DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR
RUSSIA’S INVASION OF UKRAINE: WHAT EVERYONE SHOULD KNOW AND WHY YOU SHOULD (STILL) CARE
DR. KATHRYN STONER

Organizing Questions
• What events led to Russia invading Ukraine in February 2022?
• Why does Vladimir Putin claim that he had to invade Ukraine, and what are the likely real reasons that he did so?
• Why should residents of the United States continue to care about the war in Ukraine?

Summary
In November 2023, Stanford professor and Russian expert Dr. Kathryn Stoner recorded a 38-minute video that provides a comprehensive background for the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia. In the video, Dr. Stoner details the history of Russia’s interest in Ukraine since the end of the Soviet Union, dispels several myths about Ukraine and its relationship with Russia, explains what Putin might really want, what normal Russians think, and why this conflict still matters so much. This discussion guide complements and expands upon Dr. Stoner’s video lecture. After viewing the video, students piece together a timeline of relations between Russia and Ukraine leading up to the start of the war in 2022, then work in groups to simulate a diplomatic summit among the parties in the war. This discussion guide is appropriate for advanced secondary students and university students.

Objectives
Through the course of this discussion guide, students will
• gain background and context to understand the outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022;
• critically assess the reasons Vladimir Putin has given for why Russia invaded Ukraine;
• recognize the effect the war has had on Ukraine, Russia, and Europe since war broke out; and
• understand why residents of the United States should continue to care about the war in Ukraine.

Materials
Handout 1, Video Notes
Handout 2, Timeline of Key Events in Ukraine–Russia Relations
Handout 3, Preparation for Peace Talks
Handout 4, Notes on Interests of Parties Engaged in Peace Talks
Handout 5, Reflection Questions

RUSSIA’S INVASION OF UKRAINE
### Equipment
Computer with Internet access and an HTML5-supported web browser
Computer projector and screen

### Teacher Preparation
Instructions and materials are based on a class size of 30 students. Adjust accordingly for different class sizes.

1. Make the appropriate number of copies of handouts.
2. Preview Video, “Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: What Everyone Should Know and Why You Should (Still) Care,” (running time: 38 minutes). You can use Teacher Information, Video Transcript, as a reference for the video content.
3. Become familiar with the content of the handouts, answer key, and display.
4. Set up and test your class computer and projector before starting the lesson.

### Time
Two 50-minute class periods, plus homework before each class period

### Procedures

#### Before Day One
1. Inform students that they will be learning about the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine for the next two class periods.
2. Distribute one copy of Handout 1, Video Notes, to each student. Instruct students to watch the video, “Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: What Everyone Should Know and Why You Should (Still) Care,” and complete Handout 1 before the next class period. Tell students to reserve 90 minutes to watch the video and complete the handout.

#### Day One
1. Organize the class into groups of six students each. Distribute one copy of Handout 2, Timeline of Key Events in Ukraine–Russia Relations, to each student.
2. Instruct students that they have 15 minutes to work in their groups to complete the assignment.
3. Check in on groups’ progress and use the responses on Display 1, Answer Key for Timeline of Key Events in Ukraine–Russia Relations, to help any groups who are stuck.
4. After 15 minutes have passed, ask groups to stop working. Show Display 1, Answer Key for Timeline of Key Events in Ukraine–Russia Relations, on a projector with all rows concealed.
5. Ask for volunteers to share what they believe to be the correct response for each row. Reveal the response for the corresponding row on Display 1. Continue until you reach the end of the table or there are 10 minutes left in the class period, whichever comes first.

6. Collect Handout 1 and Handout 2 from each student for assessment.

7. Distribute one copy of Handout 3, Preparation for Peace Talks, to each student. This handout asks each student to choose one of the parties to the Ukraine–Russia conflict and prepare for a potential peace talk with the other parties.

8. Ask each group to choose one of the parties (or assign them) before the end of the class period.

Before Day Two
Students work individually to research and complete their assignment as stated in Handout 3, Preparation for Peace Talks.

Day Two

1. Inform the class that they will now simulate several rounds of diplomatic talks aimed at finding a resolution to the war in Ukraine.

2. Distribute one copy of Handout 4, Notes on Interests of Parties Engaged in Peace Talks, to each student. Instruct students to use this handout to take notes as they listen to presentations.

3. Inform the class that one representative from each party has three minutes to share its party’s interest with the rest of the class.

4. Ask each group to share. Ensure each presentation is limited to three minutes.

5. After hearing from each party, instruct students to return to their original groups for five minutes to formulate a proposal for ending the war in Ukraine.

6. After five minutes have passed, bring the class back together and ask another person from each group to share their proposal with the class.

7. Inform the class that they must now decide whether they would accept any of these proposals. Give students five minutes to confer within their assigned party and decide whether they would accept any of the proposals presented and, if so, which ones.

8. After time has passed, ask the entire class to vote on each of the proposals presented. Have a student record the results of the vote.

9. Collect Handout 4 from each student for assessment and distribute one copy of Handout 5, Reflection Questions, to each student. If time remains, use the questions on the handout to debrief the activity.

10. Ask students to complete Handout 5 as homework.

Before Day Three
Students complete Handout 5 and bring their responses to the next class period.
Day Three  Collect Handout 5, *Reflection Questions*, from each student for assessment.

