

## **Putin and Ukraine**

What Happens Next – 08.20.22

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, finance, history, politics and current events.

Today's session will be on Putin and Ukraine.

Our speaker will be Mark Galeotti who is the author of the books *We Need to Talk About Putin* and *The Weaponization of Everything*. Mark will speak about Putin's war objectives and his implementation strategy. A couple of months ago the Russian government banned Mark from entering the country.

What Happens Next uses a team of interns and I have job openings. Interns improve the podcast by selecting topics of discussion, editing, marketing and production. If you're interested, please let me know.

I make this podcast to learn and I offer this program free of charge to anyone that is interested. Please tell your friends about it and have them sign-up to receive our weekly emails about upcoming shows. If you wish, you can send me your email list and I will take care of it.

Let's begin with Mark Galeotti and his opening presentation.

Mark Galeotti:

The basic thesis of my book, *The Weaponization of Everything*, is that good old-fashioned war, large scale conventional Shoot-y stuff, is increasingly untenable as an instrument of policy. It doesn't mean to say that it's going to go away entirely, but that it is becoming much, much less useful because it's no longer a case in which national power and wealth could be measured necessarily by oil fields and coal mines. A lot of it is in terms of intangibles, which you can't just simply seize. The costs of war have increased so dramatically. If you take the entire RAF air fleet that defended Britain during the battle of Britain in World War II, add together the cost, convert it to modern money, you can buy six F 35 fighter jets.

But it's not just simply about the financial costs. There are the political costs that even authoritarian regimes nowadays have to worry about. There's international law. There is the fact that our economies are now interconnected and therefore when we invade other countries, we are also actually damaging our own markets.

But international tensions are not going away. Rivalries are being moved into the economy, into law, into politics, into information, into all these other kinds of spheres. And although it might seem bizarre to say that, given the book came out one month before Putin invaded Ukraine.

Before he invaded; Putin was winning in a non-kinetic struggle. Now he's invaded. At best, he can hope for a stalemate. So this is the basic future. It's less shooting but lots of conflict in other realms instead.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks, Mark. What motivated Putin to invade Ukraine?

Mark Galeotti:

First, he genuinely believed that Ukraine was not really a country, Ukrainians were not a real people and that this was going to be easy and quick. Within two weeks, Ukraine would've been subjugated, a puppet regime installed, and that the costs were going to be relatively low. Secondly, in terms of the gains, this is not so much about territory. This is actually about politics and that is one constant that doesn't change.

He is an aging man. He's going to be 70 in October. There's a part of him that does want to step back from active governance of the country. And I think his view was that taking Ukraine would be the crowning triumph. It would establish his place in the pantheon of great Russian state building hero leaders, and mean that he was politically unassailable. The trickiest thing for an authoritarian ruler like Putin, when there's no meaningful rule of law, is stepping away. All your power, your protection, everything is based upon your position, but when you step down and you're no longer behind the big desk, you are entirely dependent upon the goodwill of your successor. I think this idea was it would make him pretty much politically bulletproof.

Larry Bernstein:

What lessons did Putin learn from his invasion of Crimea that he applied to Ukraine?

Mark Galeotti:

Crimea was in many ways a textbook seizure of power, a special operation in which only five people died in the entire operation. It managed by the most basic of tactics to seemingly bamboozle the West. They weren't wearing insignia and they weren't admitting who they were. Well, this is not exactly groundbreaking tactic to lie in war, but it did paralyze both Ukrainians and the West for a crucial day and a half, which allowed them to seize the peninsula. But the key thing about Crimea was that it was at a time when the Ukrainian state had pretty much collapsed following the flight of the previous deeply corrupt leader, Yanukovich. The Russians had established all kinds of networks of agents within the security forces. And most importantly the majority of the people in Crimea probably did want to become part of the Russian Federation.

And because it was such a small-scale military operation, the Russians were able to use their best special forces. Now, obviously, Ukraine -- a country of more than 40 million people -- they can't just simply rely on their elite forces. The Ukrainian nation had managed reconstitute itself very effectively in the eight years since. So, totally different circumstances.

Remember Putin has no actual military experience. This is a man who did only his absolute minimum reserve service training when he was at university. He ditched it as soon as he got out and joined the KGB. He's entirely dependent on what people tell him about the military. This is a man who looked at a small, self-contained, very different military operation and thought somehow that you can just simply scale up and take a country easily.

Larry Bernstein:

Mike Tyson famously said that everyone's got a plan until you get hit in the nose. I can see Putin had been misinformed by his senior military advisors. He got hit in the nose. Why didn't he apply in his inner Tyson and make a new plan?

