The xTempore Podcast: Episode One
The Russia-Ukraine War
Transcript

Cooper Spacil: Hello and welcome to the xTempore podcast offered by Truman State Forensics. I'm Cooper Spacil,

Jack Unsell: and I'm Jack Unsell,

Cooper Spacil: and today we'll be talking about the Ukraine-Russia war. Now, the Ukraine-Russia war officially really kicked off um in February 2022 as a lot of the United States citizens and other Western citizens really saw it kick off, but the conflict's actually much older than that. Um, Jack, you told me that you have some information about the general background of the conflict.

Jack Unsell: Yeah, absolutely. Um, generally when you look at the Russian-Ukrainian war, it says the time frame is from 2014 to the present day, but it honestly stretches even before then. It really starts in 2010 with the election of Viktor Yanukovych, who was the president of Ukraine. Ukraine was having some disputes on what they were going to do in the future regarding their foreign policy. They had a couple options. They could have gone towards [the] West, gone towards the European Union with countries that now are a part of things like NATO. Or they could have gone with other European nations and Asian countries out east, most notably Russia. And Yanukovych, being an ethnic Russian, decided to side with the side with the Russians and decided to not snuggle up to the EU. Fast forward to 2014, we saw the Ukrainian people had enough. They decided that this was not going to be something they put up with and ultimately forced Yanukovych to leave the country completely and what we now know as the "Revolution of Dignity." So that's when it really started and amongst that turmoil and that disorganization amongst the Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian government, Russia decided to move in and annex the Crimea region in 2014.

Cooper Spacil: Gotcha. And so that's when the conflict initially kicked off. Um, so what exactly then led to the escalation later in 2022?

Jack Unsell: Yeah, absolutely. There are many things attributed to the rise and tensions that came along with the Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Um, a couple things that are mentioned directly from the Russian government were things like labeling the Ukrainian region as ethnically Russian, saying it belonged to them, um, due to the large amount of ethnic Russian who in theory and the view of the Russian government are more ethnically aligned with Russians. There are also more broader attacks from countries in the West claiming that this is more of a protest from Vladimir Putin to stop the power and overstepping of NATO and European countries to show that Russia is still a dominant power. So, it's kind of contested why it boiled over. Um, but it is very clear that multiple factors led to the rising tensions.

Cooper Spacil: I can definitely see that being the case. I know that the EU during the time has ongoingly added more members and Ukraine has been considered as a member for quite a while. Um, and it was roughly in 2021 they started looking at ascension talks for Ukraine again. So what you're saying is part of it could have just been the spread of not only just NATO influence but also EU influence in Ukraine.
Jack Unsell: Absolutely. It's Russia and Europe have historically been not the most friendly. So there's a very antagonistic relationship there. So it's any organization right now it's NATO in the past it was EU but it's more so Russian general antagonistic behavior towards Europe and vice versa and I know that Europe and its role it has played in the war has evolved since the beginning. I think you can tell us some more about how exactly Europe has got to play more of a role in this war.

Cooper Spacil: Absolutely. It's really one of those things that changed the precedent of how Europe does a lot of its foreign policy. Um, prior to kind of the kickoff of this full-on invasion by Russia in 2022, um, Europe had been kind of pacifists. There was not a large amount of military buildup. I mean, your largest military might be out of France and the UK, but with the UK's Brexit in 2020, that kind of left a uncertain uh, level of commitment towards European military powers in terms of defense of the whole continent. Um and then with NATO in the US, I mean NATO has been a longtime um supplier of defense for whole of Europe. A lot of that defense coming from the United States. It's kind of this, you know, larger protectorate, but there wasn't a whole lot of military development. But what this war kind of did is it shifted the way a lot of countries, um, I think most notably Germany and Poland, have been viewing their defense. Um, Germany, for example, had made a commitment towards no further militarization, especially after their wartime past with [world] wars one and two. There's a lot of natural guilt regarding that, a lot of guilt continentally in terms of war that
there was ideally no more wars in Europe, some of the founding principles of the European Union. But this conflict in particular kind of changed all of that. Um, Germany has, for instance, reignited its military engine. Um, has started producing tanks. Their Leopard Twos in different parts of Europe, Latvia to be one in particular. Um, but there's been a large amount of reindustrialization and reinvestment into European militaries, not just militaries as a whole.

Jack Unsell: Sure. So, understanding the fact that Europe is seemingly gearing up and revitalizing their militaristic prowess, what implications to that does that hold for uh the Russian-Ukrainian war at large going forward? What does the future look like then?