Extension  This video was filmed in November 2023. Either as a full-class discussion or an individual writing assignment, ask students to answer:

1. What are the biggest events in the war in Ukraine since this video was filmed?
2. In what ways, if at all, have these events changed Dr. Stoner’s analysis?
3. In what ways, if at all, have these events changed your view on how the war will go and why we should care?

Assessment  The following are suggestions for assessing student work in this lesson:

1. Evaluate student responses to Handout 1, *Video Notes*, based on Answer Key 1, *Video Notes*.
2. Evaluate student responses to Handout 2, *Timeline of Key Events in Ukraine–Russia Relations*, based on Display 1, *Answer Key for Timeline of Key Events in Ukraine–Russia Relations*.
4. Evaluate student responses to Handout 5, *Reflection Questions*, based on how well they synthesize the conversations during the lesson and how convincingly they state their claims.
5. Assess student participation in group and class discussions, evaluating their ability to
   - clearly state their opinions, questions, and/or answers;
   - provide thoughtful answers;
   - exhibit sensitivity toward different cultures and ideas;
   - respect and acknowledge other students’ comments; and
   - ask relevant and insightful questions.
VIDEO NOTES

You are about to watch a 38-minute video about the conflict between Russia and Ukraine from Dr. Kathryn Stoner, a Stanford professor and Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies scholar. In this video, Dr. Stoner provides a comprehensive history of Russia’s interest in Ukraine since the collapse of the Soviet Union. She dispels several myths about Ukraine and its relationship with Russia, explains what Putin might really want, what normal Russians think, and why this conflict still matters so much even more than two years after it started.

Use the space below to answer each question; you may want to take notes on another sheet of paper as you watch the video.

1. What were some of the biggest impacts of the war on Ukraine and Russia after 22 months (i.e., from February 2022 to November 2023)?

2. What happened in 2004 that made Russia under Putin concerned about Ukraine?

3. What motivated Putin’s regime to annex part of Ukraine in 2014 and then support a low-boil civil war in the east of Ukraine?

4. What were the outcomes of the initial fighting between Russia and Ukraine, from Russia seizing the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014 and up to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022?
5. What three myths about the war in Ukraine does Dr. Stoner cite? Why does she say that each is a myth?

6. According to Dr. Stoner, why hasn’t the war in Ukraine gone as Putin hoped?

7. What makes the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine so important for the security of Europe?
KEY TERMS (in order of mention)

**Orange Revolution**—widespread demonstrations held in Ukraine after suspected fraud in the country’s run-off election for president in November 2004, which declared Viktor Yanukovych the winner. The protests led to a repeat of the election in December 2004 that resulted in a win for Viktor Yushchenko.

**Revolution of Dignity**—name given to the deadly clashes between protesters and state forces in February 2014 at the end of the Euromaidan protests. These led to the removal of Viktor Yanukovych from the office of President of Ukraine, a return of the 2004 Constitution of Ukraine, and soon after the outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine.

**Euromaidan**—large-scale protests in the Maidan square of central Kyiv that began in November 2014 in response to Ukraine President Viktor Yanukovych’s announcement that Ukraine would stop talks to join the European Union in favor of stronger ties with Russia.

**Tatar**—name given to Turkic-speaking peoples found mainly in the Tatar Republic of Russia and parts of Siberia and central Asia.

**Minsk Accords**—name given to two agreements between Ukraine and Russia, one signed in September 2014 and another in February 2015, that led to temporary ceasefires in the fighting that began with Russia’s seizure of Crimea in March 2014.

**(Eastern) Orthodoxy**—one of the three historical branches of Christianity, along with Roman Catholicism and Protestant Christianity. Most members of the Eastern Orthodox Church live in the Balkans, the Middle East, and former Soviet countries.

**Budapest Memorandum**—agreement signed in December 1994 between Ukraine, Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom in which Ukraine restated its commitment to surrender its nuclear arsenal to Russia and the signers pledged to acknowledge and respect the boundaries of Ukraine as an independent country.

**NATO Open Door policy**—NATO policy stating that any country in Europe “willing and able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership” should be able to join the alliance.
### Timeline of Key Events in Ukraine–Russia Relations

Match the 10 key events in Ukraine–Russia relations listed below with their corresponding dates and add a note about why each event was important.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event and its Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Volodymyr Zelensky elected president of Ukraine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invasion of Crimea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia (re-) invades Ukraine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia invades the country of Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolution of Dignity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euromaidan protests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budapest Memorandum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soviet Union formally dissolves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minsk Accords</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date (Year and Month)</th>
<th>Event and its Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 1991</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1994</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 2004–Jan 2005</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date Range</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 2013–Feb 2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 February 2022</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Preparation for Peace Talks**

During the next class period, your class will engage in two rounds of talks to find an end to the current war in Ukraine. To prepare for this discussion, research the perspective of your assigned party.

The list of assigned parties to the negotiation is below; circle the one that corresponds to you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ukrainian government</th>
<th>Vladimir Putin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>European Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Status</td>
<td>Russian populace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As homework, conduct research to answer the following questions from the perspective of your assigned party. Make sure you use reliable sources and use the most updated information.