Mark Galeotti:

It took him a while to fully appreciate what was happening. At first, he thought that they could just simply send some paratroops rolling into central Kiev and essentially arrest the government. Well, that didn't happen. So, then they sent a military column towards Kiev to take it militarily. That column ended up getting bogged down. Putin's not as operationally nimble as we sometimes assume. There is this huge mythology about Putin that he's this grand geopolitical, chess master. He's not actually. He's very limited.

They did give up on the idea of taking Kiev and instead consolidate on trying to take the Southeast of the country, the land bridge to Crimea. He was quite reluctant to change tactics quickly, because that would be considered to be at least a tactical defeat.

Larry Bernstein:

In your book entitled, *We Need to Talk about Putin*, you describe Putin as being cautious. Events determine his actions more than he determines events. His aggressive actions in Ukraine are inconsistent with that framework. Why did he decide to act out in this specific case, why did he go for it?

Mark Galeotti:

I thought that there was all talk of war, that it wouldn't happen. I was wrong. Has Putin changed dramatically? Or have I misread him? I think this was the familiar and recognizable Putin. He did not think he was taking a risk. Putin, like so many authoritarian rulers, becomes more and more surrounded by people who either echo his ideological perspective or just simply are yes-men. He did so without fully appreciating just how big a chance he was taking, because he surrounds him with people who reassure him rather than challenge him.

Larry Bernstein:

Why didn't Putin proclaim victory after the first couple of weeks and then agree to some sort of a peace deal?

Mark Galeotti:

The Ukrainians weren't willing to make that kind of a deal. President Zelensky is careful about the nationalist flank of his position. A lot of people before the war regarded him as weak and

would be delighted to bring him down. I think particularly in those early weeks, he was still potentially vulnerable. So. he wasn't looking for any kind of a deal.

And it's now become frankly too late. The discovery of the massacre that took place in the town of Bucha, as well as the phenomenally bloody way in which the Russians smashed their way to control the port city of Mariupol means that any kind of a deal, which allows Ukrainian citizens to remain under Russian control has become politically impossible for Kiev.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you make of Biden's public announcement that Putin can't remain in power?

Mark Galeotti:

I can on one level understand it, but on a political level, deplore it. Our track record with regime change is not one we can be particularly proud of. Either we fail, or else we do manage to topple a regime, but we then fail to control what happens next. Look at Afghanistan, look at Iraq. To do so in a nuclear armed power is especially concerning. I frankly wouldn't want to see regime change adopted as our official end state strategy.

Larry Bernstein:

Why has Putin let NATO resupply Ukraine?

Mark Galeotti:

It's a sort of proxy war. I'd rather think of it as two wars taking place at the same time. There is a very 20th century war taking place in Ukraine and a very 21st century war being fought between the West and Russia in non-kinetic means. Putin is in the unusual position of being a national leader who managed to call his own bluff. So much of his capacity to intimidate in the past was precisely this fear of the Russian military machine. And now that the Russian military machine is bogged down in Ukraine and having trouble holding its own, let alone winning that becomes rather less intimidating.

The Finns and the Swedes decided to join NATO regardless of what Putin thinks about it. My big concern is that Putin regards himself as being in an existential political struggle for his own political survival. And he may be tempted to escalate. There are some concerns about using tactical nuclear weapons and not concerned about direct attacks, for example, on arms depots in Western countries -- anything that is covert and potentially deniable -- I think we could see.

Larry Bernstein:

Why don't the Ukrainians move the fighting to Russia or Crimea. Why should the Ukrainians be the only one to take the daily grind of destruction? Why not launch a missile attack on Moscow or blow up some bases elsewhere in Russia?

Mark Galeotti:

We have recently had the attack on the airbase in Crimea, which, the Russians are saying it was a stray cigarette igniting ammunition, but it's one hell of a cigarette seemed to have left at least

six blast craters. It always amazes me that the Russians are so keen to frankly claim incompetence rather than admit successful enemy action.

We've also seen some limited raids precisely into nearby Russian cities with supply dumps and the like. The United States has been keeping pressure up on Kiev not to escalate in this way.

So when the Ukrainians do it in defiance of their own allies. It will be quite difficult for the Ukrainians to bring serious pressure to bear on Russia because this will play to Putin's notion that actually Russia is genuinely on the defensive, because Ukraine has now become a potential forward base for NATO. Absolute nonsense but this is part of the attempt at legitimating the war.

