

World Class Podcast

“Putin’s Failed War,” in collaboration with the World Affairs podcast
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This transcript has been edited for clarity.

McFaul: Hi, I'm Michael McFaul, host of the World Class podcast and director of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. Today, I'm sharing a recent episode of the World Affairs podcast, which is produced by the World Affairs Council of Northern California.

Ray Suarez: You're listening to World Affairs. I'm Ray Suarez. It's been over seven months since Russian forces invaded Ukraine. And to the surprise of many, the fight still rages on. But these events are not surprising to former U.S. Ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul. We last talked with him back in March right when the war was beginning. And he had some early predictions for how the Ukrainian people would respond to Vladimir Putin's aggression.

[ARCHIVAL TAPE — Suarez]: Has Vladimir Putin perhaps unwittingly created an event and created a moment in international relations that he's going to regret? He might have been trying to exploit splits and tears in various alliances: in NATO, in the EU. Was this a catalytic moment that actually achieves the exact opposite of what Putin was trying to do?

[ARCHIVAL TAPE — McFaul]: Yes, I think he's definitely miscalculated in many ways. He miscalculated how the Ukrainians would fight. He miscalculated How the West would react. He's miscalculated his own people have reacted. I think it will be the blunder that will erase his entire legacy, and in three different buckets.

So first, Ukraine: Putin will never succeed in subjugating the Ukrainian people to autocratic rule from abroad, kind of like what Stalin did in Eastern Europe in the 1940s. That'll never happen. It will never happen. Some will fight with guns in guerrilla warfare tactics. Others will use nonviolent civic resistance tactics. But there's no way. He does not have the power to subjugate that giant country of 44 million people. They will eventually win.

Number two, he has united the West. It's been a rebirth of Europe, I think. Focusing on Europe in particular. There was a lot of disarray in Europe. And Putin had some friends in Europe, by the way: Viktor Orban, Salvini in Italy, Le Pen, and in our country, Mr. Trump. There was a kind of “illiberal international” is what I call it, where he had cultivated these relationships. He's now blown that all apart because of this intervention. And talking to Europeans, I think that

will have lasting effect in terms of their solidarity. And I also believe this will be the beginning of the end of Putin and Putinism inside Russia.

Suarez: And while President Putin is still firmly in power, there are signs he may be more desperate than ever for victory in Ukraine. On September 21, he ordered a draft of Russian reservists mobilizing up to 300,000 troops, the first such call up since World War Two. Putin delivered this message on Russian television.

[NEWS RECORDING]: That was President Putin warning Western countries to stay out of the conflict. The move follows a counterattack in northeastern Ukraine that led to a collapse of Russian forces in that region.

Suarez: Just before Putin's military order, we reached out again to Michael McFaul to get a sense of where the war stands now in his view: what we can expect in the coming weeks and perhaps months, and how it affects Russia's international standing.

Michael McFaul served in the Obama administration as an advisor on Russia policy and then as the U.S. Ambassador to Russia from 2012 to 2014. Since the invasion of Ukraine earlier this year, he's been a ceaseless advocate for Western aid to Kyiv. And he joins us now. Ambassador, welcome back to World Affairs.

McFaul: Thanks for having me back, Ray.

Suarez: In recent days, Vladimir Putin has had his first face-to-face meeting with the Chinese leader Xi Jinping since the long ago days of the Beijing Winter Olympics, which seem even further away than they really are, and the strong declaration of mutual support that came out of Putin's trip to the Winter Games. As he arrived in Kazakhstan, the Russian leader noted that one of his agenda items for the conference was to answer Chinese concern about what he called "the Ukraine crisis." What's going on in that crucial bilateral relationship, do you think?

McFaul: Well, I think it's pretty tense. Publicly, of course, we see that they say the right things and the diplo-speak and all that. At 30,000 feet, there's support and solidarity. But think about that phrase you just used, Ray. I imagine if I said to you, "Ray, I have some concerns about your behavior." That doesn't sound very friendly, does it? And yet, that's exactly what President Putin said he was going to address from his colleague/friend/partner, Xi Jinping.

Then when they met, Putin said, "I appreciate your balanced approach to Ukraine." He didn't say I appreciate your support for my special military operation in Ukraine. "Balanced support." Xi Jinping is balancing? That's not a big sign of support.

Third, if you read the Chinese readout of that meeting — which I did, and I had colleagues check to make sure that the translation was right — Xi Jinping didn't even mention the word Ukraine in his readout of the bilateral meeting that he had with President Putin.

And fourth, to the best of my knowledge — of course, we don't know what happened behind closed doors — but there was no statement of support of new weapons or new ammunition or new microchips, none of that. So, I don't think this is a very successful meeting bilaterally.

And then add to that this is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting. I just went back and I looked at some of the NATO statements that they made in support of Zelenskyy. They are a lot more over-the-top, exuberant, supportive, including economic assistance, military assistance, then the SCO delivered to President Putin at the summit and summer con.

Suarez: Earlier this year, one World Affairs guest, Ling-Ling Way of the *Wall Street Journal* said the Chinese were blindsided by the invasion, that they really didn't even believe it was going to happen until it did. And there's been a lot of reporting since indicating that they're very unhappy. But haven't Beijing's public statements about the war been pretty muted, all the same?

