



The Perch Pod Episode 47

Will Russia Invade Ukraine

With Max Suchkov

Jacob Shapiro:

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Jacob Shapiro:

Hello, listeners, and welcome to the first Perch Pod episode of 2022. As usual, I'm your host. I'm Jacob Shapiro. I'm also the founder and chief strategist of Perch Perspectives, which is a human-centric business and political consulting firm. Joining us on the podcast today for the second time is Max Suchkov. Max wears a number of different hats, but he's primarily Director at the Institute for International Studies at MGIMO University. Really pleased to have Max on. He was an obvious choice to have on, considering the level of hostility and tensions, I hate that word tensions, but no better word for it right now, between the United States and Russia over the ongoing security situation in Ukraine. Of course, NATO and Europe in there as well.

Jacob Shapiro:

I went into this conversation thinking that Russia was mainly looking to secure political concessions and that there wasn't a real threat of conflict between or a real threat of Russia invading Ukraine, as it's being portrayed in the Western media. I came out of this conversation a little bit more chastened. I still don't think that's the most likely scenario, and it still seems pretty clear that Russia's military buildup near the Ukrainian border is about securing certain political concessions, but it seems that Russia is more serious about this than I thought, and I was particularly struck by Max talking about analytical circles, even in Moscow, being a little bit surprised at how far Russia has gone. So it's a wonderful conversation. Max was very generous with his time and his perspective, and we super-appreciate him coming on.

Jacob Shapiro:

Listeners, I always say it's important, I think, to put aside what you've read or what your biases are and just listen to Max and what he is saying about the Russian perspective. That's why it's super-valuable to have someone like him on, because you actually get a sense of what they're thinking there. Whether you agree with it or not, you can go argue about that with your friends over a beer, but here's an actual perspective that you can learn something from.

Jacob Shapiro:



Other than that, folks, thanks for listening to the podcast. Please rate and review us. Check us out at perchperspectives.com if you want to hear more about us or want to have more information about our services. You can also always write to us at info@perchperspectives.com. Cheers, stay safe, wear your masks, get boosted, take vaccines, do whatever you need to to take care of yourselves. Hopefully, 2022 is the year that maybe we say goodbye to Omicron, knock on wood. So cheers. We'll see you out there.

Jacob Shapiro:

And I'm sorry, just one more programming note. We recorded this on Tuesday, January 4th. A lot could happen this week, but we intentionally want to get this out before the big US-Russia Security Summits and the Russia-NATO Summits that are coming up next week, but if anything happens after January 4th, it's not accounted for in this podcast. Okay, cheers.

Jacob Shapiro:

All right, Max, thank you for making the time to come on the show. The listeners won't know that it took us about 30 minutes to figure out our technical difficulties so that I could actually hear the words that you were saying, and I honestly can't imagine a better metaphor for the US-Russia relationship, so welcome to the podcast.

Max Suchkov:

Well, thanks for having me. Always a pleasure to be with you, and I think it indeed is interesting that we've had this issue in the run up to talking about US-Russia relations. I agree. It's a very bitter metaphor.

Jacob Shapiro:

Well, let's dive straight in with the tough question, and then we can sort of take it apart and analyze it and talk about it from different views. Here in the United States, and I would say in the Western media in general, everyone is very concerned that Russia's about to invade Ukraine. The Guardian, just this morning's headline, it's January 4th that we're recording, it says Russia Very Likely to Invade Ukraine Without Enormous Sanctions. I don't know what that means, but can we just start off from your point of view in Russia. Is Russia about to invade Ukraine? Is this all much ado about nothing, or is there something really percolating here and that Russia is actually upset about something and is willing to do something if it doesn't get certain concessions?

Max Suchkov:

Well, thank you for asking this question. I think it indeed is important and requires some explanation, at least as I can interpret it sitting in Moscow. First of all, I think it's not about Ukraine, first and foremost. US-Russia relations may no longer be central to the world politics the way they used to be during the Cold War, but when it comes to strategic stability and security in Europe and Eurasia, I think relations between Washington and Moscow are still key. So Putin demands to the United States and NATO that followed with the proposals on the Russian side to provide Russia with "security guarantees" have got



met, including in Moscow, by surprise. So actually, while you say invading or not invading Ukraine is a major story in the US, Russia's demand/proposal/ultimatum are the major story here in Moscow.

