

**World Class Podcast**

“What a Year of Putin's War Looks Like in Kyiv”

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*This transcript has been edited for clarity.*

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**McFaul:** You're listening to World Class from the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. We bring you in-depth expertise on international affairs from Stanford's campus, straight to you. I'm your host, Michael McFaul, the director of Freeman Spogli Institute.

Today I have a special guest, Serhiy Leshchenko. He's actually not at Stanford today; he's in Kyiv, Ukraine. Serhiy is an alumnus of our Draper Hills Summer Fellows program at FSI's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. He was part of the 2013 cohort.

He's also been a journalist with *Ukrainska Pravda*; he's been a member of Parliament, and he currently serves as an advisor to President Zelenskyy's chief-of-staff, as well as a member of the Ukrainian Railways supervisory board. He has lived and worked in Kyiv throughout the war; he and I have been in touch a lot during the war, and I deeply appreciate all the conversations we've had.

We are going to be releasing this episode on February 24. A very tragic day; a horrible day; the one year milestone of Putin's horrific, barbaric invasion of Ukraine. But to do so we want to reflect on what has happened so far, and where we think the war is going.

Serhiy, we're very delighted to have you on World Class today.

**Leshchenko:** Thank you, Mike. Thank you for having me on and for the project to be part of the group on sanctions together with Ukrainian Office of the President. And thank you for everything you have done for Ukraine.

A year ago, we started to exchange messages extremely often and now we can see that our cooperation has had a very visible impact. So, thank you for joining the process and being one of the most vocal advocates of Ukraine in the world. Thank you very much. Thank you for inviting me.

**McFaul:** I appreciate those kind words. I don't know if they're deserved, but thank you.

Let's just start by setting the tone. Tell our listeners and our viewers. What's the mood right now in Ukraine? What's the mood in the capitol? You travel a lot, I see, on social media, and you've been to different parts [of Ukraine].

I remember you taking a train to Kherson at the very beginning of the liberation of Kherson. How would you describe the mood in general as your country now has endured one year of this invasion from Russia?

**Leshchenko:** I can say directly that it's complicated. I would like to say that everyone is excited and very supportive for event, but at the same time, we have to be fair in saying that people are exhausted. Our soldiers are super tired, super exhausted. Our army needs ammo. It's really what the president said a year ago: we don't need a ride, we need ammo. He was saying this on behalf of all Ukrainians.

This war is very difficult to predict when it's going to be finished. We are facing a new wave of Russian aggression with idea to complete the process of Donbass occupation. Because for Putin, it would be — as he believes — one of the face-saving solutions he has to declare the end of this so-called “special military operation” and to keep all occupied territories under his control. Then he could call the world to stop supporting Ukraine after the achievement of this goal.

So, the mood in Ukraine this winter was difficult because they started to attack infrastructure of electricity supplies, civilian infrastructure, and it made life very difficult. At the same time Ukrainians passed through this successfully. We see that it was complicated but it was a very historical moment. Even just staying in Ukraine was a historical mission. Not just to fight on the frontline, which I believe is one of the bravest jobs in the world during last 70 years after the end of the Second World War. But even to stay in Ukraine is difficult.

I know a lot of people decided to spend at least the winter outside [of Ukraine] just to get access to basic needs. And Ukrainians survived.

It's really important to say that all the plans of Putin were not fulfilled and were not complete. But at the same time Ukraine has shown that we're able to fight the second-most powerful army in the world. And this is a service Ukraine has provided to democracy because it's not just about our territorial integrity, but about the values which your state is also based on.

**McFaul:** Well I could not agree more with that, and I think it's important for people to remember that here in the United States: that this is not just a fight between two European armies far away. It's a fight between an autocracy versus a democracy. It's an imperial war. We thought we got rid of imperialism after World War II, but now it's back. And annexation. That is also something we thought we got rid of.

And I just have to say as an American who believes in those values, it is awe-inspiring to watch what you're doing not just for your own security, but for democracy around the world and for the rules-based international order that we seek to preserve.

Let's talk a little bit about and dig in a little bit more: are people in Ukraine just getting used to war? Tell us what the day-to-day is like. The sirens go off, the electricity goes out: is it becoming ritualized now, or is it still not?

