

Politics of Collapse Has Begun: Kiev's Is Hiding THIS | Prof. Nicolai Petro

While the Titanic is sinking, its captain is rearranging the chairs on the deck. No number of burning warehouses in Russia can hide anymore that something very crucial broke in Kiev. Nicolai Petro, Professor of Political Science at the University of Rhode Island and author of *The Tragedy of Ukraine*, joins Pascal to discuss Russia's war strategy, strikes on Odesa, drones, and the search for game-changing weapons. They examine Europe's role, Ukraine's political future, postwar radicalization, outside influence, possible insurgency, and Zelensky's leadership changes. Links: Nicolai Petro's Website: <https://npetro.net> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Merch: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:00:16 The war situation and Odesa strikes 00:08:06 Wonder weapons and drone warfare 00:16:22 Russia's war aims and strategy 00:28:22 Ukraine's political radicalization 00:36:36 Western influence after the war 00:41:38 Could violence continue after a settlement? 00:49:14 Zelensky's leadership changes 00:59:17 Putin, military planning, and political control

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies, today again with the always brilliant Dr. Nicolai Petro, professor of political science at the University of Rhode Island and the author of the wonderful book, *The Tragedy of Ukraine: What Classical Greek Tragedy Can Teach Us About Conflict*. Nicolai, welcome back. Thank you, Pascal. Nice to see you again. Nice seeing you too. You're one of the people who has a very deep understanding of the internal workings of Ukraine, since you wrote many books and articles about political processes there. And we will talk about the changing personnel situation in the latter part. But I wanted to begin actually with what's happening around Odessa, these Russian strikes on Odessa and the increased warfare that is now happening also through direct bombings and the near consolidation of the Donbas region under Russia. What is your reading of where the war is between Ukraine and Russia, the direct fighting of these two armies, four and a half years after the beginning of the SMO?

#Nicolai Petro

Well, the war of attrition is continuing. Russia's strategy, it believes, is working and allowing it to move forward at a consistent pace. But the reason for the slowness is, of course, Ukrainian resistance, but also the fact that Russia is simultaneously consolidating behind itself, something that Ukraine spent eight years doing between 2014 and 2022, building up these four fortress cities that Russia is now apparently systematically dismantling. And that, according to several analysts, formed

the last significant line of defense in Donbas, and really for the rest of the path to the Dnieper River. So the idea was to build around Konstantinovka and northward to make these bridges impregnable fortresses. But these fortresses in the past, like Bakhmut and others, have fallen.

And so now that process is underway in the Donetsk region. And once that is done, once those are consolidated under Russian control. And that's the thing. It's a movement forward, then a consolidation at the same time. So those two things, I think, understandably take longer than just a direct frontal assault, which I think no one advises at this point, given the new nature of warfare with drones that can see and attack in a few minutes, as we now know, once the target is identified. So that strategy is continuing. You ask about Odessa. I would say I'm not sure there is any novelty in the strategy toward Odessa. I think Russian strategy intends to underscore that there is no safe haven in Ukraine—not in Lviv, not in Kiev even, not in Uzhgorod, not in the West, not in the South, not in the North. And as a result.

#Nicolai Petro

Russia wants not a ceasefire along the line of demarcation, but it wants a peace treaty. Because without a peace treaty, the fighting will continue, and replenishment and refurbishment of equipment, etc., all of this will occur in other regions that are then safe from attack. The whole point of the war is to ensure that Ukraine understands there is nowhere from which it can safely attack Russia. But we have had attacks, and this is now one of the novelties that we keep encountering in this war: new strategies, new weaponry, new responses to the weaponry.

And this is, I hate to say it, a vicious cycle. Vicious in the sense that there is no good reason for warfare and for killing people, I think, at least. But there is a learning process that is underway. And I like to point out to my Western colleagues, especially those who are eager to point out Ukraine's successes in the war, particularly in the areas of technology, which is something that was one of the calling cards of the recently dismissed Minister of Defense, Fedorov. He was sort of an innovation guru.