1. What is your preferred outcome for the war?
2. What outcomes could you accept?
3. What outcomes are unacceptable to you?
4. What if anything, would you be willing to compromise to end the war in Ukraine?
5. What sources did you use to find this information?
$\text{NOTES ON INTERESTS OF PARTIES ENGAGED IN PEACE TALKS}$

Record what other parties to the peace talks want in the table below. Use the space at the end of the handout to jot elements of a potential compromise/agreement based on what you hear.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ukrainian Government</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preferred outcome</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable outcomes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unacceptable outcomes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential compromises</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vladimir Putin</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preferred outcome</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable outcomes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unacceptable outcomes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential compromises</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>European Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred outcome</td>
<td>Preferred outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable outcomes</td>
<td>Acceptable outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unacceptable outcomes</td>
<td>Unacceptable outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential compromises</td>
<td>Potential compromises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred outcome</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable outcomes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unacceptable outcomes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential compromises</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELEMENTS OF A POTENTIAL COMPROMISE/AGREEMENT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Answer these questions in the format your teacher requests. Turn in your responses by the next class period.

1. Which of your class’s proposals, if any, do you think could work in reality?
2. Which party’s perspective most resonated with you? Why do you think that is?
3. How did the series of peace talks change your thinking about how the war in Ukraine will end?
4. How do you personally hope the war is resolved? How likely is this outcome given current events?
5. What are the biggest events in the war in Ukraine since this video was filmed in November 2023?
6. What was the biggest way in which this lesson changed your perception of the war in Ukraine?
1. What were some of the biggest impacts of the war on Ukraine and Russia after 22 months (i.e., from February 2022 to November 2023)?

Dr. Stoner mentions the following impacts:

For Ukraine:
- The war reversed about 15 years of developmental/economic progress
- More than six million Ukrainians have fled the country as refugees, settling mostly in Europe
- Almost six million internally displaced Ukrainians
- Official death toll of just under about 10,000 people with another 15 to 20 thousand injured—but likely far more than that
- Damage to Ukraine will cost over $400 billion to rebuild, according to the World Bank

For Russia:
- Negative effect on economic and political development
- The greatest vulnerability of Putin's regime since he came to power in 2000
- Rapid economic decline
- Decline in democracy and increase in repression of society and dissent

2. What happened in 2004 that made Russia under Putin concerned about Ukraine?

Ukrainians came out in large numbers in November 2004 to protest a presidential election they believed was unfairly won by a pro-Russian president. This movement, called the Orange Revolution, led to an overturn of the election results and the victory of the other, more Western-friendly candidate. Putin worried that the Orange Revolution put Ukraine on the path toward becoming part of the European Union and even the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). He saw Ukraine as part of Russia's traditional sphere of influence, so this would be a big loss.

Putin was also worried that something like the Orange Revolution could happen in Russia. He saw Ukrainian citizens coming out onto streets and public squares and protesting a fake electoral result and an autocratic government. These conditions existed in Russia, and Putin wanted to make sure that Russians didn't follow this example, so he sought to repress Ukraine.

3. What motivated Putin’s regime to annex part of Ukraine in 2014 and then support a low-boil civil war in the east of Ukraine?

As in 2004, Putin was concerned that the 2013–2014 Euromaidan protests and the “Revolution of Dignity” would lead to contagion in Russia where the populace would be inspired to rise against him and oust him from power, just as Yanukovych was deposed in Ukraine in 2014.

The Russian government also claimed it were concerned about maintaining access to Crimea and its Black Sea fleet, which was based there in Sevastopol.

Finally, Russia had faced relatively little international punishment for entering Georgia and occupying part of its territory back in 2008, so this may have emboldened Putin.
4. What were the outcomes of the initial fighting between Russia and Ukraine, from Russia seizing the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014 and up to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022?

Dr. Stoner mentions the following outcomes:

- Ukrainian troops and forces affiliated with Russia fought in the Luhansk and Donetsk provinces of Ukraine (known as the Donbas region) over the eight years
- About 14,000 Ukrainians died during these eight years of conflict
- Russia absorbed the Crimean Peninsula, handed out passports to Ukrainian citizens who remained there, and confiscated the property of some residents of Crimea
- Russia built a bridge called the Kerch Bridge to connect Crimea and Russia at the bottom of the Sea of Azov

5. What three myths about the war in Ukraine does Dr. Stoner cite? Why does she say that each is a myth?

**Myth 1: Ukraine has always been politically divided between the east, Russian speakers, and the west and the Ukrainian speaking nationalists. Therefore, Russian speakers in the east of Ukraine need to be protected.**

Dr. Stoner’s response: This is actually not true, but it is something that Putin uses to justify the interventions in 2014 and again in 2022: he’s saving Russian speakers from Ukrainian nationalists who want to eradicate their ability or right to speak Russian.

To the extent this was true in 2004, it was not true by the time Zelensky is elected in 2019. By then, Zelensky was the leading vote-getter even in the eastern part of Ukraine, where Russian speakers are concentrated.

**Myth 2: Ukraine is basically Russian and is part of Russia.**

Dr. Stoner’s response: Ukrainian and Russian are distinct languages. While Russian is the main language spoke in parts of Ukraine, that doesn’t mean that Russian-speaking Ukrainians are the same as Russians. Ukraine has been an independent country since 1991. It has an independent history from Russia and at points has been able to assert its identity as very, very independent and different from Russian.

Further, in 1994 Boris Yeltsin, who was Russia’s first elected president, signed the Budapest Memorandum guaranteeing Ukrainian sovereignty backed by the United States and the United Kingdom in exchange for Ukraine returning its Soviet-era nuclear weapons and moving those to Russian soil.

