The Politics Classroom
Host: Professor Floros
Ep. 2023.09: How Did the West Get Russia So Wrong?
In the Classroom: Ambassador Ian Kelly

[00:00:00] **Professor Floros:** The war in Ukraine has been going on for over a year and doesn't look like it will end anytime soon. Thousands of Russian and Ukrainian troops and Ukrainian civilians continue to die as control of territory is determined by street fighting in Ukrainian towns and villages. The US and European countries continue to send military assistance to Ukraine, but not enough to trigger a Russian escalation or enable Ukraine to win.

With increasing focus on alleged Russian war crimes and the relocation of Ukrainian children to Russia on the one hand, and calls in Congress for more oversight of aid going to Ukraine on the other, it's fair to wonder how long the war will last. How long will the United States and Europe keep supplying Ukraine and isolating Russia politically and economically?

And what will happen when Russia's adversaries return to business as usual. This is Professor Floros, and today I'm sharing with you a talk by Ambassador Ian Kelly from my US Foreign Policy class where he lays out how the US got Russia so wrong to end up in the current situation. I'll feature his talk and the subsequent Q&A with students.

So, let's get started in The Politics Classroom, recorded on March 9, 2023.

Intro Music: Three Goddesses by Third Age

I am thrilled, thrilled, thrilled to welcome Ambassador Ian Kelly to class today. Ambassador Kelly got a bachelor's degree from St. Olaf College, a master's degree from Northwestern, and his doctorate in Slavic Languages and Literatures from Columbia University. He joined the Foreign Service and was posted as an Assistant Cultural Affairs Officer in Leningrad and Moscow, Soviet Union.

He also served as the Information Center Director in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Two countries that don't exist anymore.

[00:02:46] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Not my fault.

[00:02:47] **Professor Floros:** No, although I don't know, it's kind of suspicious. Uh, he was a Public Affairs Officer for the Newly Independent States, which was the name given to the former republics of the Soviet Union, and he was the Director of Democratic Initiatives to the Newly Independent States. After that, he served as Press Attaché in Ankara, Turkey and Rome, Italy, was the Public Affairs Advisor at the US Mission to NATO, and served as the Director of the Office of Russian Affairs at the State Department in DC. From May 2009 to 2010, he was the Spokesperson for the US State Department after which he was the US Representative with the rank of Ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, where he also served as the US Co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group,

which dealt with, or probably still deals with the, uh, frozen conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh.

And then, he came to Chicago to UIC to serve as Diplomat in Residence from 2013 to 2015, at which point he was appointed by President Obama to be the US Ambassador to Georgia, a position that he served in from September 2015 to March 2018. He is now retired from the Foreign Service and teaches at Northwestern's International Studies and Slavic Languages and Literature programs. Ambassador Kelly, thank you so much for making time to speak with us today, and we can't wait to hear what you have to say.

[00:04:27] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Great, thanks. Thanks a lot Kate. And it's, uh, it's, it's wonderful to be even virtually back at, uh, at UIC, as Kate said.

So, when Kate asked me to do this, I thought, what, what can I say that will be new to you guys or will help you understand how we got to this terrible, terrible place with Ukraine? And you know, as you heard from my, um, bio, which Kate talked about, I have spent a lot of time working on, uh, Russia and I came into the Foreign Service with an academic, uh, you know, with a post graduate education in Russia, in, uh, on Russia and, and Eastern Europe. You know, so we have had to deal with Vladimir Putin as a, as a serial aggressor, you know, going, going back to the, the mid-2000s.

So, I thought what I would do is talk about what went wrong. How did we approach Russia so badly? Why weren't we able to deter him from two invasions of Ukraine and, and one invasion of, uh, of Georgia? Okay, so I, you know, I, I was working on Russia policy, kind of off and on from the collapse of the Soviet Union. And from the very beginning, uh, it seemed that our policy towards, uh, towards Ukraine and the other post-Soviet states were really a function of our policy towards Russia. I mean, Russia is still the biggest country, uh, in the world even though it lost, you know, the, the other 14 republics. It is one of the most rich countries in the world in terms of natural resources, especially oil and gas. So, when the Cold War ended, the Bush I, uh, administration, George HW Bush, he saw a real opportunity to turn things around in, in Russia, uh, in, in our relationship with Russia. So, he and his successor, Bill Clinton, really were focused on trying to integrate, uh, Russia into the international, uh, system into liberal multilateral institutions. And, you know, thus, hopefully, uh, make Russia into a, you know, responsible actor in the, in the Democratic community of nations.

[00:07:08] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** We weren't insane. Uh, we had a lot of hope in Yeltsin, in Boris Yeltsin, the first president of, of Russia. So, um, Yeltsin was president from, uh, '91, uh, to basically the year 2-, 2000 when, uh, when Putin took over. And he was seen as a real democrat. I mean, he was the guy who stood against the hardliners in August of 1991 and, you know, basically got them to, to, to back down and uh, uh, to restore Gorbachev to the presidency. And Yeltsin took Gorbachev's reforms and really took them really far forward. There were more freedoms in the 1990s in Russia, really than any time, except maybe you know, right after the revolution in, in 1917. So, uh, we made a big bet on, on Russia that it would become a responsible member of the, uh, international community.

