McFaul: You're listening to World Class from the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. We bring in-depth expertise on international affairs from Stanford's campus, straight to you. I'm your host, Michael McFaul, the director of the Freeman Spogli Institute.

Today we have the honor of speaking to Oleksiy Honcharuk, the former prime minister of Ukraine and most recently the Bernard and Susan Liautaud Visiting Fellow here at the Freeman Spogli Institute. Oleksiy has the distinction of being the youngest prime minister in the history of Ukraine, and during his tenure initiated a myriad of important reforms aimed at reducing corruption and cronyism in Ukraine.

With the situation on the Russia-Ukraine border intensifying, we wanted to speak to the former Prime Minister about his perspective about what's going on, why it's happening now, and what we can do – the world, Ukrainians, Europeans, Americans, and hopefully Russians can do – to defuse this crisis.

Oleksiy, welcome to World Class.

Honcharuk: Thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador.

McFaul: Let’s start with some basic framing history, just for our listeners who don't follow Ukrainian politics and Russian politics as closely as you and I do. Give us a sense for what is the nature of the conflict between Mr. Putin and Ukraine? And why, all of a sudden, is there an escalation of tensions? Hundreds of thousands of troops are massing on the border. What's the nature of this conflict and why is it escalating now?
Honcharuk: Mr. Ambassador, it's a perfect question because I believe that this escalation, this buildup of Russian troops along the Ukrainian border, is not a regional conflict. And it's very important to understand the background of this conflict in order to find the right solution for the future.

The Ukrainian nation has a very complicated history for many, many hundreds of years. I don't think we should dig so deep today, but it's very important to understand the situation of at least the last 30 years since the Soviet Union collapsed. The Ukrainian nation played a key role in this collapse. Because for Ukraine, it was a very long history of fighting for its independence. As a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, a lot of independent countries were created. Ukraine was one of these, and is widely seen as the biggest nation who achieved this independence as a result of this collapse of former Soviet nations. Mr. Putin has said many times that this collapse was the biggest catastrophe in the last twenty years of the last century. For him, this is a tragedy.

Now, unfortunately, Russia understands itself as the successor, or empire, coming after the Soviet Union. And for Mr. Putin, it is very important to keep control over the Kremlin, and to control the power in Russia. The tool he and his crowd – which I believe is a criminal crowd – use to keep control over the power in Russia is to create a fake narrative about the special place of Russia in the world. For them – the Kremlin and Putin’s criminal and corrupted crowd – it's very important that Russian people believe that democracy is a weak idea and is a failing idea, and that democracy doesn't work for Russia, at least, or at least doesn't work for the region.

For Putin, it's very dangerous to have successful democratic countries – especially Slavic countries, Orthodox Christian countries, and a country like Ukraine with such a close ties with Russia. And obviously, we have thousands of connections to each other on multiple, many layers and many, many different spheres like the economy and culture. So, the basis for this conflict is conceptual. It's based in a battle between two conceptually different systems: the authoritarian system and the democratic system.

For the last thirty years, Ukraine has chosen the democratic path. The Ukrainian nation decided to be a democracy and Ukraine, thank God, is a democracy. We have some problems with corruption, but we are still an electoral democracy with fair elections. This is a great achievement for our nation, because if you look around our country, even among hundreds of other successful European countries, there are not many other good examples of democracy. They have problems: Turkey has problems; Belarus has problems; Kazakhstan as well.
So, a lot of countries around Ukraine have problems with the democratic path. But Ukraine, despite all of the complicated circumstances, is still a democracy. And for Putin, a successful, strong and developed democracy in Ukraine is a huge threat for his regime in Russia. This is exactly the reason why Russia is so aggressive towards Ukraine. It's not just a regional conflict. It’s not just about NATO, as to why Putin is trying to push and to attack Ukraine. The real reason – and it's very important to understand the real reason – that this is not just an attack towards Ukraine, but an attack towards democracy itself and the Western world. Our values in the Western world are a threat for Mr. Putin himself.