#Pascal

But innovation only lasts so long.

#Nicolai Petro

There's innovation, then there's the reaction of the opponent, which then needs to be countered in turn with different strategies, different innovations. So there is no one magical weapon that will give a decisive advantage to any side of the conflict. I think Russia understands that. At least I don't see anyone on the Russian side, in analysis or in the government or in the military, saying, "Ah, we now have a weapon that makes us invincible." On the other hand, the West and Ukraine are still looking for this mythical solution to their problems. And I think that will fail and is one of the reasons why

the entire strategy, to the extent that it is built on the hope of finding a magical weapon, ultimately is not realistic in its expectations.

#Pascal

That's a very good point. There have been talks about these wonder weapons for, like, every year. They keep popping up again and again. It's a game changer. The idea of a game changer is recurring. It's quite interesting how this war is basically a narrative, also a narrative invention of the West in a lot of ways. But I would rather ask you: Vladimir Brovkin, on my channel, made the point that, to him, the strategy of the Russians rather is one of hide your strength and bide your time, also trying to learn from the ways of attacks that are coming, often how to defend against them.

So kind of absorb and do not change the strategy, which is military victory on the battlefield. Do not be baited into actually counterattacking Europe or, you know, with all of these attacks that are going on on the Russian heartland, including now Wildberries and other civilian infrastructure. What is your reading here? Also considering that the Russians seem to try to answer any kind of, I guess, unexpected attack that's coming from Ukraine, and that these wonder weapons also seem to somehow influence and make the Ukrainians feel very confident, at least the leadership. Over the weekend, we've had a large drone fair, a drone fair in Kyiv, and the Russians unsurprisingly bombed it. It seems just such a dumb thing to do. Yet, is it part of, like, this feeling of, oh, now everything is changing because of the weaponry?

#Nicolai Petro

No, I think that's just human stupidity and error. Because President Zelensky identified it as such, and the prosecutor general of Ukraine has begun an investigation for, the term would be, lack of attention to duty, lack of properly taking responsibility, taking proper responsibility for what you needed to be responsible for. So that was just foolishness in the industry. But to get back to Professor Brovkin's point, that makes sense from a military vantage point. But wars—no war can be analyzed purely from a military perspective. And this war is no different. A war has a military component, a political component, a psychological component, and an economic component. Now, people with their distinctive expertises, for example, a general versus a macroeconomist, would each emphasize the importance of their perspective. And they offer their advice.

Ultimately, the commander-in-chief, the president, has to make the balancing decision and say, well, because of the economic impact, we must change our military strategy. Even if it's successful, it's not as successful compared to the losses that we are incurring in the economy. For example, and in terms of arguing whether the current strategy favors Ukraine or favors Russia, it's very much that sense of perspective. Ukraine's strategy has always been rather transparent, I think. They have, as I understand it, the analysts who speak most directly to this and not as spokesmen for the regime,

they say, we understand, given the discrepancy in size, resources, and money, that Ukraine cannot win a direct battle with Russia, a direct military confrontation. That's why that's not the strategy. The Ukraine strategy is to involve the West, hopefully directly.

In other words, send troops so that this becomes a Western crusade on behalf of Ukraine, which Ukraine will assist in and be at the forefront of. But since we cannot successfully defeat Russia, but we are confident that Ukraine and the West together can, therefore the strategy has to be to involve the West directly in the battle, in the prosecution of the battle. And a series of Western leaders have tried to avoid that while getting all the benefits that it could from this bloodshed between Ukrainians and Russians. The upside for Europe is that Russia, militarily and hopefully economically, is weakened by this bloodletting and will be in a less prepared position to take advantage should the war end.