And there was also some inertia that took this feeling that, that Russia was becoming a responsible member, integrated into, you know, Europe, uh, integrated into, joined the WTO. They were invited to join the, the G7, which became the G8, even in the first few years of, of Putin. And the Europeans in particular saw increased trade with Russia as, as a real opportunity to knit Russia into Europe. They, the thinking was, um, if we can increase trade with, with Russia, get them dependent on us, and we'll be dependent on them. It's, you know, it's mutual. This will lead to a, uh, a peaceful, non-aggressive, uh, Russia. Unfortunately, it really wasn't until February, uh, 24th last year when Russia, uh, invaded Ukraine that the West really woke up to the kind of regime that we were dealing with.

[00:09:19] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** This is a self-aggrandizing, more of a 19th century expansive, imperial state that we're dealing with. Especially, you know, Putin himself was, um, was not, he was not a democrat. Uh, but it, it took us almost that long. So, uh, we realized that conducting business as usual, uh, didn't, uh, discourage their, their, uh, aggressive tendencies; actually encourage them.

So, to illustrate this, you know, I'd like to, uh, discuss three events. So, um, the first one is, um, the effort of, um, uh, two administrations, Bush I and Clinton, to convince Ukraine to give up its nuclear weapons, and I'll talk about that more in a second. Second was the, uh, the western, the, the, the weak response to the invasion of Georgia in 2008. Uh, and then finally the, um, the response to the unilateral, uh, annexation of Crimea in, uh, in 2014. So, I would say that in all three cases, the West, Europe and the United States, put undue pressure on Georgia first and then on Ukraine to accept terms that led directly or indirectly to Russia succeeding in gaining territory through the use of force. So, there was, uh, no real, uh, deterrence.

So, um, with the collapse of the, of the U S S R in 1991, I remember this very well. Um, the big priority, well there were, there were, there were two priorities. One is you had thousands of nuclear weapons, missiles, and bombs, and, whose, uh, command and control was not apparent. So, uh, we passed something called the Nunn-Lugar Act, which, uh, which helped the, the Russians secure, they, they had very, very bad facilities for storing these, these weapons. So that was one priority. The other one was, uh, the Soviet Union had strategic nuclear weapons in four different republics.

[00:11:44] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** So, it had 'em in Russia. Most of them were in Russia. They had 'em in Belarus, which is also adjacent to Russia; uh, Kazakhstan, but they had probably the most outside of Russia in Ukraine. So, our second priority was to try and convince the non-Russian nuclear states, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, to give up their nuclear weapons. And it was easy with Kazakhstan and Belarus. They had no desire to have strategic nuclear weapons.

And you guys know what strategic means? It means it can hit us. So, there's, there's tactical, that's battlefield. There's intermediate range that can, you know, those can hit Europe. Strategic can hit us. So there were 1,900 strategic nuclear weapons on missiles, um, in Ukraine. They did not immediately agree to give up their weapons, and I'll talk about why.

In, um, 1991, right before the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a meeting in the National Security Council to talk about what their policy would be towards the nuclear weapons in Ukraine, uh, we'd already gotten insurances from a Belarus and Kazakhstan, that they would give them up. And arguing for allowing Ukraine to keep the weapons was the Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney, who, you know that name I'm sure from a different, uh, Bush administration. Uh, he said he saw value in, uh, Ukraine maintaining a nuclear deterrent against Russia. And that's because there were a number of voices in Russia, not Yeltsin himself necessarily, but a number of prominent voices who thought that Russia got a raw deal by not getting, uh, Crimea because of the Black Sea Fleet and not getting the Donbas, Eastern Ukraine, which is the, which I guess you could gotta say was the industrial heart, uh, of Ukraine, and in many ways of the Soviet Union itself. A lot of the weapons plants, for example, the missile building plants, uh, were in, uh, uh, Donbas.

[00:14:01] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Secretary Baker gave the counter-argument. He talked, he said, it is not in our interest to have another nuclear state. They didn't know the Ukrainians as well as they knew Yeltsin. Uh, they had a lot of faith in Yeltsin, the guy who stood on the tank and stood up, um, you know, to, uh, stand down the, the, the hardliners who were trying to, uh, form a coup.

So, he, he said, it's in our interest to have on-, have these weapons only in one place where we know they can exercise command and control, because it was all centralized in Moscow. And George HW Bush agreed with, uh, with Baker. So that became the policy that we would try to help, uh, Ukraine, uh, get rid of its, uh, nuclear weapons.

In May 1992, the president of Ukraine had a White House visit. He knew that what the Americans wanted to hear that, uh, that Ukraine was gonna give up its, uh, nuclear weapons. And he said, yes, you know, ultimately do, but we have a big concern. And that's how do we deter Russia from trying to control or even take over the Donbas and Crimea? And of course, as we've seen from the last few years, President Kravchuk, this Ukrainian president, his, his fears were well-founded.