Max Suchkov:

So the reason I bring this up is I think that Ukraine's story is actually one of the two components to a bigger-picture issue that's been rolling out ever since Russia's military build-up near Ukraine. So this, I don't know, if we agree to call it an ultimatum or the proposals or demands that Putin had for Biden and other NATO members breaks into two closely intertwined subject matters, as I said. One is Kremlin's desired role for the United States in the European Security Order, and second is Russia's next steps, vis-a-vis Ukraine. So Moscow is likely to make decisions regarding the second track, meaning in Ukraine, depending on the progress on the first one, the talks with the United States that are about to start in Geneva next week. So invading Ukraine was and still is, in my view, not the first option to coerce the United States to talks, but the threat of invasion serves the incentives for Washington to take this issue seriously.

Max Suchkov:

So I personally would interpret this whole story about the Russian build-up, expected or anticipated invasion to Ukraine is either a way to urge the United States to talk some bigger issues, or secondly, if the talks with the Americans fail to deliver satisfactory results for Moscow, the Russian military and political leadership has talked numerous times about the "military and military technical response." That may indeed directly concern Ukraine, although possibly it will not be limited to Ukraine, since the Russian ambassador to the United States also promised something that Russia, if the US and Western allies deny Russian proposals, Russia promises to embark on the course of "creating vulnerabilities" for Western countries should Russian proposals be rejected.

Max Suchkov:

So if you ask me, I think the decision, let's put it this, to do something to Ukraine, it has not been made, but if I was to say whether Russia would be invading Ukraine per se, I would say no, because it doesn't make sense to invade in terms of 20th, 19th-century war styles with tanks and all that stuff. So I personally look at the military build up as a coercive measure to talks with Westerners and to secure Kiev to continue their military offensive on Donbas.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah, that's a disconcerting answer for me, because coercive measures only work if the threat is real. So even if it's not the first option or even the second or third option, the fact that it's an option is a little uncomfortable. But so you said something about how this is about the broader US-Russia relationship, and I think that's right, but I wanted to drill down a little bit in what you said about how it's not necessarily about Ukraine, but it's about the role that the US is going to play in Europe from a security perspective. What does Russia want? What role does Russia want the US to play there, because I'm not exactly clear what role, and maybe it's just not doing what it currently is, but how would you articulate what Russia's trying to get to there?

Max Suchkov:

I think personally the biggest issue that Russia has, vis-a-vis the United States at this point, is that Russia is not entirely sure what exactly it wants from the United States. So your question, actually, hits the nail here. Let me get back to that question, but before, I'll answer briefly something on Ukraine that I forgot to add. I agree, and I can totally understand that the very idea that Russia may be considering some type of military offensive to Ukraine may be uncomfortable to Western countries and individuals and policy makers.

Max Suchkov:

But it's also very interesting that the Russian leadership has talked over the past few days about "active military development" of Ukraine, meaning by that the alleged or perceived American build-up of Ukraine's military potential, what the Russian FSB and other intelligence services see as penetration of American intelligence structures into key branches of Ukrainian government, development of America's own military infrastructure on Ukrainian territory. So all of that stuff is deeply troubling, unsettling for the Russian policy makers. Considering some type of military response to Ukraine is actually meant to be uncomfortable for Western policy makers.

Max Suchkov:

As to the bigger picture of things to the United States, I think if you look at these proposals, at the first sight, they look bizarre, really, and it's only logical that the knee-jerk reaction to Russian proposals in Western policy making circles was kind of to table-reject them, right? Deny any rationality to them. That makes sense, because it's dozens of demands without a hint of Russia's own concessions. Some of the proposals concern fundamental issues that originate in late '80s and early '90s. Others focus on modern day issues where the interests of the parties have long seemed irreconcilable, so it doesn't really make sense to raise all of that at once, hoping that it could be settled over a threat of invading Ukraine.

Max Suchkov:

That said, however, I think the reason Putin decided to put it on the table has to do with two things. One is Russia's interpretation of how the United States sees Russia now, and secondly, Russia's assessment of top foreign policy priorities of the Biden administration. So on the first account, while the United States does not see Russia as a peer competitor on a global scale, perhaps much to the despondency of the Kremlin, American military intelligence community take Russia as a serious adversary, especially in nuclear and precision weapons, cyber domain, space capabilities. So for the Biden administration, the thinking in Moscow goes strategic stability is probably the only area that truly concerns Washington in relation to Moscow, because this is a domain where Russia maintains near peer capabilities and poses an existential threat to the United States.