**Myth 3: NATO expansion in eastern Europe since 1991 provoked Russia**

Dr. Stoner’s response:
- Vladimir Putin claims that NATO promised Gorbachev in 1989 that it would not expand beyond a united Germany’s borders. However, NATO made no such promise to Gorbachev or to Yeltsin.
- NATO had not expanded on Russia’s borders since 2004, 10 years before the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Finally, the three Baltic states were the last to join bordering Russia in 2004. While George W. Bush said in 2008 that Ukraine and Georgia would join NATO someday, Ukraine was not put on a path to join NATO because the alliance did not want to provoke Russia.
- There have never been NATO or U.S. missiles in Ukraine
- NATO’s two antiballistic missile systems are in Poland and Romania and they are aimed at Iran, not Russia.
• To lower tensions, Ukraine offered to maintain its neutrality in December 2021, but Russia invaded anyway.

6. According to Dr. Stoner, why hasn’t the war in Ukraine gone as Putin hoped?

• Intelligence failure: Mr. Putin was led to believe by his own intelligence agencies that Ukrainian people would be happy to be liberated by the Russian military, that the Ukrainian military would lay down its arms when asked by the Russian military, and that the politically inexperienced President Zelensky would rapidly flee Ukraine. He believed it would be easy to establish a puppet government in Kyiv.

• Autocratic governance: Putin has been in power since 2000, and his regime has become ever more oppressive recently. No one likes to bring an autocrat bad news for fear of being punished, and therefore they didn’t.

• Ukrainian resistance: Ukrainians have been incredibly committed to fighting Russia.

• Unity of the Western alliance and sanctions: Western countries united to support Ukraine and isolate Russia. In particular, they enacted the strongest sanctions regime ever seen on an economy the size of Russia’s. They continue to supply Ukraine with necessary weaponry.

7. What makes the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine so important for the security of Europe?
If Putin is not stopped in Ukraine, he will move on to threaten other places in Europe he views as part of Russia’s historical sphere of influence, including Moldova, parts of Poland, Belarus, and beyond.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date (Year and Month)</th>
<th>Event and its Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 1991</td>
<td>Soviet Union formally dissolves: Ukraine and Russia were no longer part of the same country; Ukraine resumed its status as an independent nation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1994</td>
<td>Budapest Memorandum: Russian president Boris Yeltsin guaranteed Ukraine’s sovereignty, with backing from the United States and United Kingdom, in exchange for the Soviet nuclear weapons on Ukrainian soil moving to Russia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 2004–Jan 2005</td>
<td>Orange Revolution: Ukrainians protest fraud in the country’s presidential run-off election, leading to an overturn of the results and victory for Viktor Yushchenko in the retaken vote. This reflected Ukraine’s preference for a pro-Western president and alarmed Putin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2008</td>
<td>Russia invades the country of Georgia: Russia’s invasion and then occupation of its neighbor Georgia, another former Soviet republic, foreshadowed what it would do in Ukraine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 2013–Feb 2014</td>
<td>Euromaidan protests: These protests showed the intensity of popular support for closer ties with the European Union rather than Russia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2014</td>
<td>Revolution of Dignity: Fatal clashes between protesters and police led to the removal of Viktor Yanokovych, who had proposed closer ties to Russia, from the presidency and a return of Ukraine’s 2004 Constitution. It also shocked Putin enough that he backed an invasion of Ukraine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2014</td>
<td>Invasion of Crimea: Initial armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine; Russia sizes Crimea and annexes it and starts fighting in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2014</td>
<td>Minsk Accords: two agreements that led to temporary ceasefires in the fighting between Ukraine and Russia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2019</td>
<td>Volodymyr Zelensky elected president of Ukraine: Zelensky had been an actor and ran for office for the first time on an anti-corruption platform. Putin saw his political inexperience as a potential weakness to exploit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 February 2022</td>
<td>Russia (re-)invades Ukraine: In violation of international norms, Russia intended to completely occupy Ukraine and dominate it as a puppet state.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hi. My name’s Kathryn Stoner. I’m the Mosbacher Director of the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law at the Freeman Spogli Institute at Stanford University and I’m also a professor of political science at Stanford, and I’ve been asked to talk to you today about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. And I’m hopefully going to tell you in about 20 to 30 minutes what everyone should know and why we should still care about the ongoing war in Ukraine.

So the agenda today is to first give you some background to remind you about Russia and Ukraine and the sort of history of Russia’s concern in Ukraine, try to dispel a few myths about Ukraine and its relationship with Russia, identify what Putin might really want and what the real motivation of this invasion that started in February of 2022 is, what Russians think, and then also finally, fifth, why you should still care about this conflict even as other global conflicts, including in the Middle East, begin to take over the headlines.

So this is just a quick map in the slides to show you what Russia is. And a reminder that Russia is actually, territorially speaking, the biggest country on the planet. It spans 11 time zones and it is the largest of the successor states of the Soviet Union. There were 15, of course, republics of the Soviet Union. Ukraine was one, Russia was also one, and the others are, of course, in the Baltics, Belarus, Moldova, the Caucasus, and then the five in Central Asia. But there’s just a quick map of Russia itself.

Here’s some facts about Ukraine. Before the war began, it was a country of almost 44 million people. While Russia is the largest country, territorially speaking, on the planet, Ukraine is the largest in Europe, much larger than France or Germany or Spain—the largest in Europe. It’s second largest if you count Russia as part of Europe, and most people don’t these days. It’s been independent since 1991, December 1991, when it declared independence from the Soviet Union. It was also independent from the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1920. Historically, it has not always been part of Russia. Ukraine is not Russia.