Hopefully. And most importantly, that by drawing out the bloodletting, Europe's strategy is to give itself time to rearm. So the strategy is, until 2030, we will spend all this money, we will refurbish our militaries, and then it's not quite clear what the strategy will be. But in either case, Europe will have options because it will be strong enough to defend itself, and perhaps even strong enough to become directly involved in the battle in Ukraine if it chooses to do so, which it is not currently able to do because they don't have the manpower, they don't have the training, they don't have the logistics equipment, and they're simply not prepared.

So Ukraine is doing a great service to Europe by dying in large numbers, but for the benefit of Europe, essentially. At least that's why Europe applauds and, I would say, is supportive of this war. Simple illustration of this: there is no negotiation. There's no interest in negotiation in Europe. There is no negotiator. There's not even talk. I mean, there's speculation about maybe having—but as opposed to 21 packets of sanctions, not a single designated negotiator in all these years on the part of Europe. So there is no interest, obviously, on the part of Europe. There is, however, interest in wrapping up the military preparedness. Yeah.

#Pascal

Yeah. So because if there was a serious interest in actually winding it down, then at least we would see some political process on whatever level to get some negotiations going. But we don't see any of that. So the idea is still to prolong the war because the war ultimately benefits this part.

#Nicolai Petro

And I remembered the point that I wanted—that you were asking about—that I was making about different perceptions. So that's the Ukrainian rationale or vision of military success. Russia's vision of military success, I believe, is, or has been to date, more modest. Because Putin has said, "Our objectives are the liberation of the four oblasts plus Crimea." That's it. That's it. In preparation for the Istanbul negotiations of April 2022, Russia would have been satisfied with Donetsk, Luhansk, and

Crimea when those negotiations were upended by the West and Boris Johnson intervened, saying, "We're behind you. Let's fight," which is still the current position of the EU. Then Russia said, "Well, we will therefore punish this recalcitrance by taking two more regions."

And Zaporozhye and Kherson. So that's now the stated objective: four regions plus Crimea. Putin has consistently intimated that failure to reach a negotiated settlement will lead to further territorial losses and to additional unspecified losses, which I take to be political and economic in nature. In other words, creating maybe not a seizure of territory and corporates, but a buffer zone, or making sure that, for example, destroying the fleet, any sort of fleet activity—commercial fleet, military fleet—all sorts of restrictions Russia has the ability to place on the way energy reaches Ukraine, the way goods reach Ukraine.

And Russia, for example, even at the beginning of this year, as maybe your listeners will know, Russian oil still continued to flow through Ukraine to the West. And this is, you know, both sides are willing to turn a blind eye to sort of profitable interactions which are advantageous to both sides. So Russia's strategy is to continue the war of attrition because it feels it is succeeding in this objective. Why pursue a war of attrition rather than a dramatic escalation? Because a dramatic escalation would lead to social tensions, increased social tensions in Russia, as it did with the limited mobilization at the end of 2022. But that was the only mobilization for the army that there has been so far.

And obviously, Russia is reluctant to put the entire economy on a war footing, especially, well, because of the social tensions, because of the economic costs, but also because, again, and I wish to stress this, Russia feels its policy is succeeding. So if you want a sense of the difference in perspectives, when you read Western mainstream reporting on how Ukraine is winning, Russia is losing for all these reasons, and you'll see, by the way, that very few of them are military. They generally talk about not military successes, because those are debatable at best for the Ukrainian side.

But they're highlighting the burden on the Russian economy and Putin's ostensible loss of public support, which could become a significant issue in the upcoming Duma elections, which, if they go very badly for Russia, could portend a change in course, at least the Ukrainian leadership hopes. So the argument that one sees in the West, and to a lesser extent in Ukraine, about why Ukraine is winning really kind of assumes that the military side is a stalemate, that Russia's costs are accruing in these related areas. And Russia, by contrast, argues that, A, its military strategy is succeeding. It is actually advancing at a consistent rate to meet its military objectives. I don't know. I mean, we know the military objectives.