McFaul: Well, yeah, they were. That doesn't surprise me that they were blindsided because President Zelenskyy himself was blindsided. The whole world was, except for the U.S. intelligence organizations that said they saw this coming. President Biden told us about that. So, I think they were surprised.

My reading of what they're saying is that they're also shocked at how poorly the Russian Armed Forces are performing. Remember before February 24, before Putin invaded Ukraine — and I'm writing a book comparing Chinese, American, and Russian power — so even my own book, Ray, if you go back and you read it when I submitted it to a publisher three weeks before the invasion, I was talking about the Russian military as the third most powerful military in the world, after the United States, after China. It turns out that just counting tanks and counting money, GDP per capita spent on your military, does not capture the full extent of capabilities.

And my assessment is at the Chinese, along with many other countries in the world, including our own, are also surprised at how poorly the Russian military has performed. And that must raise doubts. I'm guessing and speculating here, but if you thought you had this loyal, powerful partner — the second and third most powerful countries in the world, China and Russia — and now Russia is not performing, that must make you nervous if you're Xi Jinping.

Suarez: In recent weeks, the war has not been going well for the Russian army. But as you look ahead and try to figure out, “How does this thing end?”, does it mean there's a growing chance that Russia won't accomplish its stated war aims? That it will go home, empty handed

or close to empty handed? Doesn't Russia still have advantages that a much smaller and poorer foe like Ukraine simply can't neutralize?

McFaul: That's a hard question. And I don't have enough confidence to speculate about the future. I want to be honest with you. But where we are at today, I would say definitively: Russia has already lost the war. Remember what Putin said were his objectives when he went in. I watched every word of it. It was 70-minute-long statement he put on TV before he went in.

He said, number one: Ukrainians and Russians, we're just one people. Ukrainians are just Russians with accents. When we come in, I'm going to unite our one people. That didn't happen. The exact opposite has happened.

Number two, he promised to “de-nazify” Ukraine. That is, overthrow the Zelenskyy regime. That didn't happen.

Three, he said — and these his words, not mine; I want to emphasize that — I'm going to demilitarize Ukraine. The exact opposite has happened. Ukraine is much more militarized today than it was before he invaded.

Fourth, he tried to take the capital, the Battle of Kyiv. He lost that battle definitively.

And now fifth, the battle around Kharkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine. He has now lost that battle and a major victory for Ukrainian armed forces. Now, that isn't to say that Ukraine has accomplished its strategic objectives in this war. President Zelenskyy has said, “I aim to liberate *all* territory occupied by the Russians.” That includes Donbas, that includes Crimea, which Putin annexed in 2014. But if you look at the grand strategy of what Putin sought to accomplish, I think he's radically failed already.

Suarez: It's interesting as I look at it, to see Zelenskyy — not moving the goalposts, but let's say, restating grander ambitions to reopen Crimea as a question after the Russian invasion — is something that would have been almost unimaginable on February 25, the day after the invasion began when there was this enormous armored column heading for the Ukrainian capital. The idea that in six months, the President of Ukraine would still be in business and now broadening his ambitions to include Crimea . . . is a little bit of that bluster? Is that meant to continue to keep the West's attention and the rest of the world's attention? Or is there a plausible case to be made for Ukraine's grander ambitions now?

McFaul: Well, you're most certainly right about the history. You know, I speak with Ukrainian officials pretty often these days, and even on occasion with President Zelenskyy himself during the war. And if you go back and as I think about those conversations and what they were saying in the press a month or two into the war, they were talking in a much more

limited way. Now that they've had these achievements and these victories, they're much more optimistic about their capabilities. And who are we to judge whether they're right or wrong? Because we've been wrong in judging their capabilities several times before.

Earlier in our conversation, I said that the U.S. intelligence community was dead on right about predicting Putin's invasion, and I credit them with declassifying that information so that we knew that. But let's also be honest: they were dead wrong about how long the Ukrainian forces would fight. We pulled our embassy out. We left. And we advised Zelensky to leave, right? And he said, "No, go ahead, guys. Go to Poland. I'm staying here in Kyiv." And they defeated the Russian army on the outskirts of Kyiv in a way that nobody predicted.

This counter offensive around Kharkiv, the second largest city of Ukraine: another extraordinary achievement. So, who am I to say, and who is anybody to say, that they don't have the capabilities to achieve these bigger objectives?

Suarez: Well, Zelenskyy has unquestionably played his hand pretty well, such as it is. And I wonder, when I see him speak. He understands the effect his words have in other places in the world. He knows he's being watched very closely. I wonder sometimes if this isn't part of the overall operation of keeping the West engaged and keeping those weapons flowing: "See? We're doing such a good job with the stuff you're giving us. Please give more."

Is that reasonable?

McFaul: I think that's exactly right. Moreover, I think they believe they had to launch this counter offensive right now before the winter comes to demonstrate to their supporters that they were on the move, that this was not just going to be a grinding war for years and years and years — kind of a World War I — kind of thing that would just deplete our resources and then lead to a stalemate. They calculated that that would not be sustainable, and I think it has absolutely this counter offensive had to first and foremost defeat the Russians, but second, to keep their supporters behind them.

