

# Matthew Blackburn: The Plan to Pressure Russia Has a Huge Flaw

Matthew Blackburn is a political analyst who focuses on Russia and the post-Soviet space who publishes frequently on the National Interest and Responsible Statecraft. Follow Matthew Blackburn on X: <https://x.com/MJMBlackburn81> Buy Diesen merchandise: <https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: [https://x.com/Glenn\\_Diesen](https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen) Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glennDiesen> YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@GDiesen1> Support the research: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glennDiesen> Buy me a Coffee: [buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng](https://buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng) Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

## #Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. Today we're joined by Matthew Blackburn, a political analyst who focuses on Russia and the post-Soviet space and who publishes frequently in The National Interest and Responsible Statecraft. So it's great to see you again.

## #Matthew Blackburn

Thanks for having me on.

## #Glenn

Actually, what I wanted to discuss with you was one of the articles you wrote, published in Responsible Statecraft, about the strategy of these deep strikes within Russia. That is, the West seems to have a plan that is to bring the war to Russia, as they keep saying. With deep strikes, this includes targeting commercial targets to hurt the economy, but also to make Russian civil society feel the war. That is, the overall purpose being that Russians should put pressure on the Kremlin to end the war. And, well, from my perspective, it does seem like a risky strategy, and therefore surprisingly little discussion around it and the assumptions that this strategy is based on. So I wanted to ask you about this strategy. I mean, because a lot of the success depends on what the interests are of Russia.

That is, also what are the threat perceptions by Russia? What are the domestic political pressures? Again, Putin must balance many things here, many constituencies. And I think often a lot of this analysis tends to be lost by simply portraying Putin as this dictator figure who rules single-handedly and not having to take all of these considerations into play. But again, to start at the beginning, I thought if you could outline this strategy of the West with these strikes into the Russian rear, how

it's done, what it's supposed to achieve, but also what's missing essentially from this plan or this analysis.

## **#Matthew Blackburn**

I think we should start with just acknowledging that, in all likelihood, the plan emerges from Ukraine, not from, as far as we know, any European capital or even Washington, D.C. And it's the response to the failure of the land war, the offensive of 2023. Then what is Ukraine's theory of victory? And the so-called victory plan is taken to Washington in the months prior to the presidential elections in 2024. And Biden does not agree to it, does not greenlight it. The plan is Ukraine will give its minerals, Ukraine will get a security guarantee, and they will also get the possibility to launch these new deep strikes into Russia. Biden didn't want to do it.

Trump was made aware of it when he was a presidential candidate in 2024. And so this plan potentially was supported by the Europeans at this stage. I'm not so clear, but it's definitely emerging from Kiev. And, you know, the idea of Russia, according to this plan, is that Russia and Putin have fought this war with a nervousness about public opinion, with a concern about, you know, stability, political stability, and macroeconomic stability, and that if you raise the ante, so to speak, then Russia might fold, if we consider it like a game of poker. And in the beginning, of course, this campaign doesn't start straight away when Trump comes to power in January 2025. And it's been very incrementally kind of brought in, as if it's sort of reluctantly. Hopefully it's going to be approved of by Trump.

Or was it secretly approved of by Trump earlier? We don't know. So again, trying to understand who is the author of this strategy is not transparent. But by all accounts, Zelensky pushes it. And there's some agency here from the Ukrainian side. Zelensky very much has this view of Russia's autocracy, that it's personalized, it's all based on Putin, it's extremely corrupt. And he has firsthand knowledge of Russia. He spent a lot of time there as an actor and a comedian. He spent a lot of time in Moscow. He has lots of friends in Moscow. And he knows people with proximity to the power system in Russia. And he's not completely wrong to say that there are some elements of personalism and corruption in the Putin system.

Of course there is. But to present Putin as a dictator who can suddenly be infuriated or kind of pressured and he'll just change his position, and then all of Russia falls into line behind him, that certainly is a simplification. Like any successful politician, especially one who is also a kind of modern-day autocrat, there has to be a successful balancing of interest groups that have different desires, that attempt to influence state policy. And Putin has to balance his own very clear ideas of sovereignty, Russia's security, the need for stability, with the demands of elites and also public opinion.

And that's something he has been able to do, while occasionally resorting to certain repressive techniques and manipulative techniques, but also taking actions which win some support in elites

and the population. So I think the general idea that you can increase the pain on the Russian population and create disgruntlement is not completely without foundation. If you were to look at polling data, like we do in this article, and you look at how polling has changed over the course of the war as costs have increased, you do find that those respondents who view the war in more instrumental terms, as a means of achieving a concrete goal—you spend resources to improve Russia's security. You spend resources, you take some costs, but the benefit is Russia's status geopolitically improves. Russia's standing, geopolitical, geoeconomic interests are served.