This is pretty much the heart of the issue or the contest between Mr. Putin—and notice I’m saying Mr. Putin, not Russia because I think there’s a difference although he’d like to conflate the two—between his regime and Russia and the Russian people. But Ukraine is not Russia, although he’s written several historical pieces that indicate in his mind, Ukraine is Russia. So he views this as a liberation and reunion of peoples. The problem is Ukrainians of course do not, and rather emphatically disagree.

So here’s some of the results on the next slide of 22 months of war. Obviously the victims of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which started again February 24, 2022, are first and foremost Ukrainians. The war has reversed about 15 years of developmental progress in Ukraine, producing a huge exodus of refugees into different parts of Europe, over six million according to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, or Commission on Refugees, pardon me, as of the summer of 2023. It may actually even be as high as eight million. There are almost
six million internally displaced Ukrainians as well. Officially, the death toll is just under about 10,000 people with another 15 to 20 thousand injured but likely far more than that. And the World Bank has estimated that it’ll be cost over $400 billion as of a few months ago to rebuild what has been destroyed in the war in Ukraine. That number is probably now up over $500 billion, they just haven’t given us an update.

In Russia the war has also had a rather negative effect on its developmental patterns and has caused the greatest vulnerability of Putin’s now 23-year-old regime since he came to power in 2000. Its economy has declined rapidly. It may start growing, we may see positive growth this year, but that’s after negative growth, so it really hasn’t recovered to the levels it was at prewar in terms of growth. In 2022, the Economist Intelligence Unit indicated that Russia had declined 22 points, the most of any country in the world, in terms of democracy. Russia is of course an autocracy, but it has become more autocratic and Putin’s regime more repressive of society and dissent since the beginning of the war, and so there are a lot of lessons from this case for understanding autocracy, understanding how autocrats process power, and also understanding why this particular war matters for global politics.

So here’s some quick background. Tensions arise relatively early between Ukraine and Russia. But in 2004, Russia under Putin really became concerned about Ukraine looking for, and Ukrainian leaders looking for, a future for their country to the west and not to the east. And this was really embodied in the Orange Revolution of 2004, where Ukrainians come out onto the streets en masse to protest what they view as an election that was seized by a president that was favored by Russia and was very Russia-friendly. And this became known as the Orange Revolution. Those results are overturned, then a different president comes into power and rules with some difficulty for about eight years before yet another president who is actually more friendly to Russia is elected on the promise that he, despite this friendliness to Russia, would begin the accession process of Ukraine to the European Union. Not NATO, but the European Union. He reneges on that promise in November of 2013. So 10 years ago—we just passed the anniversary, actually, since I’m talking to you at the end of November of 2023—of what became known as the Revolution of Dignity, or Euromaidan. This produces in 2014 February the seizure of Crimea and the beginning of Russian support for the Donbas region of Ukraine separating from Ukraine and eventually, as we’ll see, joining Russia.

So here, this slide shows you some scenes from the Orange Revolution and Putin’s ongoing concern, which begins here. This is a photo of President Yushchenko, who is elected after the Orange Revolution. And you can see here a very handsome man on the left side. He is poisoned during the electoral campaign, disappears for a little while, and we now know from the experiences of Russian opposition figures that poison is a pretty typical thing the Russian security services will use, pardon me, and so we can see the disfigurement in his face. So one way, I suppose, to try to get rid of somebody that you view as a political opponent according to Vladimir Putin. So Yushchenko, who was the former prime minister of Ukraine, comes out as the winner in the end of the presidential election, at the end of the Orange Revolution. The opposition unites around him, but it proves difficult to govern. Nonetheless, here again are some scenes from occupying the Maidan, Maidan Square, a central square in Kyiv, in 2004. And you can see it’s a peaceful revolution if you will.

Why did Russia care so much to actually poison the eventual winner of that presidential election? Well first, it’s the threat of European Union membership. And we’ll see again, this comes up in 2013. And it’s also the threat of the prospect of NATO membership in former Soviet republics, although we’ll see this is a bit of a fallacy that Putin pumped up. Now, however, it looks like Ukraine will join NATO, but because of his reinvasion of Ukraine. At the time of the
Orange Revolution in 2004, and then also the beginning of Euromaidan and what becomes the Revolution of Dignity at the end of 2013 and 2014, NATO membership for Ukraine really wasn’t a realistic possibility. It’s much more so now.

So the other thing is the loss, really, of a traditional and historical sphere of influence for Russia. And that’s really what seems to have motivated President Putin. There’s also the demonstration effect of things like the Orange Revolution and Euromaidan. And that is a demonstration effect of citizens coming out onto streets and public squares and protesting against a fake electoral result and an autocratic government. And that is exactly what Vladimir Putin does not want to happen in Russia. So it’s an example for Russians that Putin does not want Ukrainians to represent and this is clearly a threat to the stability and survival of Putin’s regime, so why tolerate it in his mind.