The Bush administration was really reluctant to pressure Ukraine to give up these nuclear weapons, and so not much happened really. And and there at one point Yeltsin told the ambassador, this was in May, I'm sorry, November of 1992 that Washington had to pressure Ukraine, otherwise they were gonna keep their nuclear weapons. So, he, he, you know, he urged, urged the administration to, uh, to do that. A couple weeks later, Bush lost the election in '92. And so, the, you know, it's, uh, I guess the pressure was off, uh, Bush to make a decision about pressuring Ukraine.

[00:16:06] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** And then of course you had the, the, the Clinton administration came in and one of their first meetings was a review of their policy towards Ukraine. And most unfortunately, I think anyway, they decided that they would, uh, do what Yeltsin asked, uh, Washington to do, and that's put pressure, get leverage on Ukraine.

So, the decision was made that the US would condition its bilateral relations, condition improving those bilateral relations and everything that goes with it, you know, credits and

trade and, uh, political support. So condition that on Ukraine agreeing to give up its nuclear weapons. This, despite all along the embassy in, in Kyiv reporting that the Ukrainians remained very reluctant to give up these nuclear weapons. The embassy reported that there was, um, a perception in Kyiv that Washington was more committed to looking after its relations with Moscow. They, they, uh, were worried that what they perceived to be, uh, US-Russian, discussions regarding the interests of Ukraine without b-, bringing Ukraine into the discussion, uh, and by the propensity of the, of, of the West in general to ignore their difficult situation, and that therefore they saw, uh, nuclear weapons as a, as a critical asset, you know, to, uh, deter Moscow.

The US announced that they were gonna broker an agreement, uh, between Ukraine and Russia on the nuclear weapons. So, this went on from, um, August 1993 to January 1994, and the Ukrainians made clear that they would not sign any kind of agreement without some kind of language committing Russia to, uh, to respect the territorial integrity of, uh, of Ukraine. So, the Ukrainians said, "We need, uh, we need a document that guarantees that the US and the UK would guarantee," would come to, to, uh, Ukraine's aid is what this means, uh, "if Russia invaded."

[00:18:26] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** The lawyers in the White House and the State Department said, "We can't use that word guarantee." Guarantee implies that if Russia invades the US has to come to the military aid of, of Ukraine. So, they said, "You know, we, we don't wanna do this." They didn't want, it becomes a treaty when you use the word guarantee. They suggested using this non-legally binding word "assurances." Now the interesting thing is, and you know, one of my friends, uh, uh, from Embassy Moscow, when I was there in the, uh, late eighties, was one of the negotiators for this in the early nineties, and he said that the State Department negotiators suggested that the English text of this, uh, agreement that was signed in Budapest would use the word "assurance," but the Russian and Ukrainian text doesn't have a word, a separate word for assurance. They have the word "garantiya," which is guarantee.

So, it, it was a, a short term solution, uh, that mollified both sides, but it obviously could and, and did, and uh, you know, did lead to misinterpretation, uh, by, by Russia. Um, so our text just said, you know, "We provide assurances that we will consult with the UN about next steps if, uh, if they're invaded."

And, you know, Russia under, under Putin, you know, he was told by his lawyers that the English texts doesn't commit the, the, the US to come to Ukraine's aid, uh, with, uh, with US troops. In 2014 when they annexed Crimea and then invaded the Donbas, they just said, we don't feel obligated to, to respect this, uh, political and not legally binding memorandum.

[00:20:26] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Next we have Georgia. I won't go into what led to the, the invasion of, uh, of Georgia except to say that, uh, it came right after a, um, a, a NATO summit where the leaders agreed that, um, Ukraine and Georgia would become members of NATO. Uh, it was like several months after that Putin invaded Georgia and, uh, the, the clear lesson he was trying to, he was trying to send to, to NATO was "No way Is Georgia or Ukraine gonna become a member of NATO. This is my, my backyard."

The, the, the Western reaction was again, I think, really kind of disappointing and, uh, also leaned more towards the Russian point of view than to the, uh, to the Georgian point of view. It was clear that the US was prioritizing, and Europe especially prioritizing, the Russia relationship over, uh, over the relationship with, uh, with, uh, Georgia.

So, after the invasion, which only lasted about eight days, the uh, president French President, uh, Nicholas Sar-, Sarkozy did shuttle diplomacy between Tbilisi and uh, and, and Moscow. He pushed, pushed both sides to sign a ceasefire. The Georgians, probably thinking about the experience of Budapest, uh, objected that this was not legally binding, but everybody wanted to stop the war. So, it was another political document that Moscow, uh, ignored. The agreement obligated the Russians to withdraw, and the Russians ignored that. To this day, they still occupy 20% of, uh, of Georgia. The result of Tbilisi's acceptance of this political document, uh, was its loss of 20% of its territory. And of course, Georgia's loss was, uh, was Russia's, uh, gain.