**Leshchenko:** Of course, it's still complicated. At the same time, it's a very interesting phenomena to learn and to study how people can accept a new reality and survive in a new reality which can be very difficult.

At the same time. Ukrainians are eager to have our own state and to stay in this country, not to travel abroad. And that means that when attacks against electricity infrastructure started in the middle of October in few weeks if you walk through the center of Kyiv, you can hear the noise of generators.

**McFaul:** Right.

**Leshchenko:** That was extremely self-organized, to buy all generators everywhere it was possible to. The same thing happened during the first weeks of the war when Ukrainians bought all the pick-up vehicles and SUV cars everywhere in Europe. And they were buying these cars for Ukrainian soldiers on the frontline.

**McFaul:** And they're just buying them by themselves, right?

**Leshchenko:** Yes, just buying them themselves. We bought, I believe, more than 100 pickup and SUV cars for the frontline and for visiting our brigades on the frontline in Donbass region regularly like twice months. And now it's extremely difficult to find any pickup vehicle in Europe, even in UK where they have different rules for the road. And this huge deficit means that Ukrainians self-organized very well. The same has happened with the generators.

And it's national idea, of course, for Ukrainians not just to survive, but to build a new Ukraine with a completely different reputation and with completely different opportunities for all Ukrainians. And it's very important to say the President is role model for this. He is extremely modest. He's lived in the offices of president for one year. He wears the same uniform: the same t-shirt, the same hoodie, and the same sweatshirt to show that he is a part of this movement. He is not an army man, so he cannot wear army uniform, but he's trying to identify himself with the army by identifying himself by wearing these green t-shirts and green hoodies. And that's very important for the dress code. And I think it will have a global impact and it will be fashionable in some sense to dress like Zelenskyy dresses.

**McFaul:** I think you're right about that. I think that it's bigger than Ukraine. And I just have to say that the public communications strategy of the presidential administration of which you are a part has been, I think, just fantastically successful. There's three people in academic circles in America that Zelenskyy is in the circle of: it's Churchill, Ronald Reagan, and Zelenskyy. That's how people here compare him in terms of the communication skills.

But let's talk a little bit more about that. Your president recently was on a trip to Europe, his first big trip to Europe. Tell us how you think that trip went. How do you assess European assistance so far, and what more is needed from the Europeans? Then we'll talk secondly about the Americans.

**Leshchenko:** This trip was very important for Europe, first of all, to show this spirit of Ukrainians for Europeans. I think Europe lost a little bit of themselves during last few decades because of internal crisis, because of destabilization inspired by Russia, because of the fake news and propaganda, because of Russian money working in European politics, because of many different issues.

And now Ukraine, if I may say, has provided the sense for Europe to exist united. This a moment of inspiration, because Europe now has an example for its values.

The European Union was founded over 70 years ago to show that everyone had these same values. And now they are very visible, and we're being reminded of how valuable they are.

Sometime, maybe next year, Ukraine of course deserves to be part of the European Union. At the same time, these values deserve to exist in Europe again. And Europe is united now. The U.S. shows global leadership again. This has been very good for democracy.

But it's also very important to reconsider a lot of different processes in global politics as well. For example, the Global South should not be ignored, because we see how Russia is skillful in the Global South in manipulating public opinion and to lie to billions of people. Billions of people. And we can see how skillful propaganda can be from the example of the process going on in Russia inside of the state.

The trip to Europe was important to encourage Europeans to provide Ukraine tanks and more ammo, which is crucial to prevent a new wave of Russian aggression and to start a counter offensive, which is going to happen in spring and summer. And this counter offensive will be crucial for the further development of this war. If Ukraine succeeds with the counter offensive, I believe we can finish this war this year with a very successful, positive result. If it's not successful, it will create a huge risk for the whole of global democracy.

So that is why the president traveled to Europe: to stand together with European leaders and to encourage them personally by his personal example, that the war is not finished. When

Kyiv was de-occupied a year ago, it was a moment when many people believed the war is over. No. We are far away from the end of the war, unfortunately to say. And we the need support of the West

**McFaul:** Right. Well, let's talk a little bit about your predictions and projections and discussions about the counter offensive and the Russian counter offensive. And I want you to help our listeners understand what you believe to be Putin's new objectives in the war.