And that... many Russians don't have a moral framing of the war, an ideological framing of the war. They hear it all the time on the news, but they don't necessarily buy into it about civilizationalism or about the Satanist West or about these more esoteric imperial nationalist kind of framings of the war, or the need to destroy Ukraine as a fascist entity. It doesn't necessarily flow into the instrumental framing. So those who have that more instrumental framing also are happy to see this war outsourced to the military professionals, and they can be insulated from the costs. And as long as that's the case, they can turn their back on the war and just go on with their everyday lives.

Whereas the more moralistic and ideological supporters of the war tend to be activists, volunteers, donating money and actively reading Telegram channels and thinking about the war, becoming thinking and active patriots. And in the process, some of them become critical patriots. They start to think, why does Putin wage the war in this way? It looks dysfunctional. More resources are needed. More action is needed. And so you have a kind of patriotic, hawkish constituency, which is a minority of Russians. And then you have a more disengaged, depoliticized, instrumental majority who do support Putin's war idea.

They believe that Russia cannot lose. They do have a loyalty to their country. But those are the ones that, as the costs go up, they want to see the war end. Whereas the moralized minority take the opposite view. They want to see the war escalated and fought on a new level to a successful conclusion. So I think, for the Western policymakers who support Ukraine's victory plan, or the diminished version of it in 2026, I think it's just worth underlining that the new victory plan, in contrast to 2024, now is about freezing the lines of contact and having a ceasefire. It's not much. There's the E3 plan to try and still make Russia pay for various things related to Ukraine.

But it is a much more limited idea of victory, so to speak. But nonetheless, this idea that you increase the costs is based on some truth in relation to how we can understand public opinion. But where things start to go wrong, or where it becomes a miscalculation, in my view, is that if you disgruntle the instrumental majority, that they will then become a factor that will pressure Putin into some kind of climbdown, where he finally says, "Okay then, ceasefire. You've got me. I'm up against the wall now because this passive, depoliticized, instrumental majority are disgruntled." They're disgruntled, but they won't do anything.

Because in wartime Russia, like many other countries that are at war, there's a lack of leaders who will step in to try and capitalize on that sentiment. And one political party in Russia, perhaps the only

one, has the leader Yavlinsky of the Yabloko Party, which is a marginal liberal party that's been around since the Yeltsin times. I think it only gets less than one percent of the vote, if I remember correctly, and it's still a legal party. And Yavlinsky has been one of the main people talking about the need to end the war because the costs are too high. There's no need to keep on going. There's a suggestion that people in the Central Bank and the Ministry of Finance agree.

There is the so-called economic bloc around Putin who believe the war's costs have spiraled out of control and the economy is going to overheat. And there's a good instrumental logic to ending this war. But Yavlinsky's party, Yabloko, several of its members have been arrested. And I don't think they're going to be in a position to make a vocal pitch to the Russian population in the forthcoming Duma elections. And I certainly don't think the people in the Ministry of Finance or in the Central Bank are all of a sudden going to get talking loudly about peace and making politicized comments about that. And there's many people inside Putin's kind of top appointments who you might describe as technocrats.

Actually, Western-educated, in many cases, technocrats, who never talk about these... They don't seem to use any of this sort of hyper-patriotic ideological discourse, and they just get on with their work in the government. Like, for example, the Prime Minister, Mishustin, or even the mayor of Moscow, Sobyannin. So, but they are silent, is my point. They will not lead some kind of pro-peace vocal campaign. And the ones who could have led that have largely left Russia in 2022, and those people who are more willing to take a risk and get out in the street and carry some kind of placard. So I think that's the major miscalculation, that you can increase the costs and this will force Putin's hand.

And as many other commentators, or anyone with basic knowledge of military history, would know, previous historical attempts to use heavy bombing campaigns to break the opponent's will to fight have failed. Because many people would look at Germany and Japan as a failure in World War II, but we can even look at North Vietnam and North Korea. They were heavily bombed, with very high civilian casualties, and their will didn't bend. Far from it. In many ways, it strengthened their will to fight to the end and make no compromise. Of course, in North Korea's case, they did compromise when China and the USSR forced their hand, whereas North Vietnam did not really compromise. They got what they wanted at the end of their struggle.

Those are a few of the points I would make about why this whole discourse on how Ukraine is going to be able to pressure Russia into a ceasefire just doesn't look very realistic. And of course, the other side of the coin is what's going on in Ukraine right now, which is something that is always missed in these comments. They never want to do a straightforward comparison. But you have to do a straightforward comparison because in a war of attrition, it's like two boxers going past round 10. But the difference between boxing and a war of attrition is there's no bell. It just goes for as long as it takes for one of the boxers to die, fall down. And this is where we have to look at both boxers and see what condition they're in to have an understanding of who is going to give in to the pressure, who is going to buckle first.