[00:22:37] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** I was head of the Office of Russian Affairs at that time. There was, if you remember what happened in the fall of, uh, of 2008, we had the greatest, uh, financial crisis, uh, you know, since 1929, uh, with banks collapsing and... We wanted to, uh, impose, we meaning the Bush White House, this is Bush II, of course, wanted to impose sanctions on Georgia, but they were unable to do it, either unilateral or multilateral.

They couldn't do the multilateral because the European said, "We've got the greatest, the, the, the, the most dangerous financial crisis since 1929. And you wanna sanction financial institutions, you wanna sanction Russian banks? No, we're not gonna do that at this..." You know, so we couldn't get that done. Uh, there was the end of the Bush term. Of course, Obama won in, uh, in 2008 and we couldn't impose unilateral sanctions either because we would be tying the hands of the next administration, which wanted to, they were very vocal about wanting to reset their relationship with Russia. So that was another, another lesson for, for Putin. Uh, "I can use military force and change borders and not have to pay a price."

[00:24:01] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** And then finally we've got 2014, and I won't go into the whole Maidan Revolution. But, uh, the whole idea that a pro-Russian president, as Putin saw, was overthrown. He wasn't overthrown; he fled the country. But Putin saw this as an anti-Russian, uh, move. So to punish Europe, he saw Europe and the United States as behind what happened with the Maidan Revolution, he decided to annex, uh, Crimea.

So, what happened? You know, so in February, little green men, these are, so, these are the, the soldiers without insignias. Uh, Russia of course denied that they were Russians; of course, they were Russians. The Obama administration, and I think the Europeans as well, really put a lot of pressure on Ukraine, not to resist. So, it was a, it was a bloodless takeover of Ukrainian bases in, uh, in Crimea. The Ukrainian troops, uh, stayed in their, their barracks. We were, we were afraid if they did resist, there'd be escalation. Well, there was escalation because they didn't resist, and he decided to seize more territory in, in the Donbas.

And then here again, as in Georgia in 2008, the West, this time it was France and Germany, rushed to, uh, encourage the invader and the invaded to negotiate a, a ceasefire. And for six

years, Russia, while it was negotiating in this European, uh, format, continued to occupy sovereign Ukrainian territories while Westerners, uh, can, could as-, assure themselves, they were addressing the conflict by hosting negotiations.

[00:25:55] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** 2014 was a little different because there were costs imposed for this, uh, the seizure of, um, of Crimea. Russia was thrown out of the G8. The, and these sanctions did harm the, um, the Russian economy, mostly by chilling foreign investment. And also, it sent the, uh, the Russian rubble crashing. But, uh, the economic impact was blunted by a return to business as usual for, for trade between Europe, particularly Germany and, and Russia. And this was all symbolized by the agreement to sign the big natural gas pipeline in 2015, uh, Nord Stream 2. So, the, the, the lessons that, uh, Putin learned here was that, uh, he could still maintain his economy even with these, uh, sanctions because of the trade. Uh, and then second that, uh, Europe has no staying power, uh, and would eventually return to business as usual.

So, just to sum up, our misguided approach to Russia really began in the nineties with our assessment of what we thought was a democratizing Russia under Yeltsin. So how did we get Russia, Yeltsin, and Putin so long, so wrong? And I would say, in many ways it was wishful thinking and an over, over-reliance on the, the personalization of bilateral relations. Bill and Boris got along so well. They called it the Bill and Boris Show. You can see my former boss, Hillary Clinton there with the notorious "Reset" button with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov.

It really, I think, led to a, um, to a real misinterpretation of what, of what that regime was, was up to, especially, you know, Putin. And Putin I think was very good at manipulating people. Remember he called, remember George W. Bush said, "I looked into his eyes and I got a sense of his soul"? And, uh, well, we won't go into, um, what happened with the president from 2016 to 2020.

[00:28:09] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** So, what were the factors here? I mentioned Yeltsin as a political reformer and anti-communist, and there was a f-, there was a fear that the nationalists or the communists would come back. There was a real openness to foreign investment for Yeltsin and Putin too, uh, at least until recently. Uh, so there was a lot of money to be made, especially in oil and gas. And as I said before, it was seen as a unique opportunity to lock Russia into, uh, Western institutions after centuries of, um, Russian expansionists and anti-democratic, uh, governance. So, bottom line is we just stayed too long with this wishful thinking. We really should have done what we did, what we're doing now after the invasion of Georgia.

[00:28:58] **Professor Floros:** Great. Thank you so much.

That is the end of Ambassador Kelly's talk. We're going to take a quick break and when we come back, we'll hear the Q&A with my US Foreign Policy students. This is Professor Floros in The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio.

Music Interlude: Multumesc Pentru Tot [Thanks for everything] by Cast of Characters

[00:29:50] **Student #1:** I am curious about what you were talking about with the distinction between political and legal documents...

[00:29:57] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** mm-hmm.

[00:29:58] **Student #1:** ...in these agreements. What do you think about this like trend of the executive making political agreements instead of legal agreements that would have to be passed by Congress? And do you think that continuing trend is going to lead us into like more conflict internationally?