We don't know what the timeline is. So one has to guess that the general staff is saying, "Our timeline is, I don't know, three months, not tomorrow." And if they think they're on track, then they think they're on track. That's at least what they reported. And that, with respect to the economic impact of fuel shortages, shortages in other areas of goods and logistics being felt by the population,

Russia argues that these are not significant in the minds of the Russian population. They're willing to accept them, and to absorb them and accept them as necessary to the successful conduct of the war, which is the Russian position. Но почему?

So if you increase that cost, Russia argues, and some Western analysts also point out and make the case, Russia is not going to collapse. Russia is not going to change course. It is going to become more determined to see the fight to the end because these costs now have to be met, recuperated, and the dangers emanating from Ukraine must be eliminated. And I think that's an easy— a fairly easy argument to make for the average citizen in Russia, is that, well, you know, if you could say, well, why are we sending our boys there to die? What's wrong with the Ukrainians? Let them live. We should live, they should live, and we shouldn't be sending our troops there, because they didn't feel the impact of the war.

Now that they feel what the Ukrainians are willing to do to them, for whatever reasons they might have, now we say, well, if that's the way it's going to be, well, now let's get serious. The argument that you have by people like Gilbert Doctorow and Sergei Karaganov, Dmitry Medvedev, and others is that we've been too gentle. We need to get more serious about this so that the impact of the war recedes for us. We need to be safe. And our safety is guaranteed increasingly, it seems, by the retreat and possibly even destruction of Ukraine. I heard a good phrase, a very interesting phrase, by a very thoughtful analyst called Pavel Shchelin.

And he's an interesting person, seems to live in the West, but very popular in the Russian analytical arena. And he said, you know, the thing that he sees in Russia is that, with great reluctance, the Russian elite is coming to the understanding that perhaps Ukraine's very existence is indeed an existential threat to Russia. This has been the argument all the time of the Ukrainian leadership. But in fact, Russia did not—well, it's never certainly officially argued in any way that Ukraine needs to cease to exist. It just needs to accommodate Russian security interests in some sort of negotiated format.

And the reluctance to do this has forced, again, in Russian discourse, has forced Russia to take proactive steps in that direction. But the more that Ukraine puts forward leaders, military and political, who refuse negotiations at all, then the argument becomes, well, maybe there is no point in trying to negotiate, and our strategy should not be one of creating a neutral buffer zone, making Ukraine a neutral state between the hostile West and Russia, but indeed occupying or administering all of it. Yeah. But that's something that he says Russia has been extremely reluctant—the current political leadership, he says, Shchelin says, is extremely reluctant to do.

#Pascal

It's one of these instances where you create a self-fulfilling prophecy by the actions you take in order to fight something that's not even there, but you bring it into existence. I mean, you know, what seems to me to be going on in Europe, this constant talk about, "Oh, the Russians will attack

us, the Russians will attack us," and then attacking Russia through Ukraine, all but making sure that the voices who say that we need to increase deterrence by actually attacking Europe gain more currency. It's like, it's a very vicious cycle. But inside Ukraine, then, we've had this, I mean, in your analysis, we've had this radicalization by now?

I mean, we are as far away from a neutral Ukraine as we've ever been. Like, the electoral balance is not there anymore for something like that. The personnel that would have done that is not there anymore. So what else then is left? Especially now that we've seen some personnel changes. And maybe we can use this to talk about it, like what this sacking of the Minister of Defense means and the exchange of the team. And also the fact that Mr. Zelensky is still, even two years after the end of his term, still sitting as president over there. Maybe you can talk a bit to this.

#Nicolai Petro

Yeah. So with respect to the situation, the politics of Ukraine being radicalized, that's absolutely true. But that's very normal after a war, especially for a defeated country. When Nazi Germany and militarized Japan were defeated, there were no democrats in either of those countries. Everyone in Germany in official positions were still Nazis. They had been that as they had been yesterday. Maybe not members of the party, but certainly that was the context in which they were existing. And they would continue to exist today with at least that baggage and that legacy for a decade or more, a decade or more. Because even after the political regime changes, the mail still needs to be delivered.

