asia and Africa by sea. Lost access to seaports would therefore choke Ukraine's primary source of income. Without that revenue to fuel its economy, Ukraine's postwar rebuilding and reconstruction would be painfully slow.

Meanwhile, from my perspective, Russia is becoming more resolute to win the waiting game. In the short time that I've been doing this series, two events have strengthened Russia's prospects

---

in the war. One is Putin's re-election. Second is the terrorist attack on the theater in Moscow. Let me address them in that order.

If this war is indeed a waiting game, as Putin believes, he must keep his people united around a willingness to wait, even as casualties mount astronomically. Western analysts have long suspected that, once he was reelected, Putin would feel freer to make a broader conscription of soldiers in order to throw far more manpower onto the Ukrainian battlefield. With that manpower, he would hope to turn what has been a somewhat feeble offensive this past year into a series of victories, one after another. That could weaken the ability of his critics within Russia to marshal wholesale opposition to the war.

Now, with the theater massacre, he is capitalizing on the event to further weaken the influence of anyone criticizing the war. The official Kremlin line is that the terrorists were captured as they neared a border crossing into Ukraine. Further, according to these accounts, Ukraine was complicit in their crime. This accusation is getting wide circulation in Russian media, clearly in an effort to shift the public's animus toward the terrorists onto Ukraine.

Given the prevailing outrage in Russia in the aftermath of the terrorist attack, no one dares openly challenge the government's claim of Ukrainian involvement – this despite the fact that the accused terrorists are from Kazakhstan, not Ukraine. In addition, the family of one of the accused men has come forward with evidence that he was in Kazakhstan, not Russia, at the time of the attack.

Second, the brutality with which the terrorists have been treated is a strong signal to dissidents as to how ruthless the Putin regime is prepared to be. Russian media have shown sickening footage of the terrorists being brutally tortured during interrogation. And when they were televised as they showed up for their initial court hearing, their faces were swollen and bruised, some struggled to stand, and one wore a catheter because he could no longer control his bladder. These videos have played time and again on Russian television.

The videos are a not-so-subtle implied warning to war protestors that they must be careful in crossing the Kremlin. And from reports that I've been able to consult, there are virtually no protesting voices within Russia as to how these men are being treated. People are seemingly of a mind that this is the treatment that the men deserve, given the enormity of their crime.

Now, if Putin can smear the Ukrainians with the disdain which the public is showing toward these terrorists, he can justify whatever measures he takes to quell dissent about the war and whatever toll he exacts on young soldiers to destroy the so-called Ukrainian menace. In the previous episode, I spoke of a subtle disdain toward Ukrainians which I have encountered during my frequent visits to Russia. It appears to me that Putin is using this tragedy to take advantage of that disdain.

My sense, therefore, is that Russia is now just as determined to vanquish Ukraine as Ukraine is determined to drive the Russians out. As I assess things from the perspective of my military intelligence background, I doubt that either side will succeed in attaining its goal entirely. As I said last week, everything seems to point toward a quasi-permanent partitioning of Ukraine, followed by years and years of a precarious and uneasy peace.

But because of the backstories which we've looked at over the course of these four podcasts, genuine peace is not in the offing anytime soon. Further, if a settlement can be brokered, one of Russia's non-negotiables will be that Ukraine – that is, whatever portion of it remains within

---

Ukraine's borders after the partitioning – should not be allowed to join NATO. And as I read the tea leaves, I think the U.S. will accept that condition in order to end the war.

Nevertheless, both Russia and Ukraine face formidable challenges however the war ends. Russia will spend years and vast fortunes rebuilding a military so thoroughly decimated by Ukraine. Russia will also feel pressured to restore the global prestige which its military once enjoyed. For all of its impressive May Day parades, Moscow's military machine has proven only marginally effective against an underequipped Ukraine. Fought to a standstill for months by what most regarded as a second-rate military power; losing five soldiers for every casualty inflicted on the enemy; relying on battlefield tactics which have been impractical for decades; pulling decrepit tanks, armored vehicles, and artillery pieces out of mothballs because enemy firepower had wiped out so much of their field equipment; losing major Navy combat vessels to a nation which had no Navy. These embarrassments have been on full display for the world to see.

Even if it wins, Russia will no longer be feared as an indomitable military machine. And rebuilding that machine will demand staggering outlays of funds for years to come. Higher and higher taxes will be almost mandatory. And as all nations learn when they try to build or rebuild their military capability rapidly, the money poured into such efforts is highly inflationary. High taxes and rocketing inflation will continually fuel social and political discontent in post-war Russia.

Moreover, high taxes and inflation will serve to accelerate Russia's population crisis, as the younger generation goes abroad to seek its fortune. Russia's population was in absolute decline prior to the war, in part due to a low birth rate, but aggravated by the mass exodus of young Russians for three decades. Postwar taxes will therefore fall on a shrinking population, making it increasingly difficult to support the government-funded pension payments and healthcare needs of a public which is disproportionately elderly.