And I would say, a few days several days now into it, that the counter offensive is having that effect. People like to support winners. And people don't like to support losers, by the way, as Mr. Putin is learning from his summit with Xi Jinping. And so, I think it's as had that effect.

I don't want to pretend that I know if it will continue to have that effect. And the fighting around Kherson, the second counter offensive down on the south, is going a lot slower than the one up in the north. But so far, I do think it has had that effect in rallying the free world behind the Ukrainian cause.

Suarez: You have been publicly very supportive of continuing to give Ukraine weapons and not to be very, very punctilious about this weapon system and not that weapon system. From

some of the cases I've seen you make both speaking and writing, you look pretty confident that they'll make good use of what we give them, and that the risk of not giving those weapons is greater than the risk of giving them. Are there red lines? The Russians would imply, if you watch their statements, that there are certain weapons that if they were given to Ukraine, which would be perceived as an expansion of the war, as a provocation to Russia, as something dangerous for Ukraine to have.

Is that bluster on their side? Is the West being too timid in what it gives Ukraine?

McFaul: Well, first, I want to be very clear about my position. I want the West to give the weapons Ukraine needs to end the war. I want to save Ukrainian lives.

I sometimes get accused that I'm a warmonger. I see it exactly the opposite. Putin will not stop fighting until the Ukrainian army stops him on the battlefield. It is naive to me, that somehow some Western leaders going to fly into Moscow and tell Putin to stop fighting as long as he's marching forward. So for me, if you really want peace in Ukraine, arm the Ukrainians. That's the way you end this war faster than the alternative strategy of just letting this bleed forever. That's number one.

Number two: about red lines. It's a hard question. I obviously don't have access to secret information or intelligence like I used to when I worked in the government. But when I look at these debates about MIG 29s or Soviet fighter aircraft legacy that are around, or longer-range missiles that can go into Moscow and deeper into Russia. And there's been hesitancy on the Biden team to provide those for fear of escalation. I would just say two things:

One, I respect how difficult it is to make those really tough decisions by the Biden administration and ultimately, the President himself.

Two: the bluster about nuclear weapons and biological weapons and “trap the rat into the corner and he's going to strike back irrationally.” I think that has been overstated. Putin does not strike me — and I used to note Putin. I used to work with him. I've written about him for three decades — he doesn't strike me as a suicidal leader.

Just look at where he sits in these meetings. He sits very far away from people. He doesn't want to catch COVID and die. He does not want to blow up the world. I don't believe that at all. And I don't think we've seen the evidence.

If you look closely at what he and his advisers are saying, they are saying we'll only use nuclear weapons if Russia faces an existential threat to their existence. Well, they don't. And so I think we need to not be flippant about those threats — take them seriously — but stay the course.

Suarez: There's been an interesting convergence between left and right in this country and across the West. People who think of themselves as inhabiting very different ideological spaces, but say they've come to a similar conclusion: that it's Joe Biden's fault that this war is continuing, that big swaths of Ukraine are being destroyed, that so many civilians have died because the Western alliance rallied by the American president has given Ukraine the wherewithal to fight back. Have you seen that rhetoric, and what do you make of it?

McFaul: Well, I've definitely seen that rhetoric and I radically disagree. I'll tell you why in a minute. But I've also encountered other rhetoric. You're old enough, like me, to know who Joan Baez is. Arguably, she's got pretty good credentials in terms of peacenik credentials. I have a painting a print of a painting that Joan Baez did of Volodymyr Zelenskyy sitting in my office right here that she gave to me personally at an event in support of Ukraine.

And I just tell you that little anecdote because people have changed their minds on this to understand that this is a war of imperialism. This is a war of annexation. This is a neo-colonial power trying to re-colonize its country. And so for those on the left and those progressives, I would like to remind them — and I consider myself a progressive — that we used to be against colonization. We used to be for independence. We used to be for democracy, against autocracy. And I would like people to remember those traditions that go back decades in that progressive movement. That is right frame to think about this tragic war now.

Secondly, you are right that there is this alliance and a re-shifting happening. And it's on many different political issues in our country, between the right and the left. And I would just say: Is it moral? Is it moral to watch a country with the firepower that Putin's army has, to kill innocent children and to say we shouldn't defend them? That we should just let them be slaughtered until so many of them have been slaughtered, that President Zelenskyy needs to capitulate? Because that actually is the argument. That's the argument you're making implicitly when you say we shouldn't arm the Ukrainians to defend themselves, and I don't think that's a very moral argument.

Suarez: If nothing else, your answer has established your Bay Area cred because you've gotten a print from Joan Baez.

McFaul: It is in my office right now for everybody who comes by to see me.

Suarez: It slid by a lot of the people; maybe they're doing their dishes, maybe they're not paying that close attention. But yes, Michael McFaul got a print from Joan Baez.

There's talk of a wider mobilization now inside Russia, of bringing Belarus, which also borders Ukraine into the war, opening another front that Ukraine has to defend. Could this get worse, in part because Putin has to avoid humiliation or because he has to retaliate against humiliation already suffered?