And it needs to be delivered by the same mailman who delivered it last year, you know, for the foreseeable future. There is then a generational shift, and things change gradually over time, depending on the larger context within which countries are drawn and the constraints that are put on their borders, political development by external forces. Because if left to itself, you would have had, after World War II, the same kind of radicalization and far-right politics in Germany that you had rising after World War I. World War I arose, and the political instability there arose precisely because there had been no military occupation to decide who would be the next political leaders.

So all of that is interesting when thinking about what would help Ukraine to become a, I would say, normal country after the war, a normal country after the war. Well, there's a lot of things you could speculate about and a lot of types of changes. There have always been—not always, but I would say the last year and a half, since all the discussion about negotiations and the possibility of ending the war—the first thing that several Ukrainian analysts have done is to speculate on the problems that will exist in the immediate aftermath of the war.

And when people talk about that on blogs, people like Kostya Bandarenka, Sergei Datsyuk, even Alexei Aristovich and others, there is a general understanding that it will not be a happy time and a good time for many people. Most Ukrainians—the latest survey done by the Ministry of Migration among Ukrainians abroad now shows that more than two-thirds do not intend to ever come back, do not intend to ever return to Ukraine if they can stay abroad. They would like to not return to

Ukraine. So that's one issue. The people who will be left will be an older population, probably demoralized in any case, and it will be very difficult to attract investment of any kind into Ukraine unless there is the prospect of stability in relations with Russia.

So I guess from that, it becomes apparent that what Ukraine needs out of any peace process is a long-term understanding of how good relations are to be achieved ultimately with Russia, good neighborly relations. And that's not something that political forces can talk about during the war. But as soon as the war ends, it's the only thing that I think people will talk about, or will be one of the main topics. And then we will see what political forces, people that we don't see in the politics of Ukraine today, because the politics of Ukraine today is about conducting a war. When the war is over, there's no more need to conduct the war. And the politicians whose careers were made on conducting the war will no longer be needed. And again, we've seen this time and again in history. Churchill was a wartime leader. Churchill was replaced before even the negotiation, before the ink was dry on Germany's capitulation, replaced by Eden.

#Pascal

That is very true.

#Nicolai Petro

It will happen in Ukraine.

#Pascal

That is true, but there's one factor that I think sets Ukraine apart, because there is still, to this day, a large degree of infiltration of Ukrainian politics through these outside actors that we have learned about, and that I think are now more in the open through the NGOs, through the embassies of Western countries, through this kind of appointment culture of who is acceptable to the West, who is not in upper leadership echelons. And the proxy war aspect, that it seems to me is still quite entrenched. And maybe the Russians are trying even to push back now through these attacks on Kyiv.

#Nicolai Petro

So I don't see that as different. For example, it's the prelude to the type of external control that Japan and Germany were subject to after World War II, after the end of the conflict. Only now, maybe there is a sense or an understanding that, to the extent that Ukraine becomes part of Western thinking—not writ large, not that everyone, even in the political sphere, certainly in the United States, even knows where Ukraine is—that's not the case. But they know where Russia is, and they know that Ukraine is a thorn in Russia's side. So let's be there to push that thorn, or pull it if necessary, or move it, jiggle it this way or that way. Let's have an influence already now.

And after the war, we will already be there to build on those established principles—established channels, I would say—because what was the purpose of Trump's one-sided expropriation of Ukraine's mineral resources for the benefit of the United States? Those colonial agreements that Ukraine gave up ostensibly for future U.S. investment in those regions. This foreshadows precisely the kind of strategy that I'm talking about, which was exactly the strategy that the Western powers, most specifically the United States, but also, to a lesser extent, the other occupying powers, pursued in Italy and in Germany: rebuilding local industries for the benefit of the United States, not for the benefit of those populations.

