

Is There a Way Out of the Russia-Ukraine War?

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Oliver Stone, an award-winning film director, was the executive producer of “Ukraine on Fire,” a documentary that came out in 2016. Stone also interviewed Russian President Vladimir Putin between 2014 and 2016. The interviews became the documentary series, “The Putin Interviews,” which aired in 2017
- › Stone recently sat down to talk to Lex Fridman about Russian president Vladimir Putin and the Russia-Ukraine conflict
- › “Ukraine on Fire” focused on the Maidan Revolution that began in 2013. After months of peaceful protests against the Ukrainian government’s decision to not sign a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU, favoring an offer from Russia instead, deadly violence broke out
- › Petro Poroshenko was elected president in a special election in May 2014. According to the official story, Ukrainians were dissatisfied with President Viktor Yanukovich’s “growing authoritarianism,” and his refusal to sign the EU association agreement. Yanukovich and other high-level officials, however, claim the violent revolution was orchestrated by the U.S. for the purpose of regime change
- › Stone speculates that Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine may in part have been influenced by a realization that the U.S. is intent on regime change in Russia and is willing to destroy Ukraine to do it

In the video above, Lex Fridman interviews Oliver Stone about the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Stone, an award-winning film director, was the executive producer of “Ukraine

on Fire,”^{1,2} a documentary that came out in 2016.

Stone also interviewed Russian President Vladimir Putin between 2014 and 2016. The interviews became the documentary series, “The Putin Interviews,” which aired in 2017. So, Stone has some insight into both countries. Fridman, meanwhile, is half-Russian, half-Ukrainian.

Ukraine on Fire

“Ukraine on Fire” focused on the Maidan Revolution³ that began in Kiev in 2013. After three months of peaceful protests against the Ukrainian government’s decision to not sign a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU, favoring an offer from Russia instead, deadly violence broke out.

Petro Poroshenko was elected president in a special election in May 2014. According to the official story, Ukrainians were dissatisfied with president Viktor Yanukovich’s “growing authoritarianism,” and his refusal to sign the EU association agreement, so they overthrew him.

Yanukovich and other high-level officials, however, claim the violent revolution was orchestrated by the U.S. for the purpose of regime change. Leaked conversations revealed top-level officials discussing how to implement a coup to overthrow Ukraine’s democratically elected government.

You can read more about this and see the film in my previous article, [“Ukraine on Fire: 2016 Documentary by Oliver Stone.”](#) The current president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, a former comedian and actor, was voted in in April 2019.

Putin, the Leader and the Man

In this interview, Fridman and Stone primarily focus on Putin — how and what he thinks, based on Stone’s perception of the man — and Russia’s incursion into Ukraine. Stone

presents a different side of Putin that many Americans probably have never seen, and explains why Putin's behavior is, perhaps surprisingly, rational.

The U.S. has a long history of anti-Soviet bias. As noted by Stone, the American stance was that capitalism works and communism doesn't. Modern Russia is no longer communist,^{4,5,6} yet the U.S. antagonism against Russia remains, while the U.S. government, ironically, is now doing everything in its power, and beyond, to implement communism here.

Stone notes that Putin is "very much a market man," and has been very clear that he believes national sovereignty is paramount for world peace and harmonious relations. Putin insists that all nations must be sovereign, "and I believe the United States has never accepted that," Stone says. The U.S., Stone believes, is far more interested in keeping nations subservient to it and its ideologies.

According to Stone, Putin has a generally good reputation in other countries for being a man who promotes the interests of his country, but not at the expense of others. Keeping the world in harmony, "this has always been in his picture," Stone insists.

When asked if he thought power had a corrupting influence on Putin, Stone insists that Putin would never last if he were acting as a dictator. The Russian people would not keep him in a position of power — which he has kept, on and off, for about 20 years.

Russia is a functioning democracy, and the people's displeasure would reveal itself in several different ways. The ballot box is only one avenue by which they exhibit their dissatisfaction. But, apparently, they think Putin's doing a good job at protecting the country and looking out for its needs.

Fridman, on the other hand, notes he senses a mixture of fear and apathy toward the leadership when he speaks to Russian family and friends, and this concerns him. Stone counters Fridman's concerns saying he saw "far more freedom in the (Russian) press than what is pictured in the West, and that means different points of view. Russians are always arguing among themselves. I've never seen a more contentious country."