## #Glenn

No, this is one of the things that often worries me as well. That is, we don't really have a clear objective analysis of the damage on both sides. And it's built in a bit to the language, I notice. If one argues, well, actually, you know, the Ukrainians are taking higher casualties, and you can point to any numbers, like with the drones or artillery, then immediately it would be dismissed because it would be seen as being pro-Russian, I think, to say, because you undermine belief in the war. And if this is known, you know, this could undermine public support for the war and the funding, so it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. So, you know, we have a way of building narratives which insulate themselves from facts. But by the way, with the possibility of a growing dissent within Russia, like I mentioned last year, you mentioned Grigory Yavlinsky, of the liberals in Russia.

I met him at the Vatican last year, and I am familiar with his views. But I often then would ask, you know, because we have these slogans, "Bring the Russians to the negotiation table," you know, "They have to accept peace." But what does the end of the war actually mean? If we want to put an end to the war, what does peace mean? Because, as you said, the EU tends to, and the British tend to, define this as a ceasefire. But when you ask the EU what will bring a sustained peace, they say, well, that's NATO membership for Ukraine. We need NATO peacekeepers in Ukraine. All the territories, including Crimea, have to come back under Ukrainian control, which would then be de facto under NATO influence.

And to achieve—and also, as you said—reparations. The EU wants money because it loaned a lot of money to Ukraine, which it needs to dip into the Russian funds it froze. So it just seems that even if there is a ceasefire, it will be a temporary pause because... And for Russia, this could be seen as problematic because then we have to go back to the threat perception from Russia. That is, what many people don't like to even discuss often in the West is that the Russians see this as an existential threat. That is, not Ukraine alone, but the fear that NATO is using Ukraine as an instrument. And, you know, I tend to see that the same way.

But, you know, the perceptions, you know, it... The only thing that really matters is what the Russians perceive, because if they see it as an existential threat, irrespective of what anyone in the EU thinks, this is what they will act upon. So I'm just wondering how much, if there's some disruption in the businesses, the economy is doing worse, what is actually the space here for Russia to accept this peace or put an end to the war along the EU format? Because they keep saying we have to bring them to the negotiation table. But, you know, technically the Russians were there with the U.S. The Europeans don't call them.

The Americans put a deal on the table, apparently in Anchorage, which the Russians said, "Okay, fine, we'll go with this." And then, seemingly, the Americans walked this back. So I'm just wondering how—on that part of the equation, that is, we're forcing the Russians to the negotiation table—but what exactly does the EU demand at this negotiation table? Because the amount of pressure

required depends on what goal we want to achieve, because peace becomes a very ambiguous term. And once we unpack it, we see that it might mean essentially what's an existential threat for the Russians.

## **#Matthew Blackburn**

I think you're right that the Europeans are not offering a feasible end to this war. What they're essentially offering is, let's just call it a draw, ceasefire, and forget about the whole thing. We'll look after Ukraine. You just keep your bits of territory, and we're not going to recognize them. And it'll be some kind of... very unclear what kind of peace that is and what it resembles. So I think it's a non-starter because this whole thing begins with a political conflict. There's a political conflict at the core of it. To pretend there's no political conflict at the core of it is to misrepresent the very nature of the conflict. And it is consistently misrepresented.

It's very difficult to talk about Russia's motivations in the current sort of environment, the current atmosphere. I mean, there's a couple of points that are repeatedly made about what Russia thinks is a threat by Western commentators. I think it's worth just sort of flagging them and maybe raising some questions about them. The first is that Putin merges the idea of regime survival with national security, and that he perceives Ukraine's democracy as a threat to him personally and his cronies and his regime. And so he has to crush democracy, sort of strangle it to death in Ukraine. And that's how he will persevere. And so... that's one variant of what the Russian threat perception is in many Western expert circles.

And, of course, okay, there's maybe some truth to that, to the extent that when things start to sour between Russia and the West, the Russian security circles and the political establishment highlight colour revolutions as part of a toolkit that the West uses to destabilise Russia and surround, try and change the governments of neighbouring states in order to weaken Russia geopolitically and ultimately undermine its sovereignty. And they call that hybrid war. That's Gerasimov's doctrine, that the West uses hybrid war against Russia. But that's not quite the same as the point I just made, that it's a fear of democracy spreading into Russia. So there's plenty of autocratic regimes that have sustained for decades without any need to have a war with a democratic neighbour. Take Mexico, take South Korea, take Singapore. They don't need to have a war to sustain themselves.