Cooper Spacil: Yeah. Well, in order to kind of get to the future, you kind of got to look at where the conflict is now. I mean, at the time in February 2022, it was expected that Ukraine was not going to last as long as they did against Russia. Um, and that was a lot of the opinion of Russia itself. Um, that they were going to be able to steamroll straight to Kiev. Um, take the capital and then all of Ukraine would fall. Um, Ukrainians put up a excellent defense in stopping them to do that. The fact that the conflict is still ongoing is

just a testament to how strong the Ukrainians are defensively. Um, but a lot of that strength is not solely because of Ukraine. It's a lot of it has to do with the allies. Um, the United States has given plenty of military aid towards Ukraine. And a lot of what the European militaries are now doing is they're not sending their military, they're not sending their troops, but they're taking all of their investment and putting it into Ukraine. So, what you're kind of getting is a essentially blocks beginning to form surrounding this conflict, not just in Europe, where these European countries are pooling their support behind Ukraine, but you're seeing this also form with Russia and some of Russia's allies - China and North Korea being the most notable in terms of this conflict, especially in terms of the economic detriments that have occurred to Russia as a result of the conflict.

Jack Unsell: Absolutely. And to their credit, before we move on to the geopolitical and regional risks that go along with it, Ukraine, due to the funding from Europe, has kind of revolutionized the game when it comes to warfare. Um, something that's really notable about Ukraine and something that I find not necessarily interesting, but is, but is fun to read about, is their use of drone warfare, which is not something specific to Ukraine, but something that they really, really um kind of revolutionized. So, we know that Russia has a bigger military, probably has more domestic funding for their military, but through these drones, um, unarmed systems that can blow up entire tanks or other have other militaristic goals, um, these drones have been incredibly powerful and I think it cannot be understated their impact. And um, before viewing the geopolitical risk, also seeing um, the roots that allowed Ukraine to last this long and be that successful. So, sorry to change the subject. Tell us more about those blocks.

Cooper Spacil: Yeah. No. Well, that's a lot of the reason why you're seeing drones. Drones being a "gray zone" tactic because when you get the formation of blocks like we're beginning to see form, um it's the use of more conventional military items that are not as easily used as they were maybe in the past like with the Soviet Union and the United States. Um because a lot of what we're seeing especially now in terms of what Russia is doing to also engage in its gray zone, not only are they using cyber attacks against multiple elections kind of throughout Europe, um specifically countries like Latvia, Lithuania, Germany, um who are known and very avid supporters of Ukraine militarily, economically um but it's also creation of drones on behalf of Russia as well through um global uh targeting systems provided by China as well as just economic support also provided by China. Um, specifically I think something that's not being as talked about a lot in terms of this Ukraine-Russian war, a lot of it focuses on what Europe is doing, but um policy centers like the Asia Society Policy Institute, as well as the Indo-Pacific Defense Forum have started to write papers talking about this kind of triad beginning to form out of Asia with Russia, North Korea and China, wherein these countries are becoming a lot more avid supporters of each other. I mean, North Korea has donated um, since roughly about April 2024, um between 10,000 to 15,000 of their own troops to Russia's side of the war. Um, and although China hasn't given explicit military weapons, they're definitely

being a large supporter buying Russian oil, buying Russian gas, and making sure that their ally, Russia, is very much a dog in this fight.

Jack Unsell: Yeah, absolutely. So knowing that these blocks play such a huge role, is there any shift or future direction that these blocks are taking? Is there, is there, is this turning into more of a global conflict rather than just spreading to a regional conflict.

Cooper Spacil: So, I think that's a lot of the fear when it comes to this, that this conflict is becoming less so about Ukraine itself, but more so about who's backing who. Um, and ultimately I think that leads down to what exactly is needed to end this conflict. Um, and there's a lot of debate about this. Um, Vladimir Putin has come out and said himself that one of the main factors is having Ukraine not join NATO. Um, but something that is especially recently started this summer um is further ascension talks with the European Union and Ukraine. Um, supporting the European Union although it's an economic coalition, um does have a collective defense pact. So if Ukraine were to join the EU, there's question as to whether that would drag the rest of Europe into the conflict and then by dragging NATO member countries who are also EU member countries, or that would drag in the United States, Canada as also a part of a NATO collective defense. So there's a lot of question as to what exactly an end of conflict will look like in this case.