With attacks against the enormous dam inside Ukraine — something that's holding back billions of gallons of water and would be a massive destructive event — in the wake of these latest losses in eastern Ukraine, the Russians have been shelling this dam. It has no strategic importance. It has no importance as a military objective. It's just to mess them up. Could we see this on a wider scale and see that it is pretty dangerous to be beating Russia?

McFaul: Well, a couple of things. I would just note that Ukrainian armed forces attack military targets and in response, the Russian Armed Forces attack civilian targets. That's terrorism. I'm not an expert; I don't know what the exact definition of terrorism is, but that feels like a terrorist act to me. They're not counter attacking the Ukrainian Armed Forces. They're literally trying to shut down the electricity grid and literally trying to drown people.

This is a horrific war. And I think people need to remember the barbarism of the methods that Putin's army is fighting. That's the first thing.

Second: Yes, I'm deeply worried about Putin striking back. I watch Russian television and the networks that are controlled by the Kremlin. And you hear a lot of criticism and everybody's pointing who's at fault here. They're never blaming Putin, by the way. They're blaming the generals, the intelligence officer, etc. Putin could never be wrong. But the guys around him are at fault. A few brave people are saying it's time to sue for peace. But most of them are saying it's time to double down and it's time to go forward. And I think that is a predicate that Putin is laying down to get his society ready to try to up the ante. I hope I'm wrong. But I'm nervous about that scenario.

Suarez: Well, it was interesting to see, as you note, that after that retreat from a big chunk of eastern Ukraine, the cracks may be starting to show. Some of the official sources, some of the stalwart supporters, the cheerleaders in Moscow-based media, think tanks analysts are starting to express a little doubt. What's significant is that they're expressing it publicly about the so-called “special operation.”

McFaul: Yes, that's new. I know these debates have been going on behind closed doors from the beginning of the war among the elites in Moscow, including even in Putin's government. This notion that they're all behind him supporting this is not my impression at all.

In fact, I have a hard time thinking of a single Russian living in Russia, who's benefiting from this war. The oligarchies aren't. The military isn't. The intelligence is being blamed that they had it all wrong. Mr. Putin doesn't look like some great figure on the international stage because of this war. So, when everybody's losing, that makes people point fingers at each other. And I wouldn't be surprised if you see some resignations and people pushed out, sacrificial lambs so to say.

There's defense minister Shoigu, for instance, there's a lot of chatter about him that maybe it's time for him to go. But that doesn't mean that they'll say it's time for negotiations. I think the response may be that it's time for a bigger military mobilization.

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And we want to hear from you. What did you think about today's episode? Are there any other international stories you'd like us to be covering? Please send an email or a voice memo to feedback@worldaffairs.org. Now back to Ambassador McFaul.

People are pointing to the stabilization of the ruble, the fact that the shopping streets in Moscow are still full even though there are a lot of close storefronts because Western retailers have left. Extraction based exports are still getting out and being sold on world markets. They're pointing to these things as evidence that the Russian economy has pretty effectively weathered the strong list of sanctions from the West. And it's not easy to nail down how good or how bad things really are. What are you hearing?

McFaul: Well, a couple of things I'd say on sanctions. First, people say those things that you said and those are all accurate statements of life in Russia, and they say sanctions aren't working. And to that, I say, well, does that mean we shouldn't have sanctioned Russia? That we should have done nothing as a result of this horrible, barbaric war of colonization?

Sometimes you just do the right thing, irrespective of whether it achieve your results immediately. That's the first thing. It was the right thing to sanction Russia, and I think we should be ratcheting up the sanctions every single day.

Second, the aggregate numbers look good for Russia because the price of oil and gas went up because of their war. It went up because of their war, and they're reaping the benefits of that in the short term. But when you look within sectors, some sectors are being hit really hard because of the sanctions on exports of critical technologies.

The car industry in Russia is down 80% year-to-year. It's hard to trace this because it's all done in secret, but I think they're not capable of reproducing a lot of their precision weapons because of these export controls on technology. And I think when the history of this war has been written, that's something people are going to be focused on a lot.

Third, the biggest sanctions haven't come yet. The biggest sanctions are coming in December when the Europeans are going to reduce by significant numbers their imports of gas from Russia, and the G7 countries are going to lead an effort to put a price cap on all exports of

Russian oil. I don't know if it'll succeed. We know we're not there yet. But if it does succeed, that will have a radical impact on those bloated numbers that the Russians have.

And then finally and tragically as somebody who spent a good part of my life living in the Soviet Union in Russia, and always had hoped for Russia integrating into the West and becoming part of the democratic Europe, I think those aspirations are not going to happen anytime soon. We can't underestimate the long-term negative effects of these sanctions for Russia's future.

Over 1,000 Western companies have left. That means the innovation, that technology that comes with those companies is also being pulling out. When Exxon Mobil pulled out of Russia, that means technology for their oil industry that we would have been seeing the results of for decades and the future is going to be lost.

And finally, tens of thousands of the best and the brightest of Russians have left Russia. They're here they're in the Silicon Valley. It's hard to measure, you know, in the short term, what that means, but I think in the long term, it will be pretty catastrophic for Russia's economy. And Putin did all that by invading Ukraine.