Larry Bernstein:

Russian soldiers are dying on the battlefield. Many will be injured. When the coffins return to the villages the Russian citizens must be very upset.

Mark Galeotti:

You're absolutely right. But let me take issue with the point you made about just sending some ammunition. Yes, we walked into this political war with Russia thinking that it was going to be relatively cheap for us because it will play to our strengths that we will be applying sanctions. And we'll be using the fact that the West essentially dominates the global financial system to our advantage. But no, we are also taking costs. It's not casualties in the sense of it's not people dying on the battlefield. We've chosen to fight it in a different way. If one looks at the energy prices as we are heading into to winter and there are costs. We're not just simply providing ammunition. We are providing a huge amount of money to keep the Ukrainian economy on life support.

Russia authoritarianism is increasingly becoming totalitarian. Calling this so-called special military operation a war could in theory get you over 10 years in prison.

You talk about the caskets coming back. They definitely tried to pretend that the casualties were minimal. They thought it was going to be a short war. They could just handle it with usual media management.

They had to change their narrative because precisely more and more boys were coming home and seeing boxes. Remember on TV, they're told this is a limited military operation to stop a neo-Nazi regime from committing pogroms against Russian speakers. As living soldiers come back with their experiences, then the Russians will get more of a sense of what's going on. So there is going to be that pressure, but at the same time, precisely Putin does face a nationalist critique. There are people who don't have a problem with the idea of invading Ukraine. They do have a problem with it being done so damn badly, and the evidence of amateurishness and corruption and incompetence. They are disproportionately within the military, the ex-military within the security operators and so forth. In other words, the guys with guns and the guys who are absolutely crucial to maintaining power in Russia today. He created a company called the

national guard, which is a sort of paramilitary, domestic security force, many of whom ended up fighting in Ukraine. If you look at their social media channels, they are angry because they feel they've been used as cannon fodder. And these are the guys, Putin depends on to control the streets if there's protests.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you think are the odds that Russia will use tactical nuclear weapons in the Ukraine conflict?

Mark Galeotti:

These arsenals are under very, very careful scrutiny by Western intelligence services, by both technical means satellites and the like. We will have probably several days' notice if anything of the sort is actually being seriously planned and being executed. And that will give us, I think, a crucial moment to try and exert pressure on Moscow to make it clear. These are going to be the consequences.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's say Putin doesn't hide the nuclear weapons. Imagine he posts a clock counting down, tactical nukes get fired in 4 days, it is like an episode of the TV show 24. Ukrainians give up or evacuate. Zelensky it's up to you!

Mark Galeotti:

I think it becomes an incredibly worrying and unpredictable moment. We should bear in mind that it is possible that the West would actually respond in kind, say, "look, if you do this, we will regard this as precisely that you are launching a nuclear attack against us in equivalent terms. And we will respond suitably. It's hard to say. The thing is Putin has been blustering about nuclear weapons for a long time. At the same time, his kind of professional specialists have been stressing the point that we have absolutely no intention. We will only use nuclear weapons in crisis defense of the motherland, et cetera. Now, of course he can ignore that.

He can decide, well, "I regard an attack on an airfield in Crimea as being an existential attack on the motherland. But this is not a man who I think is comfortable to risk dying in a thermonuclear fire. This is basically a guy who enjoys all the perks and fruits of his elevated position, his palaces, his comfortable lifestyle and so forth.

But I think there is no question, that the West at that stage will be thinking, we need to get rid of this man. We need to end him and his regime and that has to become our primary objective.

Larry Bernstein:

How do we persuade Putin not to use nukes?

Mark Galeotti:

We could conceive of direct attacks on Russia. Attempts to assassinate him. We are trying to do damage to Russia, through sanctions and so forth, but in a way that doesn't cause too much

trouble to the global economy and to us. We could do a lot more. If we were willing to say any ship or truck or train carrying food towards Russia, which is not self-sufficient in food, we would regard as a legitimate military target. Then if we also unleash cyberattacks to paralyze the Russian railway system. The average Russian city has got no more than two days food stored up. Everyone is operating with a certain degree of restraint. There are all kinds of things we could do to escalate.

Larry Bernstein:

Why do the Russians lie so blatantly? In the past they lied about the Malaysian airliner they shot down, and then recently about the cigarette that blew up the Crimean airfields. Why don't the Russians care about their reputation?

Mark Galeotti:

What else have they got? It's hard to think of a better narrative from their point of view. Secondly, Russia is increasingly an information-controlled society. Let's say you are just someone who watches TV news and listens to the radio and maybe reads one of the print newspapers. Everything that you read or say is being controlled directly or indirectly by the state.