[00:30:16] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Yeah. It's, um, we've, we've come to such a pass in our relationship with the legislative branch. It's the Senate when you're talking about, um, treaties, that there's a real reluctance to even start, uh, to, to negotiate, uh, a treaty. And, and that was a factor, you know, back in, in '93, '94 when they were negotiating this Memorandum as, as they, as they call it. It's, I mean, it's, there's a, there's a, there's a couple factors here and, and one is I think just the, kind of the predominance of the executive branch in, in, in foreign affairs. And, you know, presidents feel empowered to cut their own deals as long as it, as the deals don't, uh, use language that would make it, uh, legally binding. Uh, as in the case of the, of the Budapest, um, Memorandum. The other, the other factor is just all the rancor, all the, the bad, bad blood between the two parties.

You know, for a treaty, you, um, you need a two-thirds, uh, vote. And, you know, these days the only kind of treaty you really can get is on nuclear weapons. And, and that one now has been basically trashed by the Russians. But it's, you know, it's, it's hard, it's hard to get a, like a climate treaty. It's tough because of the, um, of the political atmosphere, because of the two-thirds majority and because people just scoring political points when it comes to, um, dealing with, uh, foreign countries.

So, it's, it's hard. I mean, I, there's a bunch of treaties that, that we cooperate on. Not treaties, but there are a bunch of political, uh, uh, agreements that we cooperate on, but we're not willing to put to the Senate. You know, like the Iran deal, that was not a treaty, and it should have been a treaty. Uh, the Constitution makes it clear that the legislative branch is a co-equal branch, and that's why they have the, you know, the advice and consent and... It would make diplomats jobs a heck of a lot easier because treaties have a lot more weight than, than agreements. And you know, what happened with the Iran agreement was ex-, extremely unfortunate because it just showed that the United States, uh, you know, unless, unless you bind the United States in a treaty, you can't trust them to carry out an agreement they signed from one year to the next.

Transition sound effect: Vocal Glitch Sequence 05 by Soundstripe

[00:33:01] **Student #2:** First of all, thank you for coming. I really found this interesting. Uh, my question was pertaining to popular opinion in Russia.

[00:33:08] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Mm-hmm.

[00:33:09] **Student #2:** Specifically, I wanted to know what, like, the current narrative, um, like people have really bought into or like what that kind of is like and how that's affected current events. Um, my current understanding of it is that a lot of people seem to like, have this kind of populist idea or like kind of reinstituting, like the former glory of like the USSR. But I'd like to know if that's accurate or if there's like some more complex understanding that I'm missing. Thank you.

[00:33:41] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Uh, that's a great question. Um, in many ways what's happening now is, is reminiscent of, of my experience, um, when I was, I was a student twice in, uh, in the Soviet Union, and there were two kinds of public opinions. There was the, the, the public, public opinion, which had to toe the line or, you know, you would lose your job, you know, in the best of circumstances or, you know, be arrested in the wor-, the worst of circumstances.

And then there was the kind of the private public opinion, what we used to talk about, uh, around the kitchen table, you know, when uh, we, 'cuz my wife came with me the second time, and you'd hear a very different opinion. The, uh, Russians needed to trust you. You couldn't just meet somebody on the street and form a friendship. You had to come with a, with a reference basically. Uh, and that's, you know, so we would, we would come with names and, and phone numbers and, and we would call them and say, I come from, you know, so and so. That's happening, uh, because you have a very repressive system now where you can be, you can be, uh, arrested or called in for questioning or lose your job for liking a social media post.

[00:35:08] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** So, it is difficult really now to gauge what public opinion is. You know who, who, you know, if you get a phone call from a pollster and said, "Do you support President Putin?" What are you gonna say? "Do you support the war?" What are you gonna say, I mean? However, it does seem to me that the majority of Russians do support this war, and that is partially because they never really saw Ukraine as separate from Russia. And you probably heard, you know, all the reasons why: shared language, shared culture, shared religion. The first Russian state was in Kiev. So, Russians really don't get that the Ukrainians feel a separate i-, identity. So, you know, I think that that that idea that, you know, Ukraine wants to go to the EU, wants to go to NATO, uh, because of the propaganda, they see that as a direct threat to Russia. It really isn't.

Where I think there is, there is hope is through the internet. There is a real, I think, correlation between those who just watch tv, which is all controlled by the state, uh, you know, and the opinions of people who watch TV and those who have access to other sources of information. Of course, even there, they're trying to, you know, shut off alternative viewpoints by banning Facebook and blocking, uh, YouTube. And, but I have a lot of faith in young people because most of them do access the internet rather than watch Channel One state TV.

But there is a, you know, it is a, there's a very discouraging dichotomy between how Europe sees, uh, sees this awful war and how the Russians see this awful war. Yeah, and I, you know, I think, you know, part of it is there's just a real fear that, um, Russia could lose. Uh,

and you know, they don't, they don't wanna go through the early nineties again with, uh, loose nukes and, and um, uh, you know, a lot of, a lot of, uh, chaos and inflation and...

So, there is a fear that Russia will lose as well, I think. Yeah, that's a great question and it's a very complicated answer.