Suarez: Or in another version of the scenario that you just sketched out, what the Russian president has done is basically lead his country out of the 30-year experiment of enmeshing with the West, of relations that helped bring up the living standards, at least in the big cities of western Russia.

Every time I see a Russian shopping mall, there's Zara, and there's Starbucks, and there's Adidas and all these well-known retailers from the Western world's shopping malls. There's the lovingly videographed escalator shots where the cameraman is coming down the escalator and the tableau widens out and you see the same shops that you'd see in Madrid, or Paris, or London. Well, they're all shuttered now.

But they are going to find Chinese equivalents. And Vladimir Putin has basically thrown in his lot as a junior partner — which probably is tough for Russians to swallow — but a junior partner of China and is now moving into its orbit. Maybe it's a big difference and it will feel different to Russians who have gotten used to being able to go into H&M, or Zara, or Adidas and buy a pair of sneakers or a new tracksuit. But instead, they'll be buying Lina branded gear. They'll be buying Asian brands that you'll see in shopping malls in Seoul and Shanghai, and that all of this is just trading one big brother for another, in effect.

McFaul: Well, I think that'll be the long-term implication, yes. But I think one needs to think about what that means. It's not just trading one for the other. Tell me what the Chinese equivalent of Zara is, and why aren't they selling in downtown Moscow today? That's because

Russians elites want to shop at Zara. They don't want the second tier and third tier of those other brands, otherwise those brands would already be there.

Those brands are also in Beijing and Shanghai. And it reminds me of the Cold War. I lived in the Soviet Union. Yeah, they had tennis shoes. But they weren't as good as Adidas tennis shoes, right? Yeah, they had t-shirts. They weren't as nice. And that I think, is part of it on the consumer side.

Let's talk about some other things. Yes, Russia will eventually be able to sell its oil and gas on other markets, but at a big discount. Right now, it's at a 30% discount. In the long term, that's going to have big negative consequences for their economy. Let's talk about chips. Everybody says, "Oh, we'll just take out the Western made chips, or the Taiwanese made chips, and we'll plug in the Chinese chips." For one it's not that easy to do that. I know Russian companies that are reliant on Western chips. Their whole platforms are from the West; you just can't take one piece out and put a Chinese chip in. A), It's not going to be the cutting-edge technology, and B), you're going to be dependent on the Chinese over the long run.

And so I don't think in the long term that that is a strategic, positive thing for Russia. And you know what? Lots of Russians agree with me. Right now, they're quiet. Right now, they're not speaking out. But this very conversation is exactly a conversation I have had with Russian elites. And someday in a post Putin world, they're going to be a lot louder. And I predict that people don't want to be behind some Chinese firewall just buying Chinese goods, but that they're going to want to integrate someday again with the West.

Suarez: Politicians in the United States have to worry about being elected. Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping don't have to worry about being reelected. Can Putin more cavalierly, more easily cause several years of dislocation, readjustment, and pain because he wants to? Right now, they're talking about renegotiating energy sales deals and reorienting the technology that brings gas and oil and send those pipelines East instead of West.

Yeah, it's going to be uncomfortable for a couple of years because that takes time; you don't just flip a switch and suddenly there are thousands of miles of pipelines heading east. But it will get done, and eventually India, and China, and other places will be buying that oil instead of Finland, and Poland, and Germany. Putin has got time on his side, doesn't he?

McFaul: Putin personally may. And by the way, but you know, knock yourself out sending all those fossil fuels to China and India. I think it's a great thing that Europe has made this very historic and difficult decision to get off their reliance on fossil fuels. It's short-term pain, but long-term benefit, both for their economies and for the world, and for green technology development. I think this is a very positive pivot.

But secondly, you're right. It's easier to withstand sanction in dictatorships than democracies. I worked in the Obama administration, as you know, and I was part of the team that put in place sanctions against Iran in 2010, which were the most sweeping sanctions we ever had against Iran. It took us five more years before they started negotiating with us on the Iran nuclear deal. And that's a much smaller economy where he had a lot more leverage.

So, the idea that just seven months into a sanctions regime, for an autocratic regime like Russia with way more resources than Iran, that's naive to think that it would have that effect. But I would say two things in the long run:

Number one: the goal of sanctions is not just to get Putin to change his mind. The goal of sanctions, in my view, is to limit his ability to kill Ukrainians. And so, when he doesn't have those technologies to replenish his smart bombs, and when he has fewer resources from selling, because he has to sell at a 30% discount to the Indians and Chinese, that to me is a good thing in and of itself.

But number two, I think this is the beginning of the end of this kind of regime. Let's call it "Putinism," or the dictatorship that he built. You're absolutely right; this isn't going to happen while Putin is in power. I don't see a scenario where there's a coup or revolution against Putin himself. His regime is too strong.

But the day after Putin, whenever that comes, what's the crazier scenario? Let's just keep doing this in a Putin 2.0? Let's go to Tehran and Beijing and those places for holidays. Let's not go to Barcelona anymore. There's a big debate about tourism there. Let's just shop for those products we were talking about before. We don't care about those Western products.