Max Suchkov:

So based on these assumptions, Putin's proposal hinged any further progress on these issues on strategic stability, kind of in a broader sense, to Russia's own security guarantees in Europe. In a way, Biden at one point framed his Russia policy as "We can walk and chew gum at the same time." So by



doing what Putin did makes this policy a little more difficult to implement in Russia's view, of course. You can walk and chew gum. You also have to take into account our own kind of security concerns. That's one thing.

Max Suchkov:

The second thing is that Moscow appears to believe that the Biden administration is better placed for serious deal-making at the moment, also to much of the surprise of many policy makers in Moscow, because many expect a lot of bad things from the Biden administration, more sanctions and stuff. But these considerations, it happens because there is an increasing domestic demand as Russian sees in the United States for a more kind of restrained foreign policy, and then Biden team also promised more reliance on diplomacy.

Max Suchkov:

But most importantly, Moscow was skeptical that president Biden is going to run for a second term, and that means he will have to care more about his political legacy. And Russia's assessment is that it's two things. One is his campaign slogan, "Build Back Better," and second is getting America in shape for the century's most important showdown with China. So a massive protracted conflict with Russia, that may also tie America's hands in other regional conflicts, would perhaps distract resources and impede the achievement of both goals. So Russia's idea is if the Americans don't want that to happen, they must have an incentive to negotiate some of the things that Russia has now been comfortable with over the past 30 years since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah, that makes sense. I can see how that works together. By the way, I think Biden is running for a second term, so whoever's telling you that he's not, you should correct them. Well, I think I'm even more uncomfortable with the idea, though, that Russia is still figuring out exactly what it wants than I am with the coercive measures. But another question, and it's tied to what you just said, because you talked about a US active military buildup of Ukraine's forces, penetration of US intelligence in Ukraine, US military infrastructure. I guess some of that's there. I know the Trump administration sold them some anti-tank missiles that people were very upset about.

Jacob Shapiro:

But what doesn't make sense to me is the timing of this whole thing, because all of these issues, like the expansion of NATO and US military infrastructure, not in Ukraine, but let's say in Eastern Europe, has been there, it's been building up for a while. The timing of this seems a little bit strange. It's not that any of Russia's demands or requests don't make sense to me. They make sense, because it's what Russia's been talking about for years, but the sudden urgency and the flip in the narrative or the flip in the tone of the ultimatum or proposal, whatever euphemism you want to use there, has certainly taken me off-guard. So is there something specific that happened in Ukraine that Russia's scared about, that it doesn't like, or is it really more of that target of opportunity?

Jacob Shapiro:

To just finish that thought, it seems to me, as you said, a military operation against Ukraine is completely self-defeating for Russia. You're not going to take over Ukraine. Ukraine's not going to like you. You've got an incredibly weak leader, who's literally a standup comic, as the President of Ukraine. It doesn't seem to me like you actually get anything out of doing that. So help me think about the timing. Is there something concrete that's happened, or is it just Russia sees an opportunity, as you said, because Biden is distracted and wants to focus on China?

Max Suchkov:

Well, I think it's a mixture of both, even though I'm not entirely sure I can answer your question, because the timing caught everyone, like I said, off-guard, even here in Moscow. People were asking what's really new that happened over the past few months that made Moscow to demand a bunch of things so quickly in such a comprehensive manner and threaten war if that doesn't fly? So all of that are really legitimate questions. Well, also very importantly, the demands, and I have looked at some of the past rhetoric, as you said, Russia's has been talking about that for a long while, so obviously the enlargement of NATO has been an irritant for Moscow for a long time and triggered noise from Russia every time a new wave of enlargement eastward happened.

Max Suchkov:

But the possibility of Ukraine and Georgia's accession to NATO has been said as the red line a long time ago. So to your question what exactly Moscow wants, it wants "neutrality" of Ukraine and Georgia or say they're not accepted to NATO, right? Even there's considerations that the Europeans want to embrace them somehow into the Eastern policy neighborhood kind of thing, that's fine, but no military infrastructure of NATO and the United States on their territories that may threaten Russia's security. So that's a red line. So I think Putin's speech in Munich, that is notorious back in 2007, symbolically ended the era of Russia's West relations of 1990s. So it first came as a first notable call to set the framework for "security guarantees" for Russia.

