



Episode 9: Is Ukraine Committing National Suicide?

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John Mearsheimer (JM): But the fact is that the price that Ukraine has paid up to now and will pay in the future is much, much greater than the price the Russians have paid.

JM: Hi, this is John Mearsheimer. And in today's episode, what I would like to talk about is an article that appeared in Britain that was written by Iuliia Mendel, and it's entitled: *Zelensky's Strategy is National Suicide*. And this article was published in The Spectator, which is a British magazine on the 15th of September; that was a week ago today. And then the day after she actually gave a speech, it was done virtually to the European Parliament on the same basic themes that are contained in that article. Now, who exactly is Iuliia Mendel? She was President Zelensky's first Press Secretary between 2019 and 2021. And as I'm sure everyone knows, the war in Ukraine broke out in February of 2022. So she was not the Press Secretary when the war broke out. She was the Press Secretary for the two years before the war. Nevertheless, she remained very close to Zelensky and she was a firm supporter of the war through 2024. But then in 2025, she began to be a real doubter. She began to think that this war made no sense. And she started to criticise the conflict. And this, of course, resulted in the article that she wrote last week in The Spectator and the talk that she gave to the European Parliament.

I want to lay out exactly what her specific argument is. She is not arguing that Ukraine is going to lose the war, although she believes that's true. She says that Ukraine has no quote-unquote "theory of victory", and it's clear from the piece that she expects Russia to win the war. Her argument goes well beyond that. She's arguing that Ukraine is actually committing national suicide. And she's arguing that Ukraine is going to end up in a situation where it is no longer a functioning state, it is completely dysfunctional as a result of this war. I don't think she's arguing, quite wisely, I might add, that Ukraine's going to disappear from the map. I think she recognises that there will be a dysfunctional rump state at the end. But that rump state will be dysfunctional in the extreme. And I think that's what she means by

national suicide. I think this is a remarkably controversial argument, not simply because she's arguing that Zelensky is responsible for pushing Ukraine down this road. But also because of her former position as his Press Secretary and as a staunch supporter of the war up until 2025. So she's not just any person off the street. She's a person of quite significant prominence, and she's making a remarkably controversial argument. I think the argument is not only controversial, but I think it's compelling as well. I think when you go through all the different points that she makes in the piece, it's quite clear that she's correct, that Ukraine is committing national suicide. And what I'd like to do is go through her argument, unpack the claims or the various points that she's making.

And I think the best way to do that is to start with a simple framework. And that framework says that, in essence, there are five parts to her argument, five dimensions. One is that Ukraine is undergoing a demographic disaster. Two, that Ukraine is undergoing an economic disaster. Three, that Ukraine is undergoing a territorial disaster. Four, that it's undergoing a political disaster. And finally, number five, it's undergoing a security disaster. So to be clear again, there are five dimensions here that we want to talk about. One, is the demographic disaster. Two, is the economic disaster. Three, is the territorial disaster. Four, is the political disaster. And five, is the security disaster. Let me start with the demographic disaster, which in many ways is, I think, the most powerful part of her argument.

She basically says that if you look at what's happened to Ukraine since it got its independence in 1991, which of course was not that long ago, its population has halved. Ukraine today has half the population that it had when it got its independence in 1991. She also makes the argument that half of the existing population inside of Ukraine is of retirement age. 50% of the population is of retirement age. Furthermore, she makes the point, which I find stunning, that for every one birth in Ukraine these days, there are four deaths. Just think about that. Four people die for every one person who is born in Ukraine. And then she looks at the number of young men who are of conscription age in Russia and in Ukraine and she makes the argument that there are four million men in Ukraine of conscription age and she argues that Russia has ten times as many people of conscription age. And of course, one of her central arguments in this piece, which is not controversial at all, is that this is a war of attrition. In a war of attrition, the size of your population matters greatly, and the number of men you have of conscription age obviously matters greatly. And she's arguing that Russia has ten times as many people who are of conscription age as Ukraine does.

Now, I have checked up on her numbers as best I can, and I think she's essentially correct with regard to all those numbers. On population size, almost everybody agrees that Ukraine was comprised of about 52 million people when it got its independence. Her argument is that Ukraine now has between 20 and 25 million people. So you see, if you use her upper end number, 25 million, 25 million is easily half of 52 million. And if you use the number 20 million, it's more than half. In other words, Ukraine's population has been cut by more than half. I think the 25 million number is a better number to use. I think if you look at what demographers in Ukraine are saying, they usually put a number around 28, 29. And if you look at official government statistics, the principal Minister for Social Policy puts the number

between 22 and 25. So again, her number is 20 to 25. And the Minister for Social Policy puts the number at 22 to 25. I think 25 is a good number to use, and if you use the number 25, which is to say there are 25 million people in Ukraine today, then it's quite clear that that is half the population that existed in Ukraine in 1991 when it got its independence, with regard to the claim that half of the population is of retirement age.