**McFaul:** So why now? Why is the escalation taking place now? Ukraine's been an electoral democracy for a while and after the revolution in 2014, I think, has consolidated in some ways, and then had a peaceful transition of power from one president to the other. But that was two years ago. Why now? What do you think is going on that has caused Putin to be so aggressive all of a sudden?

**Honcharuk:** It's not “now,” Mike. It's not now. For Ukrainians, this “now,” has lasted at least seven years already. We were already in a war; this isn’t something special for Ukrainians or for our country. It's not something special.

We were already prepared for almost anything. Putin attacked Ukraine and invaded Ukraine seven years ago after the Revolution of Dignity. It was a moment when the Ukrainian nation asserted and pushed back against one more strong man and his attempt to capture power. Putin understood at that time, and Putin supported Yanukovych in the same way he’s now supporting Lukashenko; they were Putin’s choice. When Yanukovych failed, it was obvious that Putin lost his influence in Ukraine, and that Ukraine will move towards the European Union and towards NATO. For Putin, on the one hand, it was an excuse. It was a critical moment when he decided – and he knew perfectly well – because he had worked hard to undermine the capacity of our army. The chief Minister of Defense, and the chief of SBU, our special services . . .

**McFaul:** That’s like the equivalent of the FBI?

**Honcharuk:** Yeah. During the Yanukovych period, Putin and the Kremlin were trying to directly control our Ministry of Defense. For example, Mr. Lebedyev, and before that Mr. Salamatin. They [Putin and the Kremlin] controlled these Ukrainian state bodies almost directly, and they perfectly knew that, thanks to the destructive influence of their agents and
thanks to corruption, they almost destroyed the capacity and the military potential of our forces.

Putin decided to invade Ukraine and destroy it like a country inside its existing borders. Putin was trying to annex at least half of Ukraine; his goal wasn’t only Crimea. His goal was [audio unclear]. So Putin decided to divide Ukraine into “their” Ukraine, you know, a Russian Ukraine or authoritarian Ukraine, and then the “other” Ukraine, like a European Ukraine. A divided Ukraine.

And for Putin, this concept of a divided Ukraine was more or less okay because it meant at least they have half of the country could be under his direct control. This was his stake. But he failed, as we perfectly know, because the Ukrainian nation pushed back and civil society worked hard to create all this voluntary military and paramilitary organizations and units and we pushed back as a nation.

And that was a moment when Putin understood, finally, that he lost Ukraine not only as an economic partner, but ideologically he had lost. Ukrainians chose freedom. As one of the best experts in the Western world on Russia, you know perfectly well what’s happening now in Russia; it’s an absolute nightmare for freedom. It might even be a worse situation now than in the late Soviet Union. Putin is building one more empire of failure, and Ukrainians will never leave in these circumstances; it is impossible. That's why for Putin and the Kremlin, Ukrainians are a dangerous example of how people can fight, and how people can sacrifice their lives to fight for their freedom.

McFaul: So, do you think Putin plans to escalate the war? I also said invade, but I think you rightly pointed out, there’s been a war going on since 2014. But do you think he plans to intervene in a greater way? Or is he using this moment to seek concessions from Ukraine and the Europe and the West more broadly?

Honcharuk: I think that Putin is playing a more complicated game. It's not about direct military invasion. Everyone is expecting this invasion in the next couple of months, but I think that the risk of the entire invasion is not very high, frankly speaking. But it's high enough that we need to be as prepared as possible, because Mr. Putin for sure wants to invade, and he's trying to find the opportunity for it. If he sees an open door, he will enter this door.
What's really important to understand is that he's trying to shape the situation and to undermine the trust among countries and among people. For him, this is like a salami tactics mixed with the tactics of a thousand cuts. He's trying to destabilize the situation and create a
mess by creating an urgent crisis, creating an immigration crisis, organize sabotages among the military, have political murders, and so on and so forth.

And for him, this buildup is only one element of this game to create one more additional crisis to attract attention, and to create a situation where Western leaders have to decide and make very hard decisions. Of course, Western countries don't want to have a war. Nobody wants to be involved in a war. And Ukrainians don't want to be involved. Putin is trying to show that, “If I do attack, nobody will protect you. All of these values you have are just fairy tales. The West is weak, the West is insincere. When they tell you that values matter, it's a lie because the only real value is money. There is no democracy; democracy is fake and only a window dressing.”