Max Suchkov:

At the time, Russia was agitated by what it called Colour Revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, as well as the US invasion of Iraq, and Putin's complained about what he then called unilateral dominance of the United States in international relations was an outcry, in my view, a failed attempt to befriend the US under George W. Bush, even though they seemed to have pretty good personal chemistry. So instead, his remarks were seen as a manifestation of Russia's own kind of revisionist ambitions. And after that call, a year after that, the Five-Day War with Georgia in August of 2008 happened, and although Moscow believes it was triggered by then president Mikheil Saakashvili offensive in South Ossetia, in Russia's view, it happened as an implication of greater American and European failure to take those red lines seriously.

Max Suchkov:



And the second time, the second call for this kind of security guarantee has happened in 2012. So the second iteration of the Russian call came amidst another turbulent international environment, the Arab Spring, NATO's intervention in Libya, the Obama administration's support for the Ballot Protests in Russia, and that made Putin publicly raise the issue of Russia security guarantees in one of the articles he penned at the time as an aspiring presidential candidate. So I really encourage everyone, who reads Russian, to look into that article. It was titled, Got to be Strong Security Guarantees for Russia.

Max Suchkov:

So pretty much it appeared in the Rossiiskaya Gazeta, the main Russian newspaper. So he argued at the time that Russia's own security can be guaranteed only by means of "developing military potential in the framework of containment strategy and at the level of defense sufficiency." So his major thesis there was we, meaning Russia, must not lead anyone into temptation with our weakness. So he thought it was a strong enough warning that the West didn't listen to and supported the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine a year-and-a-half after that in 2014, and then the takeover of Crimea became another milestone in Russia-West relations and officially ended the era of Obama's reset policy with Russia.

Max Suchkov:

So the current ultimatum is, in a way, a third attempt to coerce the United States and Europeans to look carefully to those red lines and not accept Ukraine and Georgia into NATO. And then that perhaps is kind of an immediate and most concerning and pressing issue for Moscow, but then after that come a bunch of other things, discussing modalities of the entire European security architecture. That's perhaps a little hard to sell.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yes, and we don't want to put the listeners to sleep. And we should also say Russia and the US were part of a group of countries that just signed or just put out this joint nuclear proliferation or non-nuclear proliferation document, which that's good. But the thing about Georgia and Ukraine, it seems to me that it's sort of a new red line in the sense that with Georgia and Ukraine before, and this gets to our difficulties recording at the beginning of the podcast and the mutual unintelligibility of communication, Georgia and Ukraine are not going to join NATO. It's not on the books. NATO doesn't want it. I'm sure Georgia and Ukraine would love it, but the US doesn't want it, Europe doesn't want it, whatever.

Jacob Shapiro:

But there has to be enough strategic ambiguity where the US doesn't have to say that out loud and Europe doesn't have to say that and guarantee that because Moscow asked for it. The moment that you're asking for NATO or for the US to say, "Yes, Russia. Because we respect you, we will not allow these countries into NATO," that's something different. If we use the Taiwan metaphor, it would be like China saying, "Hey, we're throwing out the strategic ambiguity here. Either you're going to say that this is ours, or things are going to get bad." And it seems to me that's sort of a semantic point, but it seems like it's pushing a little bit further. And it leads me to this next question, because I don't know that I

know the answer, and I'm curious about it from your perspective. What, in your opinion or from your analyst position, is the greatest threat to Russia, geopolitically right now?

Max Suchkov:

It's a great point, a great question. Look, again, as I'm trying to figure this out, Georgia and Ukraine in NATO, and I think one reason that Moscow is asking for what you're talking about to prove accurate is they say, "Well, look. If Ukraine and Georgia is not on the table, why don't you denounce the Bucharest Statement that it's not on the table? Because it said one day they will join. Even if it sounds vague, but it's still there." So obviously no one's going to denounce those statements, right? So that would be used as a pretext to continue taking some countermeasures as Russia's seat and then trying to prevent Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO. Since the Bucharest Summit said that they one day will become members of NATO, that means there is a concern, a security concern, for Russia.