In other words, half of that 25 million is of retirement age. I think the number's probably closer to 45%, but there's not that much difference between 45% and 50%. And on the point that she makes, which I think again is quite stunning, that there are four Ukrainians dying every day for every one Ukrainian who is born, I think that number is correct. I don't see any evidence that she's wrong there. And the same thing is true with her claim that there are four million Ukrainians of draught age and there are ten times as many Russians of draught age. I would add the caveat, however, that the Russians don't draught people and send them into combat in the way that the Ukrainians do. But nevertheless, I think her point about the ten times greater number of potential Russian conscripts is correct. Let me just add some facts to what she had to say. Recently, the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said that the Ukrainians are losing 27,000 soldiers every month, either to death or to wounds. In other words, the number of Ukrainian casualties on a monthly basis – he was told by the Ukrainians, this is what Prime Minister Tusk of Poland says – he was told by the Ukrainians, is that Ukraine is losing 27 million (thousand) people per month. And again, that's casualties, not deaths. It's deaths plus wounded, and I would assume badly wounded.

Well, this war has been going on for 54 months, and if you assume that there were 27,000 casualties every month then that would mean that over the course of these 54 months, over the course of this war, the Ukrainians have suffered 1,458,000 casualties. Now, I think that number is inflated because I don't think that Ukraine has been losing 27,000 troops every month. In other words, there haven't been 27,000 casualties every month for this war. I think the number per month is lower. I can't tell you exactly what the number is, but let's just assume that the Ukrainians have suffered 20,000 casualties per month, not 27,000 casualties per month. Even if the Ukrainians are only suffering 20,000 casualties per month, that would still be a total of more than one million casualties. This is a remarkably high number. And you want to remember that in the month of July of this year, President Zelensky said that only 50,000 Ukrainians had died in this war and 400,000 had been wounded. So, according to President Zelensky, the number of casualties in this war on the Ukrainian side are 450,000. 450,000 is a lot less than the 1.458 million figure and even a lot less, more than half less than the 1 million figure if you assume that there have been only 20,000 casualties per month. So you can see the effects of this war have been stunning from a demographic point of view on Ukraine.

There's one more point that needs to be made regarding demography. Almost everybody who has looked at this problem believes that Ukraine is going to have an extremely difficult time recovering from this demographic disaster. In fact, some argue that it's almost impossible. First of all, you have a much smaller population now than you had before the war started. Number two, you have an old population, and number three, you have a remarkably low

fertility rate inside of Ukraine. The average Ukrainian woman basically has 1.0 babies, and to have a replacement rate, it's essential that each woman have 2.1 babies. That's just to maintain a steady population number. But again Ukrainians are not even close to 2.1, the number is 1.0. So most people think that this demographic disaster is not going to improve moving forward. And if anything, Ukraine is going to continue to lose significant numbers of people every year. And by the way, the Ukrainians are losing about 600,000 people a year now. And there's no good reason to think that that number is going to change in any significant way moving forward. The only caveat to this is that a good number of the people who have left Ukraine and moved to Europe may come back, and that would, in a very important way, help mitigate this problem or ameliorate this problem somewhat. But the fact is that Ukraine is suffering a demographic disaster, and there is little hope that this situation can be reversed in the future.

Second, there's the economic disaster. First of all, the Russians are wrecking infrastructure inside of Ukraine. As Iuliia Mendel points out, the energy system has been badly damaged. It's likely to be destroyed in large part before the winter. That's likely to have huge humanitarian consequences over the course of the winter, she also points out that 90% of the storage sites inside of Ukraine have been destroyed. And of course, the transportation network is being torn apart. The Russians are targeting gas stations all across Ukraine, but especially in the western part of Ukraine. The Russians have shut down the various Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea, and in effect, Ukraine is now a landlocked country. So with all this wrecked infrastructure, you basically have a situation. Where Ukraine's economy is incapable of functioning in a way that other economies in Europe function. It's become a completely dysfunctional economy. And this leads to the second point that she makes, which is that Ukraine is now dependent on Western aid to stay afloat. Because Ukraine's economy by itself can't meet the demands of