Putin is trying to underline, show, and highlight his theory, his fake narrative, by creating different examples that show the weaknesses of democracy. And for him, the fact that Western countries are not ready to fight is a signal of weakness. As a U.S. diplomat and former ambassador to Russia, you'll perfectly understand that these guys in Russia understand only force and power. So if the West will show them – and not only the West, but Ukraine and the West should do this together – if we will show Putin that he will have as strong a pushback as we are capable of providing, it's absolutely possible not to have a war.

**McFaul:** So, a couple last questions: tell us how this is playing out inside Ukraine and domestic politics inside Ukraine. There's been some reports of conflict between President Zelensky and the so-called oligarchs. There's obviously, as you mentioned already earlier, there's a Russian campaign to undermine democracy inside Ukraine. That's not just troops on the border but all kinds of instruments of influence inside Ukraine. Give our listeners a little sense of what's happening in terms of domestic politics in Ukraine right now.

**Honcharuk:** Domestic politics is complicated because Ukraine is a democracy. And in our imperfect democracy, we have a tough political competition. Zelensky is really trying to show that he's fighting against the oligarchs. I don't think these attempts are very successful, frankly speaking. I think that he could play more effectively and more efficiently. Right now it's only some shades of efficiency, if I may. Of course, he could be more efficient. Of course, everything could be more better, and so on, so forth. But in general, now in Ukraine, the main domestic question and the main topic in our agenda if for sure the possible Russian invasion.

I talk to a lot of people from our political elite, and I would say that they are worried but not scared. So nobody, even the most pro-Russian and the closest to pro-Russian politicians we
have in political spectrum, wants to live in Putin's Russia under those circumstances, because we understand that we are free country and the lives these people have in St. Petersburg and Moscow is incredible, absolutely. That's why Putin doesn't have alliances inside Ukrainian domestic politics, except Mr. Medvedev, who is his friend, as you know. But he's not an oligarch, but an agent of Russia who openly protects and presents the Kremlin's interest in Ukrainian domestic politics.

**McFaul**: So it's just that one person, you would say?

**Honcharuk**: Just this one person. And of course, it's, there are some smaller groups of people, but it's not even significant. So inside Ukraine, he doesn't have alliances. This is very important. But his propaganda is very strong. A lot of people in Ukraine, especially in our eastern part, are still watching all this Russian TV. A lot of people are brainwashed, I would say. This is true, and this is a big problem here in Ukraine. But not only in Ukraine; Russia today is very effective in sharing all this propaganda in Germany, and even in Great Britain and the USA.

**McFaul**: Even in the U.S., yes. They have some supporters of Putin's views. It's kind of amazing, even here in my country.

**Honcharuk**: So, our elites are worried, but not scared, and Putin doesn't have allies inside our politics.

**McFaul**: So, my last question: given what you just described, what do you think is the right policy response from the Biden administration, NATO, and Brussels? What do you think they should be doing? And maybe they're doing the right thing so far? What's your take on their response so far?

**Honcharuk**: First of all, we should recognize this is not a regional conflict. This is not some small conflict between Ukraine and Russia, because it's not. This is a war against democracy. And Russia plays this game and has this war, not only in Ukraine. Ukraine is a main battlefield because it is significant concept for Russia. But it's not the war between Russia and Ukraine. It's a war between concepts, between democracy and the authoritarian world, and Russia is most aggressive actor from that side at the moment. They're maybe not so dangerous as China is in the middle- and long-term perspective, but for sure, much more aggressive here and now tactically.
It's very important to understand that Ukraine is already invaded, and Crimea already annexed, and that West already missed it’s time to give a relevant answer.

McFaul: Right.

Honcharuk: And we should fix this mistake. For Putin, the weak reaction from the West was a signal that it was acceptable to act like this. And that's why Putin is raising the stakes. And that's why Putin will continue to raise the stakes every next year. For him, it's very important to change the situation now because sanctions policy and general Western policy is creating a situation where time is playing against the victim, not against the aggressor. Every year sanctions become less and less effective because the Russian economy adapts in a way that makes the influence of the sanctions become weaker and weaker. Every single year, it becomes harder and harder for Western politicians to maintain these sanctions and support them to prolong them.