Max Suchkov:

Secondly, I think it's always a problem of what comes first, whether it's US intent to drag Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, or it's Ukrainians and Georgians what the Russians see manipulating the Russia threat to sell their importance to Western countries. And there is no consensus in Moscow on what comes first, because there are powerful groups in the decision making that say it's the US driving the process, because the US wants to contain Russia. Others say, no, it's actually Ukraine and Georgia that are a kind of, what do you say, wag the tail in a way.

Max Suchkov:

But also, when the Russian ... I was part of one delegation, expert delegation, that visited NATO's headquarters, I think, back in 2018, and one of the members of the Russian delegation asked the question whether Georgia's accession is still on the table. And some of the NATO, I wouldn't say top officials, but mid-level bureaucrats, they said, "Yes, and we're actually considering what they saw the scenario of France that was in NATO when it's still had Algeria as its colony." So the security guarantees would expand to France, but not to Algeria. He was saying that lawyers were working around this issue to see whether it could be implemented towards Georgia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia, so that if Georgia's in NATO, it's territory outside South Ossetia and Abkhazia are covered by security guarantees and then South Ossetia, because they are not covered.

Max Suchkov:

So that response, you can imagine, made a lot of news in Moscow then. People were saying, "Well, look. Actually, they are considering and they're just thinking of how to do it legally." So if you look at it from the Russian angle, there are a bunch of things that actually, even though I agree to what you are saying, but it's hard to sell this point through all the levels of Russian policy making. The biggest threat, perhaps, to your question, I would say right now, it's the American "military infrastructure" close to Russian borders. And I think the urgency is actually exactly in what I said, the Russian leadership talking about as far as Ukraine is concerned, but also all the pressure on Lukashenko's Belarus, create this kind of perception of Russia being a besieged castle, and the West pushing. Putin's phrase that Russia is pushed



against the wall is not a metaphor but a real reflection of his and his body's vision of the current situation.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah. And we can get into Lukashenko if you want to.

Max Suchkov:

I don't want to, to be honest.

Jacob Shapiro:

Good. I don't want to either. What a mess. It's funny, though, to the point about Ukraine and Georgia, I don't know, and maybe that's what I'm missing. Maybe there is some momentum for that gaining weight, even at a mid-level that I'm unaware of, and Russia saw something that made it uncomfortable. When I think, though, about Ukraine and Georgia and NATO, I think of this old joke about an old 17th century European town, and they need to pay someone to blow the bugle or the trumpet every morning until Jesus returns for a second time. And they keep on going through these people, and they can't find someone to reliably blow the trumpet.

Jacob Shapiro:

Until one day, this Jew shows up and says, "I'll take the job. That's fine." And so every day, the Jew twice a day goes around the city, blowing the trumpet until Jesus is supposed to return the second time. And you know, at the end of the week, he goes to his synagogue, and they all ask him, "Why are you doing this? Why are you working for the Christians and blowing this trumpet until Jesus comes back for a second time?" And the Jew says, "It's a steady living." So it's yes, we'll keep talking about Ukraine and Georgia as part of NATO in a hundred years time. It's all good. But I get your point. It's not something that you can bank on if you're the Russian population.

Jacob Shapiro:

But to just zero in on your answer to that question about the greatest threat to Russia, geopolitically, being US military infrastructure close to their borders, you sort of raised this obliquely in terms of the US, so I'll put it to you in terms of Russia. China doesn't worry you at all? It seems like you're getting an awfully buddy-buddy with China, which is much closer, which has revisionist aims of its own, and which Russia took some territory from them back in the day in the 19th, 20th century that I'm sure China, at one point, if it got very strong, would like to have back. But it seems like Russia takes a much different approach with China, much friendlier, much more accommodating. "We'll cooperate. We'll do this, that, and the other thing." Is that just because ideologically it's easier, because it's easier to deal with Xi? Does Russia not see China as a threat? Is it so much of a threat that it feels it has to be friendly? Talk to me about China.