I actually don't think that argument is going to win out. I think there's going to be a big argument about that. And I can't predict for sure, but I don't think we should assume that that long-term strategy is one that the majority of Russian elites — because the elites are the ones that bring about these changes — I think there's going to be a big fight about Russia's future.

Suarez: Well, the oligarchs themselves buy real estate on Manhattan Island, in Knightsbridge, in London, and they park their boats in Cap d'Antibes on the French Riviera. So, I think they're, they're voting with their feet, too.

Speaking of who has to get elected: I wonder if the calendar isn't the West's friend right now. Olaf Scholz of Germany just took office. Emmanuel Macron of France was just reelected. Liz Truss, foreign minister and now Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, just came to office and doesn't have to face voters until perhaps early 2025. Ursula von der Leyen of the EU: they've all been strong and public supporters of Ukraine struggle to expel the Russians. But they face a very tough winter.

You extolled and praised the Europeans for taking the very difficult decision to try to wean themselves off of Russian energy resources. But boy, if it's 65 degrees or 60 degrees in your living room in November and December, you're not going to necessarily be praising Olaf Scholz or Prime Minister Truss.

McFaul: Well, it's going to be a tough winter in Europe for sure, without question. Having said that, I am deeply impressed with all those leaders you just described. It was not preordained that they would respond the way they did to the war in Ukraine. And that's what Putin calculated on. He thought we in the West, including the United States, would respond like we did in 2014 when he first invaded Ukraine and seized Crimea. And I give them a lot of credit, along with the Biden administration, for bringing that coalition together. That's a lot of hard work to bring it together.

Number two: when you look at public opinion polling, what's striking is that societies are supporting Ukraine in some ways beyond where their leaders are. Germany is very striking that way, because they see this as a moment of solidarity with their European brothers and sisters in Ukraine. And I'm very struck by that.

Number three: I think Europe is actually more prepared for this winter than I think conventional wisdom describes. They have been getting ready. They've been helped by their colleagues in Norway and using their supplies. They're not quite to 100%, but they're getting close. I don't think it's going to be as tough of a winter as we're all describing. Not you and me, Ray, but those others that are talking about it!

And then number four: I was just having this conversation with a European friend of mine. Nobody likes to be extorted. Nobody likes to be blackmailed. This idea that Putin is going to make them suffer, and therefore Europeans are going to say, "Oh my goodness, we've got to lift sanctions and be friends with this guy that's freezing us." That wouldn't be my response to that. I would be more angry with Putin if I was sitting, being cold.

And I think the Russians have miscalculated on this. I think they're underestimating the reaction many Europeans might have to being extorted, to being blackmailed, to being coerced. I hope that's not just my optimism. But I just think it's a basic psychological thing that when somebody is coercing you to do something, your response is not to say, "Oh yeah, you're right, Mr. Putin." It might be the exact opposite: "I'm willing to be a little colder and to pay a little more to get back at that guy that tried to do this to me."

Suarez: What you just described, sounds to me like the bell tolling for that multi-decade project of trying to draw Russia into Europe. When I think back to the interviews I did with people like Jeffrey Sachs, with members of the Russian intelligencia who were going to international conferences in the 1990s and talking about making Russia into a normal

country, making it into a country that's knit into the values of a reforming Eastern Europe. There were new governments in Poland and the Czech Republic and Slovakia. People were looking very optimistically at a post-Cold War world which looks very different from the one you and I are talking in right now.

I know nothing's forever, but you were a big part of that time too, and watched it very closely. Are you sad, watching it all come apart? It is not going to happen. The Putin world he imagines seems to be absolutely diametrically opposed to the one that optimistic Eastern European experts were talking to me about in 1992 and 1994, and even during the shabby, shambolic end of the Yeltsin era when it finally came.

McFaul: Without question, I was part of that. And I firmly believed after the democratic forces brought down the Soviet Union. And notice how I said that. It wasn't Reagan. It wasn't the West. It was the "small-d" democrats inside the Soviet Union — Russians, Ukrainians, Estonians, Georgians — they were the ones that won the Cold War. And I wanted to do everything I could to help them. That's been a big part of my life for the last three decades, and so yes, it is sad for me. Without question, it is tragic that that didn't work. Moreover, friends of mine are in jail right now in Russia. Friends of mine have been killed by this regime and their proxies. It is a tragedy of my life. I want to be very honest with you.

And therefore, I say two things. One: while Putin is in power, I see no option whatsoever to try to go back to that project. And instead, I think we just have to gut it out and go back to containment. Cooperate when you must on things like arms control as we did during the Cold War, but don't think that we can go back to some relationship with Putin that will lead to reintegration again.

After Putin, I think we got to be prepared and be ready if there's a possibility again for integration, but again, not while Putin is there. And in the meantime, we have to do everything we can to make Ukraine successful. Ukraine has not integrated into the West, yet. Ukraine is not integrated into the European Union. Ukraine has a lot of work that they'll have to do after this war ends. \$750 billion of damage has been done by estimates that they have in Kyiv. And so we should lean in to help preserve and deepen democracy, and markets, and the European integration of Ukraine. Both because it's the right thing to do for Ukraine, but also as a model for future small-d democrats inside Russia.