And another part, another way to rebut this is this whole idea of a diversionary war. Putin has to fight this war somehow to keep the population distracted from the corruption and incompetence of his governance. But there is no media campaign in 2021 to prepare the Russian population for a big mobilization and a big war. There is no need, because Putin's ratings have restored themselves to quite good levels already by the middle of 2021. And the population, you know, is not prepared for this war. And so that's one misconception, I think, to just call this autocracy-democracy; that's the fundamental nature of the conflict. And it's a very dangerous way to portray the conflict because it basically means it can't be solved until the autocracy is destroyed or the democracy is destroyed. And that's kind of the way a lot of people see it. Okay, here's another way of framing the Russian

motivation, which I think is misleading, although, again, it has a hint of truth to it: Putin wants to dominate his post-Soviet neighbors and remove their sovereignty.

Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine are the cases that are usually given. And there is some degree of truth to that, in the sense that Russian national security, as it's perceived in the Kremlin, demands there to be some level of leverage in these countries so that Russia feels its voice is heard. And they do not want those countries to become openly hostile to Russia and to close their borders and to become part of NATO. And I mean, that is a fairly conventional security concern of any major country, and even if you're not a major country, even if you're a middle power or a small power, you're concerned about that. But to call the desire to create leverage—to misconstrue that as a complete domination of these countries and to annex and control them—I mean, that's not what recent history shows us.

In the case of Georgia, they used the tool of separatism to destabilize the Georgian government under Saakashvili in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. And they used that as a kind of mechanism to say, well, we can create many problems for you if you want to try and join NATO, and we can make it impossible for you to join NATO. And it worked in the Georgian case. But that didn't then translate into Russia dominating Georgia. I mean, I don't believe that the Georgian Dream government is dominated by Moscow, although there are some rather ideologized liberals who make that claim. I don't think the evidence is there. I think that Georgia has a relationship with many different neighbors and it's pursuing its own path to a large extent. And then if we look at Ukraine and what was, you know, obviously Russia made a major transgression of international norms by annexing Crimea.

And that created a serious escalation of what was a domestic political crisis into a geopolitical crisis. But, of course, the Kremlin said it was doing that because we were supporting—the West was supporting—a coup d'état. Now, Russia was just doing the same thing as in Georgia. It was weaponizing a separatist movement to curb Western expansion of influence into that neighboring state, and it was also successful insofar as Ukraine couldn't join NATO. And the Minsk II process was set up. But was Minsk II a tool of Russian domination? And that's often claimed by Ukrainian nationalists. But by all accounts, if it had been implemented, those regions would have gone back into Ukraine, and there may never have been this war in the state that it is now.

So to misconstrue it or to totalize the presentation as about Russian domination, that is what we have been kind of subjected to as the kind of conventional interpretation. Now, how can we replace that with a more accurate assessment of the Russian threat perception? As I've already said, I think we have to take a bit more seriously this idea of hybrid war and the fear of color revolution, and link it to a central concept that's been flowing through Russian political discourse since Putin came to power, essentially, around sovereignty.

And, of course, you know, many people dismiss the discourse on sovereignty as some kind of cover for Russian imperialism, and, you know, that's a separate debate you can have. But the quest for status Russia has been on and its idea of national security is informed by its history, and informed by

its huge size and the porous, long borders it has, and its constant being invaded. And it requires buffer zones, or belief that certain areas around its territory are safe or neutral. I mean, that is an observable fact of Russian history if you're a security studies scholar. It's not contestable.

And if you look at Putin's conception of sovereignty, it's quite Westphalian, and it's quite old-fashioned for the European mindset of 1989 up to the current day. But if you want to try and understand Putin's mentality about what sovereignty means to him, I think you have to look at what's going on in the Middle East. He was a keen observer of developments in the Middle East, and for Putin, what's happened in the Middle East is the West has completely negated the concept of state sovereignty there. They have empowered Israel. They have gone up against any country that's pursued its own independent sovereign agenda.

Libya, Iraq, Iran, Syria. They've used all kinds of means to undermine: an economic blockade, or overthrow the government, or invade it, a full-scale invasion, or killing the leader, Gaddafi, for example. And then, on the other hand, they have supported the pro-Western governments as client states: Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states. And in this sense, the Middle East is dominated by America. And there is no sovereign center of power in Putin's own mind. And so what Putin wants to do is stop that from happening in the post-Soviet space. That's my reading of his vision. It's not my view. It's not my opinion of what should be done.

But that's my reading, as best as I can understand his writings and his speeches over the last decades. And so, when we look at Ukraine and the first phase of this conflict in 2014, it does have the features of hybrid war preceding it. If we say that hybrid war includes supporting, interfering in the domestic politics of a country, Ukraine, and trying to get your guys into power and using all different measures, by hook or by crook, then the Russians observe that, and that's why they annexed Crimea. And annexation of Crimea is their answer to what they perceive as Western hybrid activities in Ukraine. And so, to acknowledge that the Russians perceive Western hybrid warfare as a threat to their fundamental security, it's almost impossible today. And it was pretty hard to get that point across between 2014 and 2022, and it still is.