Max Suchkov:



Well, it does concern me personally, and I asked that question on several occasions to some of the Russian policymakers, and I asked that question directly to one of the military guys three or two years ago. And he told me, and I'm quoting almost literally here, he said, "We're not concerned until we are superior in nuclear capabilities," meaning that as long as Russia has dominance in nuclear capabilities over China, China is not considered a dangerous adversary or an actor that can do some serious harm. Now, the philosophy that I think has been channeled through different levels of the Russian government as far as China is concerned is that Russia and China may not always be together, but it's important that they're never against one another.

Max Suchkov:

So there are obviously divergences in visions, and China has a bunch of issues with states that Russia considers important for its own kind of visions of the "multiple world," such as India, for instance. But until now, it is A, seen as a lesser evil than the US, but I wouldn't say the US is considered an evil per se. That's actually a big point that I have with the kind of this mainstream thought that Russia seeks to undermine American prestige and power across the world. It does seek to de-Americanize international relations system, and China is seen as a kind of natural ally in that, but it also is not against the US in principle just because it doesn't like the US at some point, because Putin on a number of occasions has shown his interest in deal-making with the US.

Max Suchkov:

It is just that by now, he's in such a position, in such a perception that Putin by default can be up to no good, so nobody who wants to deal with him. But I think there is still space for US and Russia to work on some issues of mutual concern together. It's just I think that over the past few years, and I think it started with the Trump administration because of all of this Russia collusion and Russia interference stories, that some of the American policies towards Russia were really pushing it into the hands of China, and Russia didn't really resist all that much. I don't think it got a lot in return, and actually every instance of US-Russia summits or high level contact, where is the Chinese? Because they're watching that carefully to make sure that Russia doesn't pivot back to the West, as if it pivoted to the East in the first place.

Max Suchkov:

But yeah, I think for now, it's a relationship that continues to develop at some kind of personal level, I would say, Putin and Xi, but I don't really see ... And there's, obviously, all the good incentives. Don't get me wrong. I'm not against good relations with China, if only because of the large land border and of the growing importance of China, of course. It's just that I do think that on many issues on many levels, Russia may be falling under more influence of China. And ultimately, I think what also is kind of in the cards right now that if the United States does not consider these proposals by Putin seriously, Russia will probably decide to augment its force-multiplier role for China and kind of drag it to the European theater in a similar fashion that the Americans are dragging Europeans to the Indo-Pacific theater.

Max Suchkov:



In that sense, Putin made interesting this kind of small step in that direction by virtually inviting China's Xi to tacitly support Russia's ultimatum, vis-a-vis NATO and the US. China wouldn't jump to Russia's support, obviously, but it's displeased with how the Americans are bringing the Europeans to China containment agenda in the Pacific. So Beijing would probably be happy to see the Europeans and Americans, for that matter, once again kind of flounder with the Russians in the European theater.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah. I'm not sure Russia can drag China anywhere anymore than the US can drag the Europeans anywhere anymore. I think that's part of the multipolar world that we're in. Let's put a pin in that for a second, though, and spend, before I let you go, just a couple minutes on, you're on my favorite hobby horse, which seems less important with each passing day, which is the Middle East. And you were talking about shared interest between Russia and the US. I have been saying for years now that there are shared interests between Russia and the US and the Middle East, and they don't seem to be able to get on the same page ever.

Jacob Shapiro:

How's Russia feeling about the Middle East in general? Is Turkey a problem? I saw that Putin was throwing some shade at Erdogan's economic policies the other day. We've got the Iran nuclear deal cooking. I expect it'll eventually get signed, but just kind of curious where Russia's looking at that part of the world now, or whether, like the United States, it's become less important, and it's more about the European security theater, the Indo-Pacific security theater, even Sub-Saharan Africa.

Max Suchkov:

Well, I think in a way the Middle East moment in Russian foreign policy is gone. We hear less about that, so it's kind of back to the shelves of the Orientalists, who study the region professionally, and we'll not hear about it until, God forbid, ISIS 2.0 raises its head. Perhaps in some years it will. So the threats-driven approach that Russia has executed ever since the beginning of its campaign in Syria has given way to opportunities-based approach where Russia is trying to monetize and capitalize on its image of a kind of serious deal-maker and exploit American failures here and there. But I don't think it could get much out of these muddy waters now, more than it got already.