So Phase Two is this, as I mentioned, Revolution of Dignity. And this slide just gives you some background on Viktor Yanukovich who is elected in a free and fair election, I must say, in Ukraine, pardon me, six years of governance after the Orange Revolution. He’s elected in February 2010. He does tend to be more Russia-friendly but he promises when he’s elected, that he will pursue, as I mentioned earlier, an accession agreement with the European Union. In November 2013, however, under Russian pressure, Yanukovych rejects the EU’s association agreement in favor of Russian loans and closer trade ties. And this leads to Euromaidan protests in November 2013. By February of 2014, there are deaths and injuries and frequent clashes between the crowd that continues to occupy the central square, Maidan Square, in Kyiv in Ukraine. A hundred are killed by Ukrainian security forces known now as the Heavenly Hundred. On February 21, 2014 there is a deal reached with the opposition and Viktor Yanukovych the then-president, but he disappears and resurfaces in southern Russia, claiming that his life was being threatened. He’s removed from power by the Ukrainian parliament shortly thereafter and sentenced to 13 years in jail for high treason, but he lives in Russia and he continues to live in Russia.

In March 2014, a few days later, suddenly we see polite “little green men” pop up in Crimea. And they’re known as little green men because they have no military insignia on their jackets. But they speak Russian so there is very little doubt who they are and what has happened is they’ve come off the military naval bases in Sevastopol and just quietly set themselves up on street corners around the Crimean Peninsula, which is part of Ukraine at the time, and take over Crimea. And this is an annexation, effectively, of the entire Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine.

Why does Putin’s regime in Russia care so much and actually annex part of Ukraine and then begin to support a low-boil civil war, and sometimes a very hot civil war, in the east of Ukraine, in the Donbas region? Well, again, concern about contagion, that such an uprising against him could happen just as it happened to Yanukovych, and he could be ousted. If it can happen in Ukraine, then Russians might think, why not us? Yanukovych’s regime looked a lot like Putin’s in 2014. It was corrupt. He was stealing from the state. There was economic mismanagement as a result, and some de-democratization under Yanukovych. So his regime, again, looked a lot like Putin’s regime in Russia. Russia also alleged a security concern regarding its access to Crimea and the Black Sea fleet, which is based still in Crimea, in Sevastopol. The base is leased from Ukraine, and at the time Ukraine needed the money from the leasing to balance its budget or attempt to, so this was a pretty unrealistic concern because Ukraine really couldn’t afford to not have the revenue from leasing the base.

Russia was in Ukraine, therefore, between 2014 and the events I just described to you, the seizure and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, which you can see here in the slide in sort
of a gold color, right through February 23, 2022. That is the day before the reinvasion, so you’ll sometimes hear it called the reinvasion of Ukraine, which was February 24, 2022. But this slide also shows you the red area here on the map, where Russia was active in those eight years, that is March 2014 until February 2022. They backed separatists, the Russian government backed separatists occupying parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk provinces of Ukraine, that’s the area known as the Donbas region. And we know about 14,000 Ukrainians died during that eight years of conflict. Russia absorbed the Crimean Peninsula, again there it is shown in gold, and handed out passports to Ukrainian citizens who remained there. And I know from personal experience from Crimean Tatar friends of mine who lived on the Crimean Peninsula, their property was simply confiscated, just taken by Russians and so many of them actually fled to Kyiv. Russia also built a bridge. It’s called the Kerch Bridge. And you’ll sometimes see it on news coverage because the Ukrainian military in the conflict that started last year in 2022 has bombed the Kerch Bridge a number of times or attacked it. If I could use my pointer to show you where it is, but it’s really in the southern end there of the Crimean Peninsula, just where Crimea and Russia meet at the bottom of the Sea of Azov. That’s where the Kerch Bridge is, and that was built after the annexation in 2014. Mr. Putin proudly drove a big truck across the bridge ostensibly the first time it was used. There are accords signed after 2014 between Russia and Ukraine called the Minsk accords that are never fully implemented and it’s an attempt to reestablish the border in the Donetsk region between Russia and Ukraine.

Why did Putin grab Crimea and support this conflict in Donbas for eight years? By taking and occupying land in Ukraine he is essentially repeating what he has done in other parts of the former Soviet Union. He did the same thing to the country of Georgia in the South Caucasus and occupies, the Russian military actually occupies and has occupied since 2008, two regions there as well. This effectively stops Ukraine, and Georgia for that matter, from being able to join NATO, because NATO documentation and requirements of membership are that you cannot have an active military conflict ongoing on your territory as you try to join in the accession process. So this is another large frozen conflict that he causes.

He brings on a series of targeted sanctions against Russia that was also unanticipated. And so that might have been a miscalculation, but the Russian economy is able to recover from this and sort of stabilize. He does take on a huge risk, though, in doing this, but it turns out it’s a risk that pays off in terms of not being challenged by NATO or by the United States militarily at least, in seizing this part of a peaceful neighbor’s territory. There’s also, he says, a real fear of NATO coming into the Black Sea if Ukraine were to join NATO so again, by seizing territory, stops Ukraine from being able to join NATO. And then he also begins this narrative that Ukraine is really the heart of Russian identity. And he points to the event of Prince Vladimir taking Orthodoxy as his religion in the first millennium, at the end of the first millennium, and that this is really the heart of the Russian people. This is highly contested whether Vladimir was even Russian or whether he was Ukrainian, and again I think is a sort of post hoc [after the] justification.

This slide also shows you some of the scenes from the palace that Viktor Yanukovych, the ousted president in 2014, had built just outside of Kyiv. This is a boat, it’s a pirate ship that’s a restaurant that floats on a manmade pond on the property, and that is the palace itself, just one of them. So you can, it’s sort of evidence of his corruption.