It's a little bit confusing, frankly, because at the beginning of the war he had many grandiose ideas about de-Nazification and demilitarization and allegedly unifying the “one Slavic nation.” More recently, he talks more about Donbass, as you already said. But others don't. Others talk about wider objectives.

Help us understand what you believe are Putin's objectives in the war are now, and then second, we'll talk about what you think will happen with respect to counter offensives in the spring and summer.

**Leshchenko:** For Putin, it's a zero-sum game. He cannot find any compromise, which would be valuable for Ukraine. Because what he's proposing to us to accept the occupation and for us to lose part of Ukraine. And not only the north, but south in the Kherson and the Zaporizhzhia region.

And for him, it's just cause for further escalation in a few years, maybe. And for Ukrainians, it's unacceptable: for Ukrainian society, Ukrainian army, Ukrainian president, the office of the president, for everyone.

Now Putin is trying to find a solution which will save his face, as I told you. He wants to occupy the whole of the Donbas and to say that the initial goal of the “special military operations,” as he called it, is achieved, so he's not going to attack any new Ukrainian territories, just keep what they occupied. Then he'll use this argument for Europeans who are sick and tired with the war to say, “Stop this war. Don't provide Ukraine any weapons or any financial support unless Ukraine continues to fight.” And if Ukraine continues to try and de-occupy its territories, that then makes Ukraine the aggressors, in his proposal and his theory and his product for public opinion in Europe.

I think he is willing to pay the highest price for this, to complete the occupation of Donbas. And this is very difficult because I was in Donbas in May of last year, and I understand how huge the territory of Donbas is which is not occupied as well. It will take not weeks, not months, but maybe years of bloody war, to go forward to complete the occupation of Donbas. And that is why I don't see a visible solution for Putin in this war.

But what is dangerous is that I think Putin considers the war not as a process, but as an idea. It's not the result is important, but the process itself. He reestablished his state to live in this state of the war. His country is in a state of war. And he's okay with this because it creates a legal way to suppress opposition, to destroy any alternatives, to put his enemies in jail, to repress freedom of speech.

And he's happy with this. He has nothing to lose. That is why I think it's a global challenge. And it's a global challenge because it's showing other countries that aggression can be a simple solution for an aggressor. And that is why I believe Ukraine must be supported, because it will stop other countries from demonstrating aggression against their neighbors.

**McFaul:** Exactly. Let me ask, just to specify for our listeners: when you say Donbas, you mean the two regions, not the four regions that he's annexed on paper.

**Leshchenko:** Of course.

**McFaul:** But he's just focused on those two right now, right? Or is he focused on all four?

**Leshchenko:** I believe he is focused on Donbas, but he's not ready to leave the territories he occupied before. I mean Kherson region, which is mainly occupied, and Zaporizhzhia region. A big part of this territory, including the nuclear power plant, is occupied by Russians. And the nuclear power plant keeps the whole of Europe as a hostage of this war, because there are six nuclear power stations at this one station. It's like six Chernobyls on one station. It's huge; it's the biggest nuclear power plant in Europe, which of course, cannot be part of any military operations or war fighting at all, because the price is too high. The risk is too high.

**McFaul:** I want to come back to the support from the United States in a minute but before I do, just tell us a little bit about what it was like in Kherson. What did the city feel like right after it was liberated when you were there? Just give us a sense of the mood among the people there.

**Leshchenko:** It was like a sort of black hole. People had no access to electricity, or the water supply, or mobile connections. So they came to only a few locations like the train station, which we established as the survival place and where people could get access to StarLinks and to electricity generators to recharge the phones. But they were they had no idea what's really going on, because of being occupied.

At the same time, what surprised me was that the local population did not accept Russians as traitors. So, if you walk through the street in Kherson, after more than nine months of occupation, even the signs of the shops and the signs of the stores and of the restaurants were in Ukrainian. So, the local, small-medium enterprises did not change the signs, but kept them in Ukrainian language, because they did not want to change the identification.