There's nothing more powerful, I think, to inspire Russian democrats than to see their fellow Ukrainians succeed at democracy. In fact, I'm just paraphrasing one of my friends who was assassinated in 2015. His name was Boris Nemtsov. He was a young democrat, part of the 90s that you were just talking about, an incredibly charismatic leader. Had he become the president of Russia in 2000 — and there was a chance that he might — I think this history could have been very different. But things were really dark in his country, so dark that eventually he was assassinated.

I used to meet with Boris when I was ambassador, and he would always say, “If you want to help democrats like me here inside Russia, help Ukraine succeed. Putin wants everybody to believe that here’s some Slavic gene that yearns for autocracy. Nothing can undermine that mythology more than a democratic Ukraine.”

Suarez: Well, if there was a recipe that a chef had to put together to intensify Ukrainian nationalism, it seems like Vladimir Putin has perfected it. Before 2014, even before February 2022 Ukrainian nationalism, the sense of Ukrainian-ness, the fidelity and the embrace of the language of the long history of a distinct and separate people has been intensified, has been romanticized, has been reinforced. I mean, I'm only half kidding, but it seems like Vladimir Putin is one of the best friends Ukrainian nationalism has ever had. If he meant to break the will of the Ukrainian people and break the sense of their separate and distinctive identity, he seems to have failed at that more thoroughly than he failed in his military objectives.

McFaul: I agree. In that speech he gave before he invaded and in the long article he wrote a few months before the war, he tried to explain to his people and to Ukrainians into the world that they were one nation divided by Western powers. He even blamed the Bolsheviks, by the way, for dividing them. And yet, nobody has done more to unify the Ukrainian people, nation, and culture than Vladimir Putin. I think that's fair to say. I just wish it wasn't at such a tragic price.

Remember, Ukrainians are being killed every single day by this guy. And I know it weighs heavily on Presidents Zelenskyy’s days and nights. For his government, they are happy to be united, but every single day another Ukrainian soldier dies, another Ukrainian grandmother dies, another Ukrainian child dies. It just shows the terrible cost that they've had to pay for the rebirth of their nation.

Suarez: Even in Donetsk and Luhansk, people that were generally Russo-files seem to have been turned off of Russia. Being occupied for the last six months seems to have given them a reality check about what it means to be embraced by the bear. I'm hearing reports from international broadcasters who say there are people saying, “Thank God, you're here!” to the Ukrainian forces liberating their villages, because “those guys mistreated us.” And these were people who were assumed to be pro-Russian, that were Russian speakers. They were assumed to be glad to go along with the project of hiving off Eastern Ukraine and all but subsuming it into Russia. And they've been turned off by what's happened since the beginning of this year.

To me, it was very telling to hear some grandmother talking about all the needless death and all the needless suffering, and these were supposed to be his friends and the ones who are welcoming Russian forces and the re-Russification of that region of the country. It's hard to

fully express the miscalculation that's going on. If you're going to send people in and take over a place, I can't understand the calculation of doing it the way they did it.

McFaul: That's a great point, Ray. You know, Russia's hearts and minds game was really weak. They just thought they're going to be embraced and it didn't happen. But they really didn't do anything to bring that on. And in the separatist regions of Donbas, they've been there for eight years and it's a horrible mess, right? They haven't done that.

But I also want to give credit to President Zelenskyy, because he could have made this an ethnic-nationalist kind of fight, but he hasn't. It's a civic nationalism that he has nurtured. Remember, his native tongue is Russian. He learned Ukrainian second. He's from the East. He has Jewish ancestry. And so, he understands that to unite Ukraine is not just to unite it along ethnic bloodlines. And I think he's been quite brilliant at doing that.

He has now been to those liberated territories. It's just incredibly emotional to watch him show up there. I mean, think about what a brave, heroic act it is to go to these places where he could easily be targeted. But he has done that in a very cautious, careful way.

Even here at Stanford, I hosted him here in-person last summer, but he spoke to our students last May again, and somebody from Russia, one of our students, got up and asked him a question. And I'll tell you honestly that as the host of it, I was nervous about that. And I could see there was nervousness in the room: "Oh my gosh, here's an enemy. Somebody from the enemy has gotten up ask a question."

And she asked, number one, what can we do to help your country? And he just embraced that moment and he said, "We have no beef with you. We have no beef with the Russian people." And I think it was such an emotional moment that captures that he understands that this is a fight for civic nationalism, for the birth of the country of Ukraine, and not about ethnic lines. And I give him a lot of credit for getting that right.

Suarez: I don't want to sound like a fanboy. And I'm not; I try to assess him like I'd watch the actions of any politician. But I have to tell you, I've been watching . . . I don't know if I'm saying it correctly . . . *Sluha Narodu*, or "Servant of the People," on Netflix. And it's eerie, frankly, to watch President Goloborodko, played by Volodymyr Zelenskyy, talking with his government partners, his opponents in the parliament and having — sarcastically or satirically — some of the same conversations he has no doubt been forced to have by the Russian invasion.