The postwar years in Russia will also probably see a rise in ethnic unrest. Putin's has drawn his army disproportionately from distant, somewhat powerless ethnic enclaves. It's a purposeful decision aimed at minimizing fatalities (and thus discontent) from families in European Russia, since they live near the seat of power. These distant ethnic groups have therefore borne the brunt of the war's casualties, and their resentment for being exploited in this manner grows steadily. Indeed, it's already daring to voice itself. As this unrest swells, crackdowns on dissent and civil liberties will ensue, because Russia's now totalitarian system has no other tool for calming discontent. In short, postwar Russia will be rife with political instability.

In some ways, Ukraine's challenges after the war will be similar to Russia's, yet altogether different in other ways. Like Russia, Ukraine will need to rebuild a battered military. At the end of the war, the Ukrainians will have a hodge podge inventory of military equipment provided during the conflict from first one nation then another. With Russia rearming to its north, Ukraine will feel an urgency to reconstitute its military while at the same time standardizing its equipment for efficiency's sake. Right now, because of its hodge podge inventory, one of Ukraine's greatest logistic challenges stems from the fact that its artillery pieces require so many different types of ammunition. The military struggles daily to have the right ammunition in the right quantities in the right places at the right times.

But if Russia will struggle financially to rebuild its military, for Ukraine the financial struggle will be far more demanding. They will need to rebuild their military inventory, while simultaneously reconstructing a heavily bombed infrastructure and resurrecting neighborhoods and towns

which have been reduced to rubble. Nor will they easily find foreign investment for these civilian rebuilding projects. With Russia sitting on Ukraine's doorstep, licking its wounds and eager to finish the conquest which it started in 2014 with the forced annexation of Crimea, investors will be understandably hesitant to spend money on new construction which another round of war could quickly destroy.

As with Russia, one of Ukraine's most daunting postwar challenges will be a sharply reduced population. In the second episode in this series, I showed how tiny Ukraine's cohort of 25 to 35 year-olds was before the war. It was the smallest ten-year age cohort in the country. Ukraine, too, is an aging nation with a shrinking population. But it will also lose whatever portion of the country ends up in Russian hands if the peace settlement results in partitioning the country. And millions who fled abroad during the war may well choose not to return to the shambles which were once their home.

It's considerations such as these which lead me to raise the question of whether Ukraine can mount a robust border security, even if they regain their internationally recognized borders. Will they have the manpower and the financial wherewithal to support border integrity. Pragmatic considerations may therefore result in a settlement in which Ukraine is truncated and possibly regains none of its lost territory in Crimea. I've already touched on the problems confronting Ukraine if, at the end of the war, they have lost access to most of their ports. But the other impediment to Ukraine regaining its agricultural economic preeminence is the amount of land that has been taken out of production due to land mines. At present, an area about the size of Florida is unusable because it lies in a zone of heavy mining. It will take years and no small expense to demine all of these areas so that they are safe for civilian housing or agriculture.

And a further challenge for Ukraine will center on resuming their experiment with democracy which has been interrupted by this war. Prior to the Russian invasion, the Ukrainians had made steady progress toward creating democratic institutions and governance, although there was still much work to be done. When the nation went on a wartime footing, however, the government became more autocratic in order to expedite critical decision-making related to the war.

Once peace is declared, finding national agreement on where, when, and in what measure to resume democratic governance is likely to be an ongoing, contentious issue. And with the number of political parties in Ukraine, developing consensus on this matter will call for skillful statecraft.

Fortunately for Ukraine, one benefit of this war is that thousands of men and women have learned the art of leadership on the battlefield. Russia, by contrast, does not even train enlisted personnel and their lowest ranking officers on the very basics of leadership. All key decisions, even in the heat of battle, must come from the top.

From a leadership standpoint, therefore, Ukraine will emerge from this conflict far better equipped than Russia to seize whatever opportunities the future holds for them. And the innovative spirit and newborn sense of nationalism which the Ukrainians have shown consistently in this war will be the very traits which may empower a renewed and vibrant Ukraine to rise from the rubble and ashes.



---

*Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at [www.LeaderPerfect.com](http://www.LeaderPerfect.com).*

*Upsize Your Leadership* is a featured podcast on the C-Suite Radio Network (<https://c-suitenetwork.com/radio/shows/upsized-your-leadership/>). It can also be accessed on iTunes, Google Play/Google Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, iHeart Radio and many other platforms which distribute podcasts.

Scripts for all episodes can be downloaded at <https://www.UpsizeYourLeadership/episodes>.

---

**Notice:** You are free to duplicate or redistribute this script so long as the authorship and copyright information are retained. This material is not in the public domain and is the intellectual property of the host.