They received a portion of the profits, but the entire orientation of those industries was to reinforce and connect and supply, provide essential supplies for the growing military-industrial complex, as Dwight Eisenhower, President Eisenhower, said, that was being built in the United States in the aftermath of World War II as the Cold War expanded. So we're likely to see something similar, a new Cold War expanding to the extent that these Western powers have the ability to promote their interests within Ukraine, which means Ukraine still needs to be in the West's orbit. Whether that is tolerable to Russia, whether Russia can tolerate a Ukraine being in the West's economic and political orbit, but not in its military orbit. It's neutral, but looking toward the West, but not militarily engaged with the West.

I think Russia has, in the past, said, "We would consider this as a solution. It's not an optimal solution for us, but we'd consider it," whether that's still acceptable now, given the obvious animosity of the West and the desire to squeeze every ounce of usefulness that the West can out of Ukraine for its benefit, for its military-industrial benefit. I'm not sure that that strategy really is that attractive to Russia anymore. In other words, Russia seems to be feeling a lot of pressure to not necessarily. I think taking all of Ukraine is a very big and perhaps unmanageable task. I don't know. But something that would still be very difficult, but is at least conceivable, would be to turn a rump Ukraine into a country without an outlet to the sea. Yeah, debatable.

#Pascal

And at that point, it essentially becomes a third-rate power.

#Nicolai Petro

A third-rate agrarian power. That's all.

#Pascal

Yeah, but would that allow for the violence to die down? Because what I worry is that the scenario you're describing, and it seems to me a realistic one, is one under which the use of bombs and

drones and so on, on both sides or on all sides, would sporadically continue because you never actually get to a peace treaty. And we might settle into something stable, where all sides can live with what it is, but you will always have sporadic kind of fighting over years and years to come.

#Nicolai Petro

We have a historical precedent in the anti-Soviet underground insurgency of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army after the end of World War II. In other words, the political leadership fled the country and settled in Western Europe, but they supported military...

#Nicolai Petro

Sort of underground insurgency activities, terrorist activities in Western Ukraine. And I think they continued into the early '50s. So throughout the 1940s and into the early '50s, until the political—the military leader of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army was eliminated, was killed. And this was not a small military activity. It was, I believe—well, I'm not enough of a military expert to know—but there were two large-scale military units devoted, I think divisions devoted, to the suppression, and search-and-destroy tactics were implemented in Western Ukraine by Soviet leaders, plus certain terror policies against the local population.

So if you were suspected of being supportive, you were sent to Siberia in exile and things like that. And it was understood—Beria talks about it in sort of historical context—even by 1954, that it was well known that although Ukraine was in the Soviet Union, Western Ukraine, even the political leadership, the Communist political leadership appointed by Moscow in Western Ukraine, had to deal with and acknowledge the significance locally and importance locally of these counterinsurgents. So I could see something similar to that taking place, but again, the question would be, how long could that continue if Russia applies military force to that area?

You look at the situation in the occupied territories today. One of the consistently voiced disappointments of the political leaders in Kyiv is that we do not see large-scale insurgencies and acts of sabotage in those regions. Most people just want to get past the war. And occasionally, there'll be something happening, a bomb or a sabotage or something like that. But the vast majority of incidents, when they occur, are strikes or plots, assassination efforts organized by Kyiv and people sent in from Ukraine proper into those territories, not local insurgents. And this has been going on for a long time.

I mean, I remember back in 2014 through 2022, this was one of the complaints voiced by the political leadership in Kyiv with respect to Donbas and Crimea. You know, where is the resistance? Why aren't we—you know, we would have a much easier time getting Western support for our efforts here if people were not so complacent under the new regime. And I suspect that one gets

tired of war, and even, you know, unless one is committed to revolution and warfare for the sake of warfare, the vast majority of people can be convinced to live under—even under a Russian regime, in the case of Ukraine.