Stone's Experience With Putin

Part of Putin's political longevity may have something to do with his ability to stay unruffled. "I never saw him lose his temper," Stone says, noting that while most Americans tend to be emotional, Putin, in contrast, is calm, rational, balanced, mature and respectful, even under pressure. And, contrary to charismatic dictators such as former Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez, Putin doesn't try to charm you. He's a straight-shooter.

All of his interviews with Stone were granted without rules or restrictions. All questions were allowable. Nothing was off the table. Putin also did not request to see any of the work before it was published. "He trusted me," Stone says.

According to Stone, Putin has "no empire intentions," and repeatedly expressed his desire to have friendly relations with the U.S. Unfortunately, Putin's reputation has been tarnished by U.S. media, people acting from a political agenda, those who never met him, never went to Russia and don't know Russian history. This U.S.-fabricated persona of Putin as an enemy of both his own people and the rest of the world has made such relations difficult.

Stone's Initial Take on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Stone had a harsher critique against Putin in a March 2022 Facebook post, in which he had the following to say about Russia's invasion of Ukraine:⁷

"Although the United States has many wars of aggression on its conscience, it doesn't justify Mr. Putin's aggression in Ukraine. A dozen wrongs don't make a right. Russia was wrong to invade. It has made too many mistakes:

- 1) underestimating Ukrainian resistance*
- 2) overestimating the military's ability to achieve its objective*

- 3) *underestimating Europe's reaction, especially Germany upping its military contribution to NATO, which they've resisted for some 20 years; even Switzerland has joined the cause. Russia will be more isolated than ever from the West*
- 4) *underestimating the enhanced power of NATO, which will now put more pressure on Russia's borders*
- 5) *probably putting Ukraine into NATO*
- 6) *underestimating the damage to its own economy and certainly creating more internal resistance in Russia*
- 7) *creating a major readjustment of power in its oligarch class*
- 8) *putting cluster and vacuum bombs into play*
- 9) *and underestimating the power of social media worldwide*

But we must wonder, how could Putin have saved the Russian-speaking people of Donetsk and Luhansk?

No doubt his Government could've done a better job of showing the world the eight years of suffering of those people and their refugees – as well as highlighting the Ukrainian buildup of 110,000 soldiers on the Donetsk-Luhansk borders, which was occurring essentially before the Russian buildup. But the West has far stronger public relations than the Russians.

Or perhaps Putin should've surrendered the two holdout provinces and offered 1-3 million people help to relocate in Russia. The world might've understood better the aggression of the Ukrainian Government. But then again, I'm not sure.

But now, it's too late. Putin has allowed himself to be baited and fallen into the trap set by the U.S. and has committed his military, empowering the worst conclusions the West can make. He probably, I think, has given up on the West, and this brings us closer than ever to a Final Confrontation. There seems to be no road back.

The only ones happy about this are Russian nationalists and the legion of Russian haters, who finally got what they've been dreaming of for years, i.e. Biden, Pentagon, CIA, EU, NATO, mainstream media – and don't overlook Nuland and her sinister neocon gang in D.C. This will significantly vindicate the uber hawks in public eyes.

Pointing out the toxicity of their policies (Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, NATO expansion, breaking nuclear treaties, censoring and omitting crucial facts from the news, etc.) will be next to impossible. Pointing out Western double standards, including Kyiv and Zelenskyy's bad behavior, will likewise fall on deaf ears as we again draw the wrong conclusions.

It's easier now to smear those of us who tried to understand the Russian position through these last two decades. We tried. But now is the time, as JFK and Khrushchev faced down the perilous situation in Cuba in October 1962, for the two nuclear powers to walk this back from the abyss. Both sides need to save face.

This isn't a moment for the U.S. to gloat. As a Vietnam War veteran and as a man who's witnessed the endless antagonism of the Cold War, demonizing and humiliating foreign leaders is not a policy that can succeed. It only makes the situation worse. Back-channel negotiations are necessary, because whatever happens in the next few days or weeks, the specter of a final war must be realistically accepted and brokered.

Who can do that? Are there real statesmen among us? Perhaps, I pray, Macron. Bring us the likes of Metternich, Talleyrand, Averell Harriman, George Shultz, James Baker, and Mikhail Gorbachev.