[00:37:37] **Professor Floros:** Can you talk about maybe the short, medium, long term, take your pick, implications of so many objectors leaving Russia?

[00:37:49] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Yes, that's a, yeah, it's a huge factor. People were really surprised that Putin just let them go. There was one reason why there was this huge, you know, flight from Russia was a, a rumor that they were gonna close the borders to, uh, especially to, um, to, to young men. But they didn't, and they're still open. I mean, you can still come and go. And I think, you know, it was, this is something that the, um, that the czars did to sort of, you know, lower, lower the, um, the, the, the pressure on the regime, get rid of them, allow the ,the objectors to, uh, to go into exile. And so I think that was what Putin was thinking.

You know, when, when, when he looks at where possible opposition would come from, it's gonna come from the urban elites and it's, it's the young urban elites who left. A lot of them had IT experience and, you know, could get another job overseas. But I think that now they're beginning to realize that this is also a, a, a brain drain that could have had an effect on their, on their economy. But it's, it's very interesting and um, it's, it's caused some tension in some of the states that...

[00:39:13] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Russians can go without a visa to, um, Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Armenia. And I know, you know, from my contacts in Georgia is there's a lot of resentment of Russians coming there. Because, you know, they occupy 20% of their country. It's, it's a small country. You have tens of thousands of Russians coming in. Um, there's a lot of, uh, economic effects. You know, a lot of these guys have money, so rents, apartments are going way up.

And, um, and we're even seeing that happening in Kazakhstan too, which has had a more of a "live and let live" approach, uh, to, to its neighbor, to the north. Uh, yeah, but it, it has a, it has a, um, yeah, it's had a very strong, strong effect, uh, both in Russia and in the countries that are receiving the, the Russians.

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[00:40:10] **Student #3:** Do you think that because of this invasion, that Russia's reputation amongst the international community has kind of just been shattered?

[00:40:20] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Depends on where you are. I mean, depends on which country you wanna talk about. Yeah. So, you know, I've worked with Russian diplomats for, you know, for years and years and, um, you know, I just, I find it hard to believe that they're able to accept, you know, the, the, the way that Russia has been ostracized, uh, you know, in

Europe, in the North es-, essentially. But only one, one Russian diplomat has, has defected. And I don't know if that's because that they're, you know, true believers in Putin or imperialists, or just as likely, they're afraid of retribution if they defect. A big as Putin, even more than the Soviets, you know, will go after you if you betray Russia.

But it's a different story in, in the South, in the Global South, and that's, you know, they, some of these countries, you know, because of the, the, uh, impact of, of colonialism, you know, from Europe. If you're looking at Latin America, the impact of, of, uh, of, of US heavy handedness in Latin America, there's a tendency for them to buy into, you know, Putin's Putin's narrative, which is that he is trying to, uh, prevent the expansion of the former colonial powers, uh, into, you know, the Russian space, you know, which he considers, uh, Ukraine.

[00:41:53] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** So, it's a pretty bipolar difference, you know, between the attitude of a lot of African countries, Latin American countries, India in particular. India has a long relationship with, uh, with Russia going back to the, the Cold War, and the attitude of, of our European allies and Japan and Australia, and, uh.

You, you, you can see who's, who supports Russia indirectly by, you know, how much oil and gas they buy. And, uh, India has bought a lot more oil and gas at discounted prices. Uh, and as they're, they're not as inclined to, uh, to, to go after, go after Putin. Same thing with South Africa too, I think, and some of the other African countries. And again, that's kind of a legacy of, um, of the proxy wars, you know, in Africa and Latin America from the, from the Cold War where the Russian supported one side and we supported the other.

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[00:42:57] **Student #4:** Thank you, Ambassador Kelly, for your talk. I found it really interesting. Uh, I was wondering why you think that NATO expansion into Ukraine and into Georgia isn't, isn't really a threat as Russia thinks It is.

[00:43:09] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Yeah. I mean, this is the argument that we've used til we're blue in the face. Uh, you know, for, for the Russians it's really, it's a more, uh, it's more of a factor of who has hegemony, you know, who has influence? Uh, I don't, I don't think many Russians really think that NATO would attack Russia. But by moving into Ukraine, moving into another adjacent country like, uh, Georgia, they are, uh, marginalizing Russia.

Of course, you know, I think that Russia marginalizes itself, uh, it pushes people towards the West. Look at Sweden and, and Finland, you know, they were neutral and now they wanna join NATO because they're afraid of Russia. Uh, so it's really the issue isn't, NATO isn't, you know, a defensive alliance signing an agreement with one of Russia's neighbors. For, uh, Putin, it's, it's the loss of, uh, of empire, loss, of, uh, of influence in Ukraine, uh, in particular. You know, it's, it's all about their sphere of influence.

[00:44:29] **Professor Floros:** Given that the invasion and takeover of Ukraine was not the cakewalk that I think everybody, including people in America, thought it was gonna be, what

do you think Putin's end game is now? Is he willing to just wait the West out and hope that we'll get bored or whatever, of supporting Ukraine and that when the West ducks out, he'll be able to take over?