#Pascal

No, we see that in political science constantly, how the people who are most closely affected by political violence are the ones who are most ardently in favor of doing anything in order to end it. It's not just about wars, but also about guerrilla warfare in South America. We see that the regions most desperately struck by violence are always the ones in favor of any kind of peace deal, even if it includes amnesty to the perpetrators. And so it's the regions that are removed that always say, like, "No, we want justice, justice above all. So we need to punish them, even if it means..." Exactly.

#Nicolai Petro

So, and we have numerous examples. The one that just came to mind is, I may say, Gustavo Petro in Colombia, the president of Colombia. Again, one of the guerrilla leaders. And at some point, as in the case of Northern Ireland, as in Colombia, as in the Philippines, as in a lot of different regions where there have been long-term insurgencies for decades, then there's a generational shift, and a new set of leaders argues that it is possible, essentially, to achieve much, if not everything, that we hope for working through the political process if we are allowed to participate in it. And there's no reason to expect that Ukrainians are going to be, you know, an exception to this rule. Yeah.

#Pascal

Can you talk maybe a little bit about the leadership changes? We haven't directly touched on them yet. What does it signify for the political process in Ukraine that Zelensky was basically forced to do this? Some people speculate it's because his minister of defense was getting too popular and Mr. Zelensky was feeling insecure about it. What's your reading of the changes?

#Nicolai Petro

Well, I actually don't think he was forced to do it because before the prime minister was sacked, no one was speculating that there was any reason to sack the prime minister. The common interpretation now of why the government was sacked was precisely to allow a backdoor to firing Umerov, who otherwise would have to be singled out by Zelensky. And he didn't want to do that. So he wanted to get Umerov out by firing the prime minister, because once the prime minister is fired, the cabinet must be reconstituted. So everyone automatically tenders their resignations until new cabinet ministers are appointed. So that didn't have to happen. There were, of course, a lot of rumors about Umerov not getting along with Syrskyi. But when has that not been the case in Ukraine?

When since 2022 has the minister of defense ever seen eye to eye with the commander of forces, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and not appealed to the president for more money and authority to pursue different strategies? That's always been the case. And so this is really no different. The difference is that what we're seeing with Fyodorov is a media- and tech-savvy entrepreneur. So he is not someone whose strength lies in having built political networks. He's not an oligarch. He's not come up through a particular party sort of structure. He came to Zelensky's attention when he basically said, "I can run a modern media campaign for you on the internet. You don't know about that in 2019, but you can appreciate the importance of media, coming as you do, Zelensky, from the media environment."

But what you're missing is what I can offer because I know everything—the tech world—and I have begun to work out strategies for promoting and doing slick videos. And there's a lot involved, both upfront in the way you present candidates and also black ops, tarnishing other candidates, and sort of nasty news about other people. So all of that together forms part of the electoral campaign, and Fyodorov was in charge of it. And he sold himself as that. And therefore, coming out of that, Zelensky rewarded Fyodorov by creating a new ministry just for him, which was the Ministry of Technology and Information, I think. So this was going to be Fyodorov's bailiwick. And again, one of the things that comes with promoting yourself in that arena is that you promote yourself.

You promote yourself. You promote the government. But you are also the one who is seen as being the beneficiary of, and knowing how to promote certain people and denigrate other people. And as his interest expanded, he began to invest more and look for ways to extend the significance of the media technological arena in the military. He said, and this was, I would say, his innovation, that the military is not just about fighting, and it's not just about weapons. It's about selling a vision and a strategy about the weapons that we will have, about this brilliant strategy that we will have, and how to package it and how to sell it.

And I can do that for you because that's what I've been doing the last several years for the government and for the president, for Zelenskyy. And lo and behold, he becomes, now six months ago, Minister of Defense. But the portfolio of the things that he does as Minister of Defense is not what a typical defense minister does. In other words, he's not a manager. He doesn't seek to become involved in the details of military procurement, although there's some element of that, but that's not his bread and butter. His bread and butter is to take a great idea like Flamingo, new missiles, or drone warfare, or let's kill 50,000 Russians a month. That's the vision. And we can do it with drones.