Ukraine had a struggling democracy post-2014. This is a photo of Petro Poroshenko. Yanukovych had been ousted. Poroshenko is elected in 2014, May 2014. He remains president for five years after that. He undertakes a lot of reform in Ukraine, but it is accurate to say that Ukraine struggled with corruption, with domination of a few, of politics by a few very, very
wealthy men known as oligarchs. It did, though, under Poroshenko, manage to increase foreign investment. He tries to free Ukraine from its reliance on Russian energy, infrastructure, and investment. He improves Ukraine’s ease of doing business but he doesn’t solve the ongoing conflict in the Donbas region and ultimately he loses in a free and fair election to Volodymyr Zelensky who was elected in April of 2019.

And he’s probably pretty familiar to you now as the face of Ukraine’s fight against Russian takeover basically of all of Ukraine, which was clearly the intention when Russia invades in February of 2023. He gets 73 percent of the vote on an anticorruption platform. He’s never run in politics before. And if you haven’t seen it previously, I would urge you to take a look at his series called “Servant of the People” and the slide shows you one of the promotional posters for it. And the conceit of it—it’s on Netflix and it’s actually really, really funny, he’s almost like the Tom Hanks of the Slavic world—the conceit of it is that he is a teacher, a high school teacher, his character, and he is caught on, recorded by his 10th grade students railing against corruption in the education system in Ukraine, and they post this video on YouTube. It goes viral, he becomes very well known in Ukraine, and that’s just the character, not Zelensky himself. And they then get enough signatures for him to actually register as a presidential candidate, and he’s sort of accidentally elected president of Ukraine. And the show is called “Servant of the People” and so when Zelensky the actor actually runs for the presidency of Ukraine in April of 2019, the party he creates is called Servant of the People. So you can watch that show “Servant of the People” on Netflix and see how art imitates life. It might even be a fun teaching tool, I use it myself. But he wins from 30 candidates and it takes two rounds. He actually grew up as a native Russian speaker, not as a native Ukrainian speaker, but he’s fluent in Ukrainian and he’s getting increasingly fluent in English, he’s actually visited here at Stanford. He was a comedic actor and has now used some of his talents, communication talents, in communicating Ukraine’s plight in the war, as you’ve no doubt seen.

So let’s move quickly to some myths about the war in Ukraine. First, Ukraine has always been politically divided between the east, Russian speakers, and the west and the Ukrainian speaking nationalists. So this is a myth. This is actually not true but it is something that Putin uses to justify the intervention in 2022: he’s saving Russian speakers from Ukrainian nationalists who would have eradicated their ability or right to speak Russian. And he says this in 2014 and again in 2022.

To the extent this was true in 2004, it was really not true by the time Zelensky is elected in 2019. And this shows sort of the electoral differences between 2004 and 2019, and you can see that Zelensky actually gets a lot of the vote in those yellow regions on the, I guess it would be on the right hand side of the screen, 73 percent even in the regions where Yanukovych, who was more pro-Russian, had done well. So: not true.

Second myth: basically, Ukraine is Russia and Russian. So this just shows you a language map quickly and you can see the blue areas are where there is a lot of Russian spoken, but the rest of the country is predominantly where Ukraine, where Ukrainian is the main language. A way to think about this is this kind of justification that Putin has used to take over all of Ukraine, which was clearly his initial intention in the invasion and attacking Kyiv. Americans, you speak English. Does that mean that you want England to come and liberate you? Do you want to rejoin England? I’m guessing the answer would be “no,” right? We fought a revolution over that here in the United States and that’s the way Ukrainians feel. They’ve been an independent country since 1991. They’ve had an independent history from Russia, and at different points have been able to sort of assert their identity as very, very independent and different from Russian. I speak
Russian, by the way, I don’t speak Ukrainian. I can get a sense of the conversation when I hear it in Ukrainian but I really can’t understand it, so it is a distinct language.

As I said, here are the facts: Ukraine’s an independent country, has been since 1991. Boris Yeltsin, who was Russia’s first elected president, signed the Budapest Memorandum in 1994 guaranteeing Ukrainian sovereignty backed by the United States and the United Kingdom in exchange for Ukraine returning its Soviet-era nuclear weapons and moving those to Russian soil.

Myth number three: NATO expansion since 1991 provoked Russia. Any Russian president would have behaved this way. Gorbachev was promised in 1989, this is another myth, that NATO would not expand one inch beyond a united Germany’s borders. Well, again, what’s the problem with this? So as the slide indicates, that Budapest Agreement. Second, NATO had not expanded on Russia’s borders since 2004, so a good 10 years before the annexation of Crimea in 2014. There was also no promise made to Gorbachev regarding no expansion or to Yeltsin, either. Finally, the three Baltic states were the last to join bordering Russia in 2004. North Macedonia was added in 2020, it’s not on Russia’s borders. And before that, in 2009, Albania and Montenegro, also not on Russia’s borders. But in 2008, Putin points to George W. Bush’s statement saying that someday Ukraine and Georgia will join. Ironically, Ukraine was not put on a NATO accession plan after that so as not to provoke Russia. So perhaps this was the real foreign policy mistake of the United States: the ambiguity and not actually being clear and saying Ukraine is not going to join NATO or otherwise bringing Ukraine in then, and perhaps all of this could have been prevented. Putin has also, in this invasion, ironically, caused the expansion of NATO, not just because Ukraine has recently begun the accession process not just to the European Union, but to NATO as well, since the start of the war. But Finland, who had since the inception of NATO after World War II, has just joined NATO this spring of 2023, and Sweden has also signed an accession protocol for membership and is waiting for final approval.