Max Suchkov:

With Turkey, it's always interesting. Indeed, Putin kind of made some snark remarks about Erdogan's fiscal policies, but also Erdogan was the first foreign leader he called in the New Year and discussed a bunch of issues, including interest in Turkey proposed itself to be a mediator between Russia and the West, to deliver the Russian proposals to the Americans, which was kind of interesting. What happened the next day, the Russians bombed Idlib, some of the Turkey allied positions in return.

Max Suchkov:

I think the Iran deal is one thing where Russia and America could cooperate, but what happens even when it's reached, probably everyone would go to their room, cook their own policies, vis-a-vis around



not much cooperation would be expected. America's presence in Syria would still be a pain in the neck for the Russians. As long as Americans are there, Assad will not get a lot of oil-rich lands in Trans-Euphrates, and that puts more financial pressure on the Russians to support the Syrian government. Tons of things, objectively, for Russia and America to cooperate as far as the Middle East is concerned, especially counterinsurgency and radical Islamization and all that stuff, but I don't unfortunately see it materializing in any way any time soon.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah. I think I have to take an L on that one. Last sort of question I wanted to pose to you and to bring it full circle to where we were before, we sort of talked about Russia and Ukraine and the US from a high level strategic point of view. I can tell you that most Americans, most normal Americans who aren't thinking about international affairs and geopolitics all day, don't think much about Ukraine or Georgia for that matter. They think about Georgia the state and whether it's going to go Democrat or Republican, not about Georgia in Europe. And I was just wondering, you can answer this from your perspective or from what you think is sort of Russia's general popular opinion perspective, but do people care in Russia as much about Ukraine as Putin seems to? Because Putin put out that essay a couple years ago about, maybe it was even last year, I can't remember now with COVID, time doesn't make any sense, but about how Russia and Ukraine were one people.

Jacob Shapiro:

And people are trotting this out as an example of how much Putin cares about Ukraine and how important it is for his legacy and for Russia's security and its re-ascendance to global power that it makes sure that Ukraine is part of Russia as it always should be. Do most Russians feel that way? Do they look at Ukraine and say, "This is part of Russia. It should be part of Russia. None of this makes sense." Do they kind of throw up their arms and they don't care, and they're more concerned about domestic stuff, like some of the Americans I talked about? How much does it actually matter in the day-to-day Russians' lives?

Max Suchkov:

Well, I would say that most Russians are similar to most Americans in the sense that they care less about foreign policy in general. A part of that, because there's been so much foreign policy on TV and all the talk shows and stuff that the majority of Russians have been fed up with that. First, it was Syria, then it was Ukraine. It's been going on since 2014. So I think there is this kind of first, Syria fatigue, now the Ukraine fatigue thing. So even if you look at the Putin's big press a couple of weeks ago before the end of 2021, I think about 60% of questions were about social policy, economics, social programs, that kind of stuff, and a little over 10% about foreign policy, and I think 4% of that was about Ukraine.

Max Suchkov:

As far as the geopolitics is concerned, I think Ukraine will and is still considered to be part of the security component for Russia. But the attitudes to it differ tremendously depending on the age group you talk to. So I do believe it's important for Putin and people of his age, because a lot of even my colleagues



consider Ukraine as part of Russia. Historically, emotionally, culturally, they think of Ukraine as the same people. One of my colleagues remarks, "I can't think of Ukraine as a foreign country, because I was," and he lived in the south of Russia, next to the border of Ukraine, so they would go back and forth in the time of the Soviet Union.

Max Suchkov:

The younger generation, I personally look at Ukraine as a foreign country that should be dealt as a foreign country, not as part of one nation. I think it does have to do with generation gap, if you want to call it this way. But also, if you look at who does Ukraine in the Russian government, it's mostly the Kremlin. Foreign Affairs Ministry has lesser of an involvement to Ukrainian affairs, which is also kind of telling that because it's the Kremlin's file most of the time, it perceives Ukraine as part of an extension of domestic issues, not foreign policy per se. So it reacts very, very emotionally to any involvement on the part of the Americans, the Germans, or whoever else on that.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah. Well, I'm not sure any of this makes me feel much better, but I think we've taken the room away from your children's cartoon hour for long enough. So thank you so much for sticking with us, Max, and we'll talk to you soon, okay?

Max Suchkov:

Thanks so much, Jacob. Always a pleasure to be on your show. Thank you so much.

Jacob Shapiro:

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