One of the placards on the Cardboard Maidan read, and this basically summarizes his entire political vision: "With Fyodorov, drones are killed. With Syrskyi, people are killed." Oh, if you have drones, then people won't die. Isn't that a nice way to conduct a war? But that can't work, in fact. So, yeah, that's the problem, is that we have Fyodorov coming up with new ideas that the military staff argues are a little bit crazy. In other words, they're nice, and he should do his thing on the internet, but he should leave the fighting and the strategy of the fighting to us, because what he's trying to do is a

fantasy, essentially. But people like fantasies. They go out in the streets for fantasies. They'll, you know, they'll...

#Pascal

Okay, so you're basically saying that Fyodorov now lost a battle between what's more important, actual military strategy or propaganda about it, and the propaganda arm and IT arm kind of now lost out for the benefit of the hard military power kind of wing.

#Nicolai Petro

Well, he personally, as the... So what has he been trying to do since he was fired? Since he was fired, he's trying to argue, no one can do this except me, so I need to be reinstated. And everything, this whole campaign, is part of his strategy... not just to show why he's so indispensable, but also to show that politics in Ukraine can be manipulated in this way. Pay attention, Zelensky. Pay attention, the West. I can make things happen that you don't realize because you think you have control, but I actually can manipulate the audience to do what I want. And that's the interesting thing. We have to now wait and see: is this a theater where he is right and the theatrical performance is more important than the actors themselves? Or can Zelensky get through this? And basically, if he does, then Fyodorov's history...

#Pascal

Is there any chance, in your mind, that somebody who might just be listening in to this conversation is actually sitting in Moscow and trying to take notes of what's going on here? Or maybe that's too far into speculation. I just wonder.

#Nicolai Petro

I'm not saying anything that Elon Musk and Palantir and all... I'm the last person to speak about this. Everyone has been saying, I think, this for a long time. But in the Kremlin, there is a lot of old-school thinking. And I think there's something of a partition, sort of maybe a firewall. So my sense, I believe that Putin is looking at the military and saying, you know, you're the experts here. I will not... I want to know how things are going. I want to understand the strategy. But I'm not going to tell you where to send divisions, make this happen, attack in the north, attack in the south. This is the thing that Zelensky does. Zelensky says, "Oh, we need save Mahmoud, save this, do this, send this." And he intervenes, much to the frustration of the military commanders who consider themselves the experts in this.

And maybe they are. But Putin's assumption is, well, we will win some battles, we will lose some battles, but as long as I believe the military has a strategy that makes sense to me and can argue that our objectives are being met, they're moving toward that goal, I respect them enough to let

them do their jobs as professionals. And that's probably the more sensible course in the long run, because whenever a political leader who is far removed from the military gets involved and starts to give orders, first of all, the first thing that happens is chaos. And the second thing is that you don't know... The consequences of these actual battlefield changes are hard to predict. And they don't usually work out for the best, for the military. Yeah.

#Pascal

Okay, Nikolai, thank you very much for this very insightful overview of what you're seeing going on, especially on this political level. If people would like to follow your work, is there a place where you occasionally publish or a mailing list to subscribe to?

#Nicolai Petro

Well, they should visit my website, npetro.net. I post everything on there. I believe I have an article with Ted Snyder coming out in The American Conservative in the next few days. It's been accepted. So that's more about the Fedorov and Syrskyi and Zelensky kerfuffle. And, you know, yeah, just follow me. And if people want to get in touch with me, they should just email me. My email's on my website. And I will put you on my mailing list, but I do that on an individual basis.

#Pascal

Okay, everybody, if you're very keen on getting the news and analysis from Nikolai Petro, write him an email directly. You will find that, and I will put a link to his website into the description box below. Nikolai Petro, thank you so much for your time today. Thank you, Pascal.