Here’s some facts on NATO: Ukraine is not a member of NATO. It’s not right now, although it aspires to be a member of NATO for obvious reasons, and its membership was not in the planning stage in 2014 or in 2022 when Russia invaded. There are no NATO or U.S. missiles in Ukraine. There are only two antiballistic missile systems in Poland and Romania, both NATO members since 1997. They are defensive in capability, and they are aimed at Iran, not Russia. These are facts that Russia well knows. NATO’s Open Door policy has been in place since its founding in 1949. Ukraine is a sovereign and it was a peaceful nation when it was attacked initially in 2014 and again then in 2022. Ukraine offered to maintain its neutrality before Russia attacked again in February of 2022. It did so in December of 2021. It did this in an attempt to forestall an attack or prevent the attack. But it wasn’t enough for Russia then, and evidently it’s not enough now.

Finally, what does Mr. Putin say he wants to get by invading Ukraine? Neutrality, NATO off Russian borders, no new NATO members, a new European security architecture, and no U.S. missiles or troops in Europe. All of this is available in the speech I highlight below that Putin gave to mark the first anniversary. He’s gained none of those things. By the autumn of 2022, he declares four provinces of Ukraine part of Russia, and he’s now supposedly rebuilding them. People in these regions have been given Russian citizenship. He has moved up to 100,000 children in Ukraine, claims far more than that, into Russia from these regions and undergone a process of forced adoptions. And for that which is in violation of international law, Putin has been indicted by the International Criminal Court.
His imaginary annexation of these four regions on September 30, 2022 amounts to a claim of 15 percent of Ukrainian territory and is the largest land grab in Europe since World War II. He says that it was through a historic choice by a referendum by the people who live in those regions, but it was a referendum held by gunpoint under occupation in part of those regions, but not all of them. Here is the new map that Russia puts out annexing those regions of Ukraine.

The problem here is that even as of today and again, I pulled this as of today, November 29 [2023], Russia actually doesn’t occupy all of those four regions of Ukraine. And you can see the difference here in terms of what he claims and what Russia actually occupies. This is essentially where the war has been in the last six to eight months, Ukraine making incremental gains in particularly in the southeast of Ukraine. But recently was called by General Zaluzhnyi, who is the head of Ukrainian military forces, in an article in The Economist magazine more or less a stalemate. Not that there’s not fighting going on, but there’s not a lot of territory being exchanged between Ukraine and Russia as we go into this second winter of the war between the two countries.

I want to end, though, by saying that in a sense Ukraine has won this conflict because it faced the second most capable army in the world, what was thought to be, ahead of this invasion and now really made it, on most days, the second most competent army or military in Ukraine. That is, the Ukrainian military outperformed its own expectations, certainly the expectations of our alliance with our European allies and the expectations of the Russian military in particular. And so in a sense Ukraine has won because it survives. That said, it is still under daily bombardment and we’ve just seen a huge attack by drones on Kyiv yet again.

What has gone wrong for Russia in Ukraine? Well, some of the problems of autocratic incompetence have been laid bare. First of all, an intelligence failure. Mr. Putin was led to believe by his own intelligence agencies that Ukrainian people would be happy to be liberated by the Russian military, that the Ukrainian military would lay down its arms when asked by the Russian military, and that President Zelensky, a political neophyte in Putin’s view, would rapidly flee Ukraine and that he could easily establish a puppet government instead in Kyiv. All of that turns out to have been wrong. This is a problem of autocratic governance—and Putin has been in power and his regime has become ever more oppressive particularly since the end or since the beginning of this war in 2022—of trying to present evidence to an autocrat that confounds or contradicts a preconceived notion of how things are. And so no one likes to bring the autocrat bad news, and therefore they didn’t.

Ukrainians have shown themselves to be very committed to fighting back and are now closer to joining NATO than they were when this conflict began. The Western alliance has held, built on the strongest sanctions regime that we have ever seen on an economy this size, Russia’s, and continues to supply Ukraine. The danger, of course, is that that supply will end. And so U.S. policy really has to change to perhaps support Ukrainian efforts to begin really building up its own defense industry, what we’ve called a porcupine strategy, so that Ukraine is no longer reliant on who the particular U.S. administration is at any one time, or the winds of Congress in terms of funding its own purchase of weapons built abroad by the U.S. or from Europe, but that it actually can produce its own weaponry to defend itself effectively from Russia.

Russia has lost some of the prime intellectual power that it has had, specifically in the tech industry, since the beginning of the war with about a million Russians voting with their feet and leaving their country. Putin has had to use information control and repression, fear, to keep his own population from actively opposing the war in Ukraine.
So this is where we are almost two years after the war. Whether or not we will see any kind of huge change in the year to come in terms of a peace settlement as we approach an election in Russia for president, which I’m going to go out on a limb and say Mr. Putin’s probably going to win because there is no real opposition. Most have been jailed, poisoned, or have been forced to leave the country. The real issue is the presidential election in the United States and whether this conflict can be settled before that or whether this conflict will become a political football in our own politics.

One thing is clear, though: our own security and the security of Europe is bound up in the outcome of this conflict because Putin, if he is not stopped in Ukraine, will clearly go on to be disruptive and aggressive in other parts of Europe, which he views as part of Russia’s historical sphere of influence. That includes Moldova, parts of Poland, Belarus, and beyond. And so this is the real danger and why we still have to care about the conflict that is ongoing between Ukraine and Russia. Thanks for your attention.