[00:45:01] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Yeah. I think you know his, he, he made a couple of miscalculations. One is the, the capability of his own forces. Uh, he was just being misinformed by his own people. Uh, that's a very typical situation when you, you know, an autocratic leader who doesn't want to hear bad news, you just give him bad, good news, and, uh, but it was a, it was a disaster.

I think that he's not just hoping that the West will, uh, you know, go flip floppy. He's counting on it. You know, as long as he has troops on the ground, he is hoping that there'll be a repeat of what happened in 2008 with Georgia and then 2014 in Ukraine where you had France and/or Germany coming in to, to force a ceasefire. You still have Macron talking about the need for a ceasefire, and that suits him just fine. Um, you know, he can just wait until he's got a better situation and he can do it again. You know, he can push out again. And I think he's kind of waiting for 2024 too, in our own country. So, I think we have to be prepared for a heck of a lot more election interference, supporting, um, you know, isolationists or pro-Russian candidates.

[00:46:24] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Uh, Putin doesn't have to worry about the electoral cycle. Uh, he, you know, he may be deluded, but he thinks that he doesn't have any, any kind of threats to his rule in, in Moscow. And by all appearances, he doesn't seem to. It's kind of hard to believe, but he's yeah, more than willing to, to play a long game.

Uh, and he's made it quite clear that this is a legacy thing for him. You guys have all heard this, that the, you thought the, you know, the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century was the, was the loss of, uh, you know, was the breakup of the Soviet Union. He doesn't wanna put the whole Soviet Union together, but he wants to have kind of an Eastern Slavic alliance, so Russia, Belarus, Ukraine. He has said openly, Ukraine is not a country and that Ukraine is historical Russian lands. As long as he's there, this is gonna continue. You know, whether it's a frozen conflict or the horrible situation we have now. Because he wants Ukraine.

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[00:47:37] **Student #5:** I just had a question in regards to democracy building.

[00:47:40] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Mm-hmm.

[00:47:40] **Student #5:** Um, so I heard you've done it in Russia.

[00:47:43] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Yeah. Did a great job too, didn't I? (Professor Floros and Ambassador Kelly laugh ruefully)

[00:47:47] **Student #5:** But I was just wondering how you implemented democracy within different countries.

[00:47:52] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Yeah. It's, it's really hard. I mean, you have to have a government, uh, that's supportive first of all. And you know, we, so we have had that in places like Kosovo. We used to have it in Georgia, uh, but there's a government now that wants to kind of squelch civil society. Yeah, you, you have to have a, you have to have a, um, uh, you know, an accepting environment really for it to be effective. Otherwise, it's really, uh, just sort of keeping faith with the people who are, uh, putting themselves at risk, uh, to promote, you know, the kind of values that we hold as, as important. So, there's a lot of like direct assistance to NGOs, but to really have transformation, you gotta have a situation like in Kosovo or in South Africa.

[00:48:46] **Student #5:** Okay. Does it have to be like a weak state or is it, you know, are you more concerned with like the people or you know, where you need to implement democracy in order to keep the state stabilized, I guess?

[00:48:59] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Yeah. Yeah. I mean, you, you need to have governance, obviously. Uh, accountable governance. Yeah. I think it's, it's, it's probably hardest to try and, uh, promote democracy in, in a, in a weak state.

[00:49:12] **Professor Floros:** So, when you were engaging in that process right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was it about helping the government build strong institutions, or was it about helping civil society adopt practices that would support a democracy, or a little bit of both?

[00:49:35] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Yeah. Yeah. It was both. So, I, so I was involved in that from, you know, the beginning. So, from '92, um, through '96, both on the ground and, and in Washington. So, I mean, this was a very permissive environment. You know, Yeltsin was very, was very supportive. We, I think, spent most of our resources on building a, um, uh, a judiciary because there was no independent judiciary in the Soviet Union. It was like a rubber stamp court system. So, we put a lot of money into, uh, jury trials, into, you know, training judges. And, uh, of course that was all blown away by Putin. Uh, you have, again, a compliant non-independent judiciary.

Uh, there was no tradition of volunteerism or, you know, non-governmental, I mean, obviously they were banned, non-governmental organizations. So that was the other big part of it was, was supporting NGOs, um, and supporting the idea of citizen involvement and, uh, volunteerism. And that was a little more successful into the Putin era for a while, because there were some, uh, organizations, uh, you know, some civil activist organizations that were able to sustain themselves. And sustain themselves with, uh, Russian money too, you know, because of all the oil and gas. But that all came crashing down too, as, uh, Putin didn't want any other, didn't want anybody holding him accountable, basically. And so they, you know, they, they basically, I mean, basically all the NGOs, the civic activist NGOs have all been closed down.

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[00:51:31] **Student #6:** I just wanted to touch on what you were talking about earlier with India and how these countries are kind of, because there was that piece in the New York Times a few weeks ago where they kind of talked about how there's these countries that are ignoring these sanctions and kind of piggybacking off those sanctions to move up in the world. Like, is it possible that these countries that are already kind of moving up technologically and um, brain power-wise can use these sanctions and this war to really become like a more powerful nation in the world?