There are jokes about Putin in that show, and jokes about the threat from Russia. There are jokes about the Central Bank and the value of the hryvnia. It is just amazing, the portents, the foretastes in that show. But also tragically, shot through the dialogue, shot through even the jokes, is an ominous feeling that you can never quite be free of Russia.

And this was a comedy. This was a satire. But here we are now, all these months into the invasion, and watching that show just gets eerier and eerier when you see the things that they're dealing with on a day-to-day basis.

This man who was never expected to become president is now the president that just a few years ago, he was playing in a comedy series. Sometimes it just seems like all too much. As you as you watch this show, he seems to have met the moment. Perhaps arguably, it's his skill as an actor that's helping him do that. But one way or another, he's figured this out, and on the fly.

McFaul: Well, I'm quite impressed by him, too. And I would remind you that on the eve of the war, there was a lot of division inside Ukraine about him. There was a lot of skepticism in the West about his leadership, and would he be up to this task or not? And I think he's proved all of his critics wrong. And many of his critics are now supporters of him inside Ukraine. These are people I know personally who think that he has really risen to the occasion.

And something I would say too, is that he doesn't sweat the small things. He understands what's strategic and what's trivial. I just made a mistake while we were talking about 10 minutes ago. I called him "Vladimir." It's "Volodymyr." I used the Russian because Russian is so deeply embedded.

For some Ukrainians, that would be deeply insulting to them. For him, because I've chatted with him, those are the things that he doesn't sweat because he knows the bigger stakes here. And he was not chosen for this, as you said. He never thought that he was going to be in this moment. But when the moment was there, he understood what his job was. He did not flee. He chose to stay. And we don't know how the war ends. Let's be careful here. We're still we've got a long way to go, tragically. But I think one would be hard pressed to think about somebody who has performed so well under such very difficult circumstances.

Suarez: You're right that we don't know how the war ends. But while it's going on, the Russians are moving ahead with techniques of 21st-century warfare, you might say, which are disturbing. One is the mass movement of civilians into Russia proper, basically just loading them up and taking them out of the country and scattering them across Russia. That could be construed as a war crime.

On the ground in the places that they have occupied since 2014, in many cases, but also since February, they have pulled down all the billboards, all the street signs, everything that's in Ukrainian and replaced them with Russian-language signage and messaging. They've installed Russian speakers in every office up and down the food chain from a street sweeper to the mayor to provincial governor.

They are holding elections in places. They are moving ahead as if they already control these places for the long haul with a kind of Russification that is disturbing and creepy, not just tactical and political. And it is showing us a different aspect of war that bears watching, I think

Putting the ruble back in place in these places, taking down all the Ukrainian language radio stations or jamming their signals and replacing them just with Russian. They are prosecuting a cultural war along with one fought with bullets and armor. Is this getting enough attention?

McFaul: No, it's not Ray. I'm glad you brought it up. Because this kind of war actually is not new. It's old. This is pre-1945. When I was listening to your talk, I was thinking, "Is he going to compare this to Stalin, or Hitler?" Because some of those tactics are ones that both of those guys did. And if you go back further, these are wars of imperialism where people were wiped out, and people were not allowed to speak certain languages and their cultures were destroyed.

Putin is actually a pre-20th century guy or 20th-century circa 1939 guy. We thought we ended that with 1945. That's what I was trying to get to. That was such a horrific war, with its civilian killings, as we all know, and the Holocaust, that we said, "No more of this." And we set up an institution called the United Nations to put some parameters about the kinds of wars and the kinds of things that were going to be allowed. "Thou shall not annex the territory of thy neighbor." Implicitly, that was one of the Ten Commandments of that time.

And there has been limited annexation since 1945. There have been pockets of it, but nothing along the scale that you just described. I could be wrong, and your listeners will probably tell me that I am wrong and will let us know.

But it's horrific. It's barbaric. And it's a return to a time that I thought we had escaped, to be honest. And I think it is important for us to remember that Putin doesn't care about basic human existence, and he's demonstrated by the way he is fighting by the way he is shipping innocent people into his country. He doesn't play by basic rules of the game that we thought were in place after 1945.

Suarez: Is that stuff hard to undo? Is he trying to create realities on the ground that leave a long-lasting mark on the place, even if what flag flies from the flagpole in front of the city hall changes?

McFaul: I don't know. I think it matters who wins. And that's the part that we don't know. The cities that have just been liberated, over the last six months as you just talked about, that was a short enough time that they were greeting their liberators, and there were ceremonies of people watching those Ukrainian flags go up and then celebrations. If the Russians are there for decades, maybe that's different. And I hope that they won't be there for decades. But we don't know how this war ends yet.

Suarez: It's always a pleasure to talk to you, Ambassador. Michael McFaul was the U.S. Ambassador to Moscow from 2012 to 2014. He's written a number of books that I urge you to seek out on that part of the world. And his own life has been enmeshed in that part of the world since he was a college student, so he knows what he's talking about. Always good to have you with us. I hope the next time we talk we're closer to the end than to the beginning.

McFaul: Thanks for having me, Ray. Great to chat.

Suarez: You've been listening to World Affairs, produced in partnership with KQED with funding from TPG, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and from listeners like you.

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