The great unseen tragedy at the heart of this history of our times is the loss of a true peaceful partnership between Russia and the U.S. – with, yes, potentially China, no reason why not except America's desire for dominance.

The idiots who kept provoking Russia after the Cold War ended in 1991 have committed a terrible crime against humanity and the future. Together, our countries could've been natural allies in the biggest battle of all against climate change.

In its technical achievements alone, in large scale science, in its rocketry, heavy industries, and its most modern, clean nuclear energy reactors, Russia has been a great friend to man. Alas, in our century so far, man has failed to see or reach for the stars."

How Does He See It Now?

Now, two months later, how does he feel about the situation? "It's very hard to be honest about this because the West has brought down a curtain. Anyone who questions the invasion of Ukraine and its consequences is an enemy of the people," Stone replies. "I've never in my lifetime seen such a WALL of propaganda as I've seen in the West."

And, the way European countries are jumping in with NATO suggests they do not, in fact, have sovereignty over their own countries, Stone says. Why hasn't NATO objected to the massacres taking place in the Donbas region of Ukraine ever since 2014, when Ukraine under Poroshenko took an anti-Russian position as an ally of the United States?

There were death squads, local leadership were being murdered, as were journalists. An estimated 14,000 Ukrainian Russians were killed between 2014 and early 2022 by the Ukrainian military and Nazi battalions,⁸ and the U.S. has supported it, and continues to do so.

Stone claims the logs of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine show that before Russia's "invasion" of Ukraine, February 24, 2022, there was heavy artillery coming into the Donbas from the Ukrainian side. According to Russia's Foreign Ministry, Moscow's action against Ukraine was a "special military operation" to end the "systematic extermination of the Donbas population."

“ We cannot analyze the Russian invasion of Ukraine without taking the Donbas conflict, which has been ongoing since 2014, into account. ”

Ukrainian forces had built up on the border, and Stone believes Ukraine was actually planning to invade Donbas. Russia then responded by sending forces to the border, but this buildup on both sides has been largely ignored by Western media, which portrayed it as a sudden and unprovoked invasion by Russia.

In other words, we cannot analyze the Russian invasion of Ukraine without taking the Donbas conflict, which has been ongoing since 2014, into account. Stone is convinced that Poroshenko was instructed, from the start of his presidency, to refuse negotiations with Russia, and to maintain a hostile stance.

“This is very, very dangerous,” Stone says. Zelensky, also, has maintained this stance since 2019. “The whole world is being hurt by this, and no one is calling it out.”

Stone believes Putin realized that the U.S. is intent on regime change in Russia, and are willing to destroy Ukraine to do it. So, he took action. Fridman suggests the Ukraine conflict may in reality be a proxy war between Russia and the U.S., and Stone seems to agree with this theory. But that still doesn't give us any greater insight into this war. Putin could have surrendered the Donbas and offered safe harbor for the refugees. He chose not to, but why we don't know.

Whatever the reason, Stone is convinced that it was a calculated move – and not one based on the misuse of power. He also points out that Zelensky had mentioned bringing in nuclear weapons into Ukraine shortly before Russia's invasion, which could have set off alarms and influenced Putin's decisions.

Stone also warns that the U.S. is more than capable of a nuclear and/or chemical false flag. A small nuclear device could be set off in the Donbas, and even if it didn't make sense, the propaganda machine would automatically blame it on Russia. Of course, Russia also has a significant nuclear arsenal, which could be brought to the fore.

“Can we walk back from the brink of nuclear war?” Fridman asks. “Yes,” Stone replies.

“What do we need to walk it back?” Stone replies:

“Reason. Reason, and then diplomacy. Talk to the guy. Mr. Biden, why don’t you calm down and go talk to Mr. Putin in Moscow. And try to have a discussion without falling into ideologies.”

Sources and References

- [1 Ukraine on Fire](#)
- [2 Rumble, Ukraine on Fire, Full Movie](#)
- [3 Brookings February 21, 2020](#)
- [4 Salon March 1, 2022](#)
- [5 The New Yorker August 2, 2014](#)
- [6 Newsweek March 2, 2022](#)
- [7 Deadline March 7, 2022](#)
- [8 Crisis Group Donbas: A Visual Explainer](#)