Now, what would it mean to create some kind of peace where Russia felt it was no longer expending its energies in a hybrid war competition with the West in Ukraine and Georgia and the countries bordering it? What would that possibly look like? And I think we're very, very far away from any European leader talking in a way that would acknowledge Russia, any blame or role that the West has played in creating the conditions for this war. We're so far away from that. I mean, you correct me if I'm wrong, is there anybody that's in power in Europe today that's made any statement that would indicate that?

Any deviation from that black-and-white narrative of pure Russian aggression, pure Russian imperialism, a pure desire of an autocrat to extinguish the democratic state and to absorb territory? And if that version, just say for the sake of argument, is correct, we need to have a World War III with Russia. We have to actually destroy the Putin regime, don't we? Because we can't have peace.

But that's not where the European leaders are going. Where they're going is neither war nor peace, which of course was a quote of Trotsky, who thought that you could have neither war nor peace after the October Revolution with the Germans.

And of course, that was a failed strategy, and Lenin signed the Brest-Litovsk Treaty. But that's a historical footnote. It's not really that relevant. But the point is, is it really a feasible strategy, neither peace nor war? Is it not more likely that we're just going to sit on the edge of spiraling into a final exchange of blows between the European states and Russia? I mean, we just sit on the edge of that spiral and ask, when is it finally going to happen? Is it only after the spiral that we're going to take the question of war and peace seriously again and maybe reconsider our commitment to some of these very, in my view, very one-sided views of the Russian threat perception?

## **#Glenn**

I think this black-and-white framing is actually at the heart of the problem to find a settlement here, because even recognizing basic Russian security interests along its borders, this would be impossible to discuss across the political West, because as you said, the first thing someone would say, "Well, then you're advocating for Russian dominance." But back in 2008, when NATO first made this commitment to expand NATO to Georgia and Ukraine, from the Kremlin, you got this concept out. I think it was Dmitry Medvedev who first pushed it, that Russia didn't want spheres of influence, but spheres of interest. Now, you made a clear conceptual distinction that, as you said, a sphere of influence suggests domination, right, or exclusive influence. And that's usually what we assume that the Russians want.

But he was arguing, we don't need this anymore. This belongs to a bygone era. What we need is a sphere of interest. And he said, essentially, this means that, no, we don't demand exclusive influence, but when other great powers operate on our borders, you can't do this without taking our interests into consideration. And this also was very quickly dismissed, especially by the Europeans, but also the Americans, who made the point that, well, that suggests the limited sovereignty of neighbors, and neighbors should be allowed to do whatever they want. But that's, for me, this sounds lovely, but it's absurd because that's never been the case. I mean, I would argue that the Americans have a sphere of interest in Mexico. That is, the Americans don't demand exclusive influence in Mexico. That would be absurd.

But we can't pretend Mexico has the freedom to set up Chinese military bases and Russian rockets. I mean, it's not going to happen. So, in other words, when other great powers operate on the borders of the United States and Mexico, they do have to take into consideration American security concerns. Again, this would be the sphere of interest. And, you know, once one can discuss the shades of gray instead of everything being black and white, then you can, you know, possibly have some sensible discussion. I mean, you said the same with Georgia. Georgia today, essentially, they recognize the

sphere of interest. They're arguing, you know, we have to recognize political reality as it is. In other words, if we try to join NATO now, the Russians would never accept it, and they essentially have veto power. If it's not in an institution, it will be through military force.

And I often see that the EU, they respond, okay, well, I guess now, you know, it's Putin's thugs who are now ruling Georgia. But you've been to Georgia as well. This is simply not true. Many of them have aspirations: we want to join the EU. Ideally, we could have joined NATO, but we have to respect reality as it is. But that little gray zone, recognizing it's not either this or this, it's reality, is virtually impossible to do in Europe now, which makes it so hard to discuss. And that's why everything's either democracy or autocracy. And I thought it was also the same with Russian objectives, because when they went in, the main two narratives we got in 2022 was, you know, it's unprovoked, which suggests, you know, they have no security concerns.

It's only, you know, territorial acquisition and also full-scale war. This is something they still repeat in every sentence. But I find this to be fascinating because, from what I remember, in 2022, when the Russians went in, they didn't go full scale to war. Indeed, the first month they dropped fewer bombs than America did on the first day in Iraq. And many analysts linked to the U.S. government assessed this as, well, they don't want to spoil the possibility for diplomacy by using excessive force. Why would they want diplomacy? Well, Zelensky told us on the first day of the Russian invasion, well, Putin already contacted us. He wanted to negotiate Ukraine's neutrality in return for Russia pulling out, which was the foundation of Istanbul.