[00:52:01] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Yeah. I, I, I think what the, you know, when you think of the, the, of the Biden administration, I think what they're most concerned about is some kind of nascent or, or growing coalition uh, of countries that are trying to push back against what they perceive as, as you know, American hegemony or European uh, hegemony. They're obviously most concerned about China, um, but you see Iran, you know, Iran is, is, um, uh, providing weapons to, to, to, uh, to Russia.

Um, India, uh, is buying massive amounts of, uh, of oil and gas and yeah, I, I I think that there's, there's a, there's a real, there's a fear of, um, of having another type Cold War situation of, of blocs, democratic and authoritarian or whatever, whatever you wanna call them. But in the case of India, I mean, you're right, they have profited really, um, you know, from these, uh, discounted, uh, oil and gas prices and of course they've kind of hold their fire, held their fire, but, um, uh, criticizing Russia too.

Of course, the big fear is China. That's why we came out with releasing intelligence, which this administration has used to great advantage. They are, they are the most willing to release classified information than any administration, in my lifetime anyway. But that's why they, they said that they have information that China is considering giving arms to, cuz that would be, then you really would have kind of an East versus West situation.

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[00:53:49] **Professor Floros:** So, I wanna ask a question, um, about the end of your time in, in Georgia. So, it is traditional when a new president comes into power that all of the ambassadors, uh, submit their resignation

[00:54:04] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Mm-hmm.

[00:54:04] **Professor Floros:** Um, and he can choose to accept them or not. And a lot of hay was made out of the fact that Trump accepted a lot of resignations very quickly and didn't give diplomats a chance to kind of reorder their lives. You stayed in Georgia into 2018?

[00:54:19] **Ambassador Ian Kelly:** Mm-hmm.

[00:54:20] Professor Floros: So, why didn't Trump accept your resignation, and why did you stay as long as you did?

[00:54:32] Ambassador Ian Kelly: Yeah. So that's, the second question that I'm gonna answer.

[00:54:35] Professor Floros: Okay.

[00:54:36] Ambassador Ian Kelly: I'll answer the first one too, but I'll answer the second one first. Uh, why did I stay? I didn't wanna stay.

[00:54:42] Professor Floros: Oh.

[00:54:42] Ambassador Ian Kelly: In fact, I called my senior staff together in November, whatever it was, 2016, and said, I'm gonna have to resign. I can't work with this guy, and my deputy afterwards took me aside and said, "You know, Ian, I don't know if you noticed the, the looks of the people around the table, but they looked really dismayed," uh, because, you know, they, I had, you know, over 30 years in the Foreign Service I could resign and, and pension and everything. And, and so I realized it was, it had a, a uh, deleterious effect on the younger officers by my saying that. She said, "That's one point. The other point is you took an oath to uphold the Constitution, not to uphold the president." And I go, "Hmm, yeah, you're right."

And then the other factor was he was leaving in a few months anyway. He was rotating out and there'd be a brand new deputy who'd have to be Charge d'Affaires. So, what I did was I gave her, you know, about six months or so, and I sub-, you know, so in uh, January [2018], I submitted my resignation. He, the White House accepted it within 24 hours.

[00:55:58] Professor Floros: Oh!

[00:55:59] Ambassador Ian Kelly: They were fine to have a career guy out of there. And so my, my, the Acting Chief of Mission, Charges d'Affaires, um, had a good, you know, six months under her belt to develop contacts, uh, get the lay of the land. And so that, that's why I, I held my fire so long, uh, I wanted to get out there. I, I mean, I just really didn't wanna, uh, really didn't wanna work for that guy. And I did tell myself if he ever asked me to do something, I, I object to, I will immediately resign. He never did.

[00:56:34] Professor Floros: But you were there for a year after he

[00:56:36] Ambassador Ian Kelly: Yeah.

[00:56:37] Professor Floros: was, okay.

[00:56:38] Ambassador Ian Kelly: Was there a year, year and three months? Yeah.

[00:56:41] Professor Floros: Okay. Thank you for your service.

Okay. Um, we are at the, um, the end of class, so can you please virtually thank Ambassador Kelly for coming and speaking to us? That was really fascinating.

[00:56:55] Ambassador Ian Kelly: Yeah. Well, thank you. I really enjoyed it. Bye-bye, guys.

[00:56:59] Professor Floros: Thanks, Ian.

[00:56:59] Ambassador Ian Kelly: Bye-bye.

[00:57:00] Professor Floros: Ambassador Ian Kelly, it's a retired Foreign Service Officer. He teaches in the International Studies and Slavic Languages and Literatures programs at Northwestern University.

Thank you for joining me today in The Politics Classroom. If you want more information about what you heard today, check out the bookshelf section of thepoliticsclassroom.org, which is also linked in the show notes.

I'm trying something new in the show notes, and I'd love to hear what you think. You can reach me on Twitter @DrFloros with feedback. This is Professor Floros in The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. That's all I've got for this week. Class dismissed.

Outro Music: Three Goddesses by Third Age