Why go and hunt for bad news? Now, the thing about the Soviet Union's control is it broke down when people begin to have objective and personal benchmarks to be able to test the line. And it's one thing to say, "yes, you may feel you are a bit hungry because there's long lines to get bread, but in Manchester, the workers are starving and they're dying in the streets." How do you know any better? But on the other hand, when they try and tell you something that says, "actually everyone in your hometown is really happy and doing very well." And you're thinking, "hang on a minute, I've just been in a bread line for three hours. You are being lied to. As the war goes on, as more people come home from the war with real experiences, then I think that's when people will acquire much more of a sharp way of calibrating when they're being lied to.

Larry Bernstein:

What about the international community? Do the Russians care if they look foolish to the Chinese, the Indians, or Africans?

Mark Galeotti:

I think they care about different constituencies. In the West, there is a constituency of people who are so mistrustful of their own societies that they will generally would rather repeat Russian messaging, because it fits their own personal agendas.

We have a tendency to assume that we are on the side of right. And everyone agrees with us. Well, that's not the case. If you look at which countries voted against measures against Russia in the United Nations, it's very clear that there's a north/south split.

Countries applying sanctions on Russia with a few exceptions, there's a strong global north-global south split. The West failed to present a good narrative. We just assumed that they would follow. The Russians and the Chinese says, "look, this has nothing to do with you. This is a spat, as we try to push back against Western hegemony and American attempts to dictate everyone how we should be. You're hungry. Well, that's because of sanctions. You can't trade with us because your fear of secondary sanctions from the Americans. That just simply shows American economic hegemony that they're trying to force war onto you."

Individual details about precisely why an airfield blew up might seem irrelevant, but it fits into a wider narrative that they're trying to present. The idea that Russia is the plucky anticolonial power. This is the irony: it's fighting an imperial war in Ukraine, but it's selling itself as the anticolonial power. Generally speaking, the propaganda campaign is being spun in the global South to ensure that ideally Russia gets allies, but at the very least, no one is interested actively in supporting the West in its campaign against Russia.

This is not a struggle of democracy versus authoritarianism. Russia is still unable to come to terms with the end of superpower status. Putin is going to be 70 in October, almost all the people in his inner circle are between the ages of 68 and 74. They're all people who went through that trauma of the collapse of a superpower and are still trying to process that. This is about the last gasp of empire and dealing with it.

Larry Bernstein:

Xi declared that its Russian friendship has no limits. Why do we want to push Russia into Chinese hands? Mearsheimer tells us the real risk is China, and we need to split the two Asian powers and not push them together.

Mark Galeotti:

I think the idea of fusing Russia and China is indeed deeply problematic. The relationship between Russia and China has always been much more play than reality. Xi says these nice things, but China has done nothing at all to support Russia. It hasn't really sort of been willing to jeopardize its export market in the name of supporting Russia.

It hasn't supplied Russia with military kits except in a few contracts, which have been concluded before the start of the war. This is a friendship without benefits. China clearly has other interests, but Russia has nowhere else to go. There are a lot of people in Russia who are themselves deeply worried about the rise of China, not just economically, but increasingly militarily.

I remember back in about 2015, 2016, talking to a Russian retired army officer who had been in the general staff, who was saying that in 20 years' time Russia will have had to make a choice of being an ally of the West, not necessarily joining the European Union, but having some kind of relationship. The answer is not to cozy up with Putin. We need to be thinking about the post-Putin Russia and positioning ourselves as well as possible to be able to reach out to that and

say, "look, we can have a relationship as long as you're willing to accept certain rules and norms."

Larry Bernstein:

Do you believe that Putin's popularity numbers are rising because of the war, or do you think the threats of insulting the regime undermine the polling?

Mark Galeotti:

Putin tends to enjoy the sky-high approval ratings, 60 to 80%. However, his trust rating tends to be in the 30%, which suggests that there's a substantial chunk of Russians who approve of Putin without trusting him. We need to be a little bit subtle in how we actually assess these approval ratings. Putin is not as popular as is often assumed and all wars tend to lead to a short-term rally round the flag.

It's more that people can't really conceive of an alternative to Putin. They necessarily like him.

Larry Bernstein:

What happens next for Putin? Will there be domestic unrest?

Mark Galeotti:

It's very different in a democracy compared to an authoritarian regime. Putin is not really in a position in which he can stand down safely now. He may have been thinking about leaving office before the invasion. It may well have been part of his planning, but now given that it is clear that this is not a victory, the temptation for a future regime to use him as the scapegoat to say this was Putin's war and it's all his fault is so high.