And every single year, these events – for example of annexation of Crimea – becomes historical events, not political issues. And for sure, the strategy of Putin is to wait, and to use all his resources to undermine his democratic opponents, and to make sure that the next politicians in the western world will be more flexible. And maybe in 10 years or 15 years when the annexation of Crimea event will have become deep, deep history, he will find some new trade-off with the next generation of democratic leaders.

And now he will play as strong a role as he can and as he capable of to undermine democracy and undermine trust between people in order to make the alliance weaker. This is very understandable strategy to divide in the room. So now time is playing, but not against Russia. And this creates a perfect circumstance for Mr. Putin to continue his aggressive behavior. He will raise the stakes and he will create additional problems for the West, and it will not turn the time against Russia.

I'm sure that the existing model of sanctions is not efficient. We should use a new model of smart or cascading sanctions where the EU adopts a package of sanctions for some period of time, maybe five, seven or ten years, and every next wave, every next package of sanction will automatically come into power if the problem is not solved. So every single day, it raises the price for the aggressor automatically. Then it wouldn't be the problem of politicians to continue sanctions or to make them stronger. The solution should be made one time and create a perspective and perception for investors and, most importantly, for Russian domestic political elites, because they should understand that they will live in a totally
isolated country. And, of course, that it's absolutely unacceptable. This is what we need to do to create the incentives for internal pressure inside Russia and to stimulate the Russian elites to do something with the aggressive, abusive behavior of Mr. Putin.

This is a first layer, or pillar. The second pillar is, of course, to support fragile democracies because these countries are paying a price for all of the Western world. For example, this build-up along our borders affects our economy. For Ukraine, resources become more expensive. It's very complicated and it's very hard to achieve economic growth when you have the possibility of a war tomorrow; nobody will come to invest in your country, and your currency is not very stable. So, it's a very complicated task to grow the economy if you have a possible war tomorrow.

This is exactly what Putin wants to have in Ukraine. The mess and the unsuccessful economy show the Russian people that “If you will choose the democratic path, you will unsuccessful like Ukraine; look what is happening in Ukraine now.”

So, supporting fragile democracies is not just a morally correct choice. It's also reasonable, because the West should share the risks of this possible war with Ukrainians and with Georgians, and with other fragile democracies who are on the front lines from these dangerous, big, aggressive authoritarian states.

It’s reasonable, I believe, to have a normal representative here. It’s hard to imagine this, and I can’t explain this, but the United States hasn’t had an ambassador in Kyiv for at least two years. And this is a big signal. If, for example, the ambassador to Belize is already nominated and the ambassador to Kiev, to Ukraine, is not, it’s a signal for our elites that we are not a priority. It’s a very strange signal and it’s a very big mistake, I believe. I’ve also discussed with you the idea of setting additional, special goal for democracy to make sure that democracy is protected and to make sure that everything possible is done to decrease the level of aggression to not have additional wars, at least.

So these signals may be symbolic signals, but signals are still very important to have. And I believe that this combination between the new sanction policy to create additional pressure – or to put it another way, to create the right incentives to turn the tide of being so aggressive – and secondly the package of support to fragile democracies who are on the front lines in this struggle, and understanding that it's not because of moral choices and not because it's morally right, but because those countries that have paid an additional price – an additional tax, if you will, for democracy, and have taken on additional burdens, because they choose
the democratic path. Ukraine does need a Western support now in a much bigger way than they have now.

**McFaul**: Well, those are some pretty clear ideas. I hope Washington and Brussels are listening to World Class and listening to you, Oleksiy. Thanks for being on our program today.

**Honcharuk**: Thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador, for your attention.

**McFaul**: You’ve been listening to World Class from the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. If you like what you're hearing, please leave a review and be sure to subscribe on Apple, Simplecast and SoundCloud to stay up to date on what’s happening in the world, and why.