I mean, it's... we're not allowed to discuss this, which makes an analysis very difficult, because I tried to make the point that the Russians didn't actually want territory. That means to an end. What they wanted was neutrality. And then once you recognize their security concerns, there's always this sleight of hand where they say, well, then you're justifying it or you're providing legitimacy, this kind of stuff. I'm just... it's... How is it possible then to have proper discourse around this in order to actually do what we usually do? If you want to find peace, the first thing you should do is put yourself in the shoes of the other guy. But what do you do if this is treasonous? Because if we do want to pressure Russia into a deal, surely we must figure out what kind of deal would be possible for the Russians. Yeah.

## **#Matthew Blackburn**

Well, I mean, as an academic, my job is to try and get the clearest possible interpretation and then hear why it's wrong. And of course, that was made impossible in February 2022. It was a different time. But today it's a bit easier to have discussions and to have some kind of academic discourse, and, you know, to try and step aside from all the hyperbole about the way that this, you know, Russia's, you know, it's an act of military aggression in February 2022. There's no bones about it. But what we can say is that Putin brought Clausewitz back to Europe in 2022: war as an extension of diplomacy by other means, which we Europeans thought had ended. We thought it had ended. And when the Russians said, "You're doing hybrid war on us," it was called propaganda.

And most European people thought, "We're not waging a hybrid war against Russia." So Putin says, "Well, we're sick of hybrid war. Let's have conventional war and see how this goes." And you notice what Putin's doing is saying it's legitimate for sovereign states to fight limited war for limited geopolitical aims. And that was a completely normal part of European life in the Westphalian system, and you correct me if I'm wrong, but also in the Concert of Europe system that was considered to be legitimate, although it was maybe modified from the Westphalian period. And I think that comes back to what you said earlier about why Medvedev's idea of zones of interest was ignored, why we never seem to have any grasp of what the Kremlin is asking for, because of a fundamental mismatch in how political concepts are understood.

Take two: sovereignty and democracy. So even before the 2008 Georgian crisis, we had Vladislav Surkov come up with the concept of sovereign democracy. And by doing that, he was just summarizing what was becoming the Russian position, first on sovereignty: a traditional view of sovereignty as undivided in the Hobbesian sense, and a Westphalian kind of idea of sovereignty as something that all states must prioritize, preserve, and keep—the one thing they don't want to lose. Then they also come up with an idea of democracy, which tied into Carl Schmitt's idea of a kind of majoritarian democracy, or even Max Weber's idea of a leader democracy, which was to separate the idea of liberalism and democracy.

So you can have democracy without liberalism, which was quite a popular view in many non-Western countries, but was widely rejected in Western analytical circles. And in the West, at the same time, let's just not forget, the idea of sovereignty is, we don't need it. We pool sovereignty to a higher cause in supranational organizations, which give us the greater good of a global civilization, which is ours. And if you're a smart country, you want to join our group. You want to give us your sovereignty and pool it with us and have these benefits, mutual benefits of pooled sovereignty. And at the same time, the idea of democracy was really reconfigured after 1989 to be a checklist of things that were defined by liberal democratization NGOs. All of a sudden, liberal democracy had a menu—sorry, a recipe, I should say.

And you just had to follow the cooking instructions, and you'd get it. And if you didn't follow the cooking instructions, then you were evil. I mean, this is kind of a sort of comical way to describe it, but this is a huge problem. So when we come back to the idea that Putin says it's a limited war with the idea of achieving a diplomatic end by other means than diplomacy, because diplomacy is burned out and impossible, I think we have to acknowledge where Putin maybe took a wrong step, or he took a big risk. Because one of the reasons the Clausewitzian approach to war became discredited was that in the age of nationalism, you couldn't have a limited war without it becoming a major or total war, a people's war.

And I think that the German high command acknowledged that after 1870, that once they had the war with France, which was very successful, they saw that it could have sparked off into a people's war, and then they would have been dragged into fighting deeper into France. And there was

conversation about that in the German high command, and that influenced their idea about, yeah, could they have any more limited wars with Bismarckian kind of wars? And then in the 20th century, we have nuclear weapons, which puts a stop to all this. You know, you kind of have a Clausewitzian kind of approach to war when you have nuclear weapons, right? So you have proxy wars.

And the proxy wars in the Cold War, as you've discussed at length with John Mearsheimer, you know, they were contained to places that were considered to be safe to have a competition. Vietnam, Angola, Korea, were considered to be small enough that it wouldn't boil over into a World War III. And there was no evidence that the U.S. ever considered opening up a proxy war somewhere in Finland or in Austria or in the European theater, because they understood that the Soviet Union was ready to go to war about that. They were primed, and you would have a conventional war then, possibly spinning into a nuclear war. So for Putin to take this action in February 2022 is basically—it's not the same proxy war as the Cold War. And he very quickly starts using the nuclear kind of rhetoric to back his action.