Jack Unsell: Absolutely. And when viewing the the into the solution, given that it's gone on for so long and given the, the stalemate it seems to have formed between Russia and Ukraine, is a, is a mutually beneficial agreement between Russia and Ukraine truly in the picture or is it
becoming at odds to the point where there's no middle ground?

Cooper Spacil: I think the issue ultimately boils down to Ukraine just wants a guarantee of its own. Um they want to remain a sovereign state um and they would like to ideally do it without any loss of territory. Um, we're saying there's still a lot of Russian control in uh southern, southeastern parts of Ukraine. Um and so there's question as to whether they would be able to get Russia to cede that territory back, whether they would have to accept it as a loss towards the war. Um or rather it would be some other kind of concession such as a commitment to never join NATO, commitment to never join the EU. Um the ball is, unfortunately, in Russia's court on this front in terms of what exactly is Vladimir Putin and his government expected to gain out of this war. Um, Vladimir Putin, has I'm sure you're aware, has been talking a lot about how he wants to kind of reinvent the Soviet Union as he knew it. Um, which means taking and holding Ukrainian land. So what exactly he's willing to accept in terms of a ceasefire or resolution, that's really what we're looking at.

Jack Unsell: Sweet. So just to summarize and give the TL-DR of everything started off with a with a not so favorable president in 2010. Ukrainians didn't like him, kicked him out, kind of destabilized the country, which is when Russia came in and annexed that region, escalated in 2022 when they invaded formally, to what we know as the beginning of what

we know as the Russian-Ukrainian war, and ever since then it's been a bitter stalemate with blocks forming on both sides of different countries and a solution that is foggy but can have multiple approaches. Does that seem right?

Cooper Spacil: Very much. And ultimately, as long as both sides continue to have the same support they've had, um, it's likely that the stalemate could go on for quite a while. Um, but that's ultimately the question is: can a resolution be found before one of the two sides gives out?

Jack Unsell: Absolutely. It's a multi-faceted issue and I hope a solution can be found soon. I agree.

Cooper Spacil: Turning our focus now towards a more questions-based approach. Jack, if you were to get the question: "How much of an impact are Ukrainian drone strikes inside Russia having on Russian endurance for their conflict?" what steps would you take towards answering this question?

Jack Unsell: Absolutely. Before we even answer the question truly, there are two really important parts of that question that we need to fully understand. First, first, is the power of Ukrainian drones. It's going to be necessary in this question to address and contextualize how big of an issue Ukrainian drones truly are. Um, and then, secondly, you also have to address Russian endurance. What does that look like now? Where is it going in the future? And what does good versus bad look like for Russia? So before even answering the questions, those are two parts that you need to have concrete in your speech and have in your mind. That being said, there are a couple very different, very interesting different paths you could go in actually answering the question. First, could be a sort of comparison. We know that Russia also utilizes drones. Despite this, Ukraine innovates faster. They have more drones. Their drone fleet is more resilient and is better built. So, a comparative analysis there might do, do well. Um, something talking about the physical impact of drone strikes would also be really rhetorically compelling for some judges. Talking about the impacts it has had on civilian infrastructure, even parts deep in Russia that were once thought impossible to reach from Ukraine, from a Ukrainian perspective. Um, and also talking about the risks that come along with drones from a militaristic perspective, how effective drones have been in limiting Russia's militaristic capabilities. Um, and then, the final thing I would think about, obviously not the only thing to think about, but is the the symbolism that drones have allowed Ukraine to to draw from, despite being not necessarily kicked, but been kind of, kind of stumped a little bit by Russia in the foot. What we, what we've seen is that Ukraine has kind of had a problem when it comes to motivation and overall global perception. What drones have allowed them to do is have a form of militaristic success to show that they're not completely helpless to themselves, to their population, to Russia, to show that they're not completely helpless, but also to the international community that they still have a fighting chance, which perhaps allows the drones to get even more funding to, uh, to help. What else would you add on to that?

Cooper Spacil: No, I think that, I mean that hits a lot of it for me. Uh, my biggest thing is again focusing on like what impact has the drones had on the actual drivers of the war for Russia. So, for me that's what is it doing to decrease their economic ability? What is it doing to decrease their, uh, alliances with China and other actors? Um, because for Russia, a lot of this war they poured so many resources
into it. So what exactly are these drones doing that would stop or prevent Russia from continuing based on what I believe would be resource? Yeah, I think that was a fantastic answer. Now, uh
gearing towards a different type of question. Um: "How will Ukrainian attacks on Russia's oil industry impact the global price of crude?" Uh, do you have an answer, or approach to an answer, for that type of question?