It's clear that there are voices already within the military, who've been saying, "look for God's sake, stop calling it a special military operation, come out and just say, it's a war, because once you call it a war, we can go to a full national mobilization and call up the reserves. And within about three months, the Russians would have at least a 150,000 extra troops. They'll be fresh troops at a point when the Ukrainians are already on full wartime mobilization and that will have an impact on the battlefield.

The big concern is unemployment. The sanctions hit, come September, most families will have run out of their household income reserves. Materials and components that they stockpiled before the sanctions hit that they can't get hold of now. And this risk of closures and unemployment since Soviet times it's been taboo. And that is what's more likely to get people out on the streets it's economic rather than the draft.

Larry Bernstein:

I heard that Putin spent most of Covid in a bunker and now during the Ukraine war he is back in the bunker. Is he stir crazy?

Mark Galeotti:

He doesn't tend to go much to the Kremlin; he can't be bothered. He would rather stay in one of his palaces. There's one outside Moscow, and there's one down at Sochi. And the interesting thing is that he has offices in both of them that look exactly the same. So, when he's doing his video conferencing you can't tell from the pictures where he is. He's not in a bunker as such, but I would argue that he's been in a bunker really since the start of COVID. For whatever reason, there was this astonishing level of biosecurity. So the health of the Monarch matters, he might be immunosuppressed or cannot take vaccines. It's worth noting that we were told he'd been vaccinated, but for a man who seems to be so happy to take his shirt off, we never had a photo opportunity of him actually being vaccinated. There was this period in which very, very few people got to see him. If you actually were going to see him, you had to spend two weeks in a sort of government guarded facility in isolation. Then you were taken to him again in isolation. And then you had to walk through a corridor, which was bathed with germ killing ultraviolet and fogged with disinfectant before you could see him. And then you end up sitting on the end of a very, very long table, very, very few people were in his bubble.

Larry Bernstein:

What are you optimistic about, especially with regards to Ukraine?

Mark Galeotti:

For Ukraine, it's clear that this whole struggle is a true nation building moment. Since it acquired its own independence in 1991 is failed attempts at nation building that didn't manage to unite the Russian speaking and the Ukrainian speaking, the East and the West, all the different elements of Ukrainian society, whatever language they may speak, whichever part of the country. In terms of actually building a Ukrainian nation, that has really happened. And it gives a chance for a kind of a real emergence of a European Ukrainian nation in the future.

In terms of Russia, I am optimistic about the long-term trajectory. First of all, Russia has got certain issues with exactly the post-imperial hangover, which countries had trouble with. Look at Brexit. Arguably France even more so hasn't yet really outgrown empire. In Russia it took a particularly toxic turn, but Russia needed to lose a war in some ways.

If one looks at the next political generation, they're not nice people, but they are pragmatic autocrats. And the thing is they will want to have improved relations with the West so that they can make money and get their money out. And they will probably also want to see more rule of law because you don't want there to be law when you're stealing, but once you stolen everything that isn't bolted down, you want rule of law to be able to actually protect it and legitimize it. Russia is on the cusp of one of the biggest intergenerational transfers of wealth the world has ever seen.

Now, you can have rule of law without democracy, but you can't have democracy without rule of law. This is what Russia tried in the 1990s was democracy without rule of law. And it failed, if this next political generation bringing rule of law creates a foundation for the generation after that, to actually begin to democratize this country that that is the trajectory that is more likely.

Once this last toxic gasp of Soviet era that Putin represents is off the scene, then we will see progress in the right direction, not in a way that is instantly heartwarming and charming. People like opposition leader Navalny are not going to be the next president, but there could well be a Navalny who becomes the president after that.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks, Mark, for joining us today. That ends this session.

Check out last week's show on the COVID vaccine and Operation Warp Speed with Paul Mango who was the former Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy for the US Department of Health and Human Services. Paul managed the government's conception, development and implementation of Operation Warp Speed.

I would like to make a plug for next week's show.

Our speaker will be Richard Fontaine who is CEO of the Center for a New American Security. Richard led a series of war games based on a Chinese invasion of Taiwan with congressman and senior retired defense officials. I want to find out whether China will attack US forces in Japan and Hawaii, the risk of a nuclear confrontation, and whether the US can effectively prevent a full-scale invasion of Taiwan. I think this is the most important foreign policy risk that the US faces today.

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I would like to thank our audience for your continued engagement with these important issues, good-bye.