The only few locations that changed the branding was the local university changed into Russian, and then a lot of billboards with propaganda about the fake referendum, which happened in the fall of last year.

Mainly people stayed with Ukraine in their hearts, and there were very touching moments when some Ukrainians on video discovered the flags in the soil. People had put the flags into the soil secretly to keep them until Russia leaves the territory or the territory is de-occupied.

**McFaul:** Wow. That is that is an incredible story. That's amazing.

We're close to the end of our time, but I want to ask you two more questions. One is about the United States. Serhiy, give us your assessment of how the support has been so far — military, economic, sanctions, humanitarian assistance — and then give me your assessment as to what more needs to be done.

**Leshchenko:** Starting from the first day of the war, the U.S. government is one of the strongest supporters of Ukraine, and we appreciate it. From the beginning, we consider the U.S. as our main ally and partner, and no one made more for Ukraine than Americans.

At the same time, of course, we have more and more you know, to continue, at least resistance, not even de-occupation. Russia had a huge mobilization of local populations, of prisoners from prisons, including criminals, and they had, really, one of the strongest army in the world. We should not consider a Russian army as idiots and weak soldiers.

**McFaul:** Right

**Leshchenko:** We should respect our enemy.

**McFaul:** Exactly. Yeah.

**Leshchenko:** It's not a piece of cake. This is a really big war in Europe, with a score of battles like in Stalingrad and in Kursk during Second World War. To fight this war, Ukraine is really eager to have American support. And unfortunately, we get what we need later on, like in three- or four-month periods. So, if we get artillery before war started, I think Russia would not have progressed on the frontline after the invasion.

If we got anti-aircraft systems like Patriots in summer, Russia would not have destroyed our electricity infrastructure and millions of Ukrainians would not have left Ukraine during the wintertime.

If we got tanks in autumn, I believe we could now have a very good counter offensive operation on the frontline during the wintertime. But it's always three or four months later than we expect it to happen.

That is why — with all appreciation — we are still very much looking forward to getting the weapons we're looking for. And the same will happen with the jets. I believe Ukraine will get them. But again, with a delay. This is crucial because in the war time, one of the main resources is not only ammunition or soldiers, but time. By losing time, we are losing territories, losing lives, losing our reserves of ammo.

For Americans, I believe this war is also very important because it shows the values which your state was founded on are still very much respected in Europe. We are in a country which is far away from America but at the same time very close by spirit. The Russians understand this, and Russia propaganda is starting to spin one of the topics that this war is for American financial circles, for industries that create and produce weapons, for American political establishment. It's all the typical bullshit from the Cold War time.

By using this argument, Russia shows that this war is really important for democracy in the sense that the future of not only Ukrainian democracy, but also global democracy, is on the table. That is why we consider your support as really crucial for us. And that is why the presidential trip to the U.S. was so important. It was a historical moment, for sure.

At the same time, it might be difficult for Ukraine to get all the necessary support as much as it was before because you have had some changes in your internal politics. It's up to Americans to decide who's going to rule the country and represent voters in Congress. But we see that some changes happened. And we would appreciate if the new Congress will stand on Ukraine as it done by the previous one.

**McFaul:** I think that's a perfect note to end on. Both so we understand the security interests, but also the values that we share. I most certainly agree with that. And I think it's important for Americans to remember, after all, that how our country was created. So thank you, Serhiy, for reminding us of our own history.

**Leshchenko:** I had no idea to use this argument as this kind of pretext, but only to show that we're standing on the same basis.

**McFaul:** Exactly. Exactly. Well, thank you for joining us. *Slava Ukraini!*

**Leshchenko:** *Herogam slava!* We appreciate you all as American citizens and the American government.

**McFaul:** Well, and let's hope we can get you back on. Let's do this more frequently. I think it'd be great for our listeners to hear more often from you. And we'll do that in the in the coming months.

**Leshchenko:** It was all my pleasure. Thank you, Mike.

**McFaul:** You've been listening to World Class from the Freeman Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. If you like what you're hearing, please leave a review and be sure to subscribe on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts, to stay up to date on what's happening in the world, and why.