Jack Unsell: Yeah, I'll give you a, a real brief couple things and then turn it back over to you. Um, first we know how important oil prices are, um, internationally, especially right now with the conflict between the United States and Iran, and the Strait of Hormuz being closed. So something to think about there is the global importance especially right now. Um, it's also important to understand the full complexities of Russian oil, and Russian petroleum, which I'm sure you'll touch more on. Um, but it's a huge industry um, to think about also. And the third thing to think about is that war costs a lot of money but it also costs a lot of resources. So how has the war not only impacted the market but also the actual supply that Russia has? Um, but that being said, you go ahead and tackle this one.

Cooper Spacil: No, I, I agree a lot of with what you're having to say. Um, especially when it comes to oil prices. I mean we're living in a fairly unstable oil market. So, I feel like any disruptions in the production, especially right now, um, could have really devastating impacts on not only Russia's allies, but also Ukraine's allies as well. So, I think really when we're looking at Ukrainian attacks towards Russia's oil industry, um while it might be helpful in the short term for them, I think there should be a really strong consideration about how tenuous the oil market is globally and whether that could potentially have a backlash on Ukraine ultimately. Um, and that's really a lot of what it comes down to.

Jack Unsell: Absolutely. I think another important perspective to think about um when it comes to this issue is, is Ukraine targeting petroleum exclusively? Are they targeting other energy resources? And what resources are they targeting? It's all a, it's all a contextual game.
Extemp is all about context. So whichever way you want to frame it, if you want to frame it in a wayof broader Ukrainian strikes on energy or if you want to frame it as like a, like a one-off attack, there are, there's always broader context that can help you frame the question in a specific way, especially something that is as complex as Ukraine and Russian oil.

Cooper Spacil: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. So, for one final question, um, how would you go about answering the question, um, "Should the US continue to support Ukraine's fight against Russia?"

Jack Unsell: Absolutely. It's, it's one that is probably going to be most common for invitational tournaments, and also one that could be most controversial. You know, it is the general view of many Americans that Russia is probably the less favorable side, but there are always going to be people on both sides. So approaching this question just like any other controversial question is going to be important. That being said, there are a couple important facets to both sides of the discussion when it comes to the United States support. First, I would say is the stake we've put in so far. We've had a support for Ukraine, not only since the beginning of the war in 2022, but also a historic devotion to the region in Ukraine. So that's an important facet to look at. Um, something also important to look at is money. We don't have infinite money. We have money going to a lot of different places. Is it justified in Ukraine? Again, I'm not saying one way or another. It's just a important part of a speech that's centered around the United States. And then, also the large amount of weapon stockpiles which are primarily driven by Ukraine. Um, is this good that we have more weapons to give to people? Is it good that we are preemptively helping Ukraine, or is it bad? So, those are a couple things that come to my mind. First, what are you thinking about?

Cooper Spacil: Yeah, for me, a lot of it comes down to um, a head of government. Um, I mean, this war started while Biden was president. Uh now, Donald Trump is president um, and Congress has flip-flopped between parties a lot since then. So, a lot of what comes down to should Ukraine be supported um comes down to a lot of it the view of our government um and what they choose to do with it. Um, and I think that is especially looking at the um, further down the line, how this conflict is going to continue to go. Um, it's going to be governmental support not just from the United States in terms of party, um, and just general ideology, but also other countries like the UK, for example. Um, a lot of what our government's priorities are is going to change and that's going to have a really big impact on the war. Um, and that's something to very, be, be very conscious about, um, is how to weigh those impacts on governmental priority.

Jack Unsell: So, to kind of bring it full circle, um, it's kind of a war that obviously is between Russia and Ukraine

Cooper Spacil: very much

Jack Unsell: but one that was loosely started, definitely driven, and definitely will end, from all of these blocks of nations that you're talking about

Cooper Spacil: without a doubt.

Jack Unsell Sweet. I think that's very interesting given the the complexities of war. We typically tend to see it very one-sided, I think. And the fact that this war has involved so many nations is tragic, but it also makes for some pretty fun topics that you could spend your speech towards.

Cooper Spacil: Absolutely. Well, thanks for tuning into our show. Make sure to check out xTempore for weekly questions and more. Um, I'm Cooper Spacil.

Jack Unsell: I'm Jack Unsell.

Cooper Spacil: Signing off.