And he has a belief that he has escalation dominance. And he has a strong belief that the West is not committed to Ukraine the way that Russia is. And therefore they will, just as a matter of course, eventually give in and change their position and recognize the Russian concerns. So he believes that he can stick within these basic parameters. Now, he was wrong in the first case in February 2022 because he, well, I mean, one of the things that I think is mysterious about Putin's approach in February 2022 is that instead of articulating a specific limited objective, he said demilitarization and denazification, which could mean any number of things.

Now, why is it that he can't just articulate a Clausewitzian kind of vision of war? Because it's illegitimate. And it's always been illegitimate. Sorry, it has been illegitimate for as long as he has been president. And he's always had to rely on other kinds of things like identity and status and emotional kind of language to justify what's going on, why Russia has to step up against the West in the post-Soviet space. So he has to wrap it up in all this kind of language of culture and national history and identity and all this stuff about Ukraine being fascist, which, you know, I don't know if... I don't think a serious analyst is going to say that Ukraine is a fascist state in 2022 under Zelensky.

I mean, come on. It's not a serious argument if you know what fascism really is in a historical sense. So my understanding of what causes some of the problems with understanding what Russia is doing, what Russia is attempting to achieve, is their own mistakes in presenting their war aims, their own communication failures, their own poor information strategy. I mean, and I think also, you know, we don't seem to be willing to understand it in terms of limited war. As you said earlier, it was called a full-scale invasion, and it's not a full-scale invasion because, you know, I guess I've made this point several times to various colleagues, and not many of them like the argument because it sounds like I'm saying I like the Russian invasion, because it's not false.

I'm not saying I like it because it's not full-scale. I'm just trying to be accurate and talk about the scale and scope. It could be a full-scale invasion if they mobilized a million men and if they started

producing all the required tanks and the huge preponderance of force that's required to break through at parts of the front, to have a three-to-one advantage on certain sectors of the front, and to do something like a blitzkrieg. But to call February 2022 a blitzkrieg is just military illiteracy. In a book, I think on deterrence, John Mearsheimer, back in '82, wrote a book on that based on his PhD thesis. And he outlined three main ways that countries initiate conflict as an aggressor. One is blitzkrieg.

It's a very specific form of war, and it does involve a very specific preparation, and it's the minority of wars. And that is not what February 2022 was. There was no kind of amassing of forces of that nature, like there was when Nazi Germany invaded Poland and the USSR, and when America invaded Iraq. The second way that they initiate a war is as a limited short-term war, which is intended to catch the opponent by surprise and put facts on the ground and force them to a settlement. That's what happened in February 2022. The third main means of conflict is a war of attrition. We don't try to, you know, pierce through the lines and have a quick, clean, rapid victory. You go for a slow overwhelming of each citadel one at a time.

That was the North against the South in the American Civil War. That was the First World War. And, you know, that's what it developed into. And so when we have the presentation of the war and the Russian kind of activity, what motivated the Russians, that was completely lost. And it was very hard to get anyone on TV that would, in the UK, where I paid attention to the media there, be able to articulate that point. We have a chance to negotiate this out and replace Minsk II with something that the Russians and the Ukrainians and the Americans, the Europeans, can all sign. And, you know, that is, I think, how we should, you know, that would be a more accurate way of understanding what was going on in 2022.

## **#Glenn**

Yeah, well, I think that's common in all wars, though, and on all sides, is that during wars, well, as you write, the doves go quiet and the hawks become very loud because suddenly being aggressive would be, you know, the patriotic thing to do. So I noticed if you argue that this was a limited war, again, they didn't go in with 100,000 men in 2022 to occupy a whole country of, you know, 35 to 40 million people. Like, none of this makes any sense. But again, all evidence suggests that they wanted to impose a peace organized around neutrality, which is, again, consistent with the sphere of interest idea.

But again, if everything is dismissed or accepted based on—it's seen as legitimizing or delegitimizing—you can't advance this argument. But as you said, it's an important thing to recognize, because to recognize that it wasn't meant to be a war, it was meant to be what the Russians call a special military operation. That's not only a propagandistic concept; it's also supposed to denote that it is limited by nature. You know, this is important to assess their intentions. And once you acknowledge their intentions, their motivations, then we would have a clear view of what would be required in an actual peace agreement. But yeah, same with the rules of proxy war.

I thought it was interesting what you said. You know, it's the idea that you just fight in narrow space with clearly established rules. One of the things which surprised me a bit over the past four and a half years is how the rules of proxy wars have changed. I mean, four and a half years ago, you would have most European countries arguing, well, we don't supply weapons to countries at war because that makes us a participant. If you make that point today, that you're a participant by sending weapons, it's almost treasonous. But that was, you know, a common position only four and a half years ago. So you see how things are changing, and now, yeah, the proxy war—essentially, the proxy is going away.

But yeah, I just had a last question. How would, again, if the main point is to pull Russia to the negotiation table by escalating or intensifying attacks in Israel, how will Russia respond to this? Because, I mean, it has two options, the way I see it. I mean, it can either bow to pressure. It's very difficult if there's no acceptable peace on the table besides essentially what is capitulation in a war for its existence. Or the alternative is escalation. And, you know, I get the impression that from Russia now, there's many who are worried that all the restraint by Moscow is interpreted as weakness in the West.

And as a consequence, Russia's deterrence has started to slip as, again, the rules of proxy war have changed. How do you see this moving? Because only from recent events, we see now Kyiv is burning. The Russians are targeting it in a much more brutal way than they did in the past. They're putting naval blockades, all these things which they could do in the past, but didn't. So it looks, again, they're not striking NATO yet, but there are some voices who are arguing very strongly for this. So how do you see this calculation going, though, part of this strategy? I mean, if you strike deep into Russia, will this bring the Russians to the table, or will it force them to escalate? I mean, how do you see this playing out?

## **#Matthew Blackburn**

Well, I think it's worth acknowledging that it's a legitimate strategy for Ukraine to go for deep strikes and to try this one because of the unexpected centrality of drones to contemporary warfare, which was not understood in February 2022. They are able to hold the lines much longer than anyone expected, and they are now able to cause this pain. And if you're the Europeans and you're the Ukrainians, this might be the best hand they can play. And it shows a united front. It shows that, you know, they're not weak. They're not giving up. They're not cowards. They're not ready to capitulate, which you don't want to show if you're going into negotiations.

So this is a legitimate approach to going into negotiations. It could be a legitimate way to go into negotiations if it's combined with two other things. Firstly, real diplomacy, as you know, means putting people in a room and talking back and forth, and getting the ideologues and the big mouths

out of the room. You can't have Kallas in the room any more than you can have Maria Zakharova in the room. You need to bring someone from the Russian side who's considered by the Europeans to be fair-minded and interested in peace. And the same thing has to come from the Europeans.

And they need to come up with a swap that basically is a mutual concession. Russia has to give something up. And, you know, what they want most of all is neutrality. They want no NATO forces. They want a security architecture. So that's one thing they need to do. And they can do that while fighting, while doing deep strikes. That's how the Korean War ended. It's called fight and talk. It's okay. I mean, I don't necessarily, like—I'm not excited by that. I'm not, like, getting, you know—I'm not having, like, leaps of joy when I see things getting blown up in Russia and Ukraine. Of course not. Quite absolutely contrary.

However, that's one thing. The other thing is to balance deterrence with reassurance. Now, deterrence is everywhere in the Western discourse, in the European discourse about Russia. And the further east you go, the further in the north and in the east, in the Baltics, Poland, and the Nordic countries, it's very, very noisy in that regard about deterrence. But reassurance is very important. And reassurance is what needs to happen: the back channels of reassurance. The European states come together and send certain signals to reassure Russia that we're not going to do this, we don't want to be doing this, and we don't want you to do it.

The back channels would have to be about controlling emergency situations and avoiding crises, hotlines. You know, like, at the moment it's not even clear to me who from the European side would do the reassurance and with what authority they would do that. Trump can do it. The Americans do it. Yeah, they can. Tomorrow they can do it. They do. I think they have reassured Russia on several occasions, and it's worked, so that, you know, Putin doesn't feel that America is ready to step up and do something, uh, that would, you know, a huge escalation. So those things: reassurance, not public, maybe back-channel reassurance, plus diplomacy, plus pressure. That could be okay. But I fear that those two things are not happening, and all we have is ramp up the pressure and let's see how much heat Putin can take before he gets out of the kitchen.

## **#Glenn**

Well, the fight and talk is a good point. This is a strange thing at the moment, especially with all the Americans are talking since Trump took over. Not necessarily going anywhere, but for the EU, this idea that we're not going to talk to the Russians at all. But we have to put an end to the war, and the only way this can be done is an unconditional ceasefire. So we won't talk. The idea that you can't have diplomacy to end before you end the war, that essentially talking to the other side is now a condition for first ending the war, it's kind of strange.

You would hope that even if the EU isn't ready to end the war, if the Russians aren't ready to end the war, or the Ukrainians, at least you would want your guys sent to the capital of your opponent to work out some common understanding. So once an opportunity for peace emerges, that you do

have some basic framework. It just seems very strange not to have anything at all. But, well, as I said, a strange war indeed. Anyways, I did want to ask you before you go, where can people find you and follow your work?

**#Matthew Blackburn**

They can find me on Twitter, and they can also find me on Google Scholar and Academia pages. You'll be able to find all my academic work there as well.

**#Glenn**

Perfect. Well, I'll leave a link in the description, and thank you so much for your time.

**#Matthew Blackburn**

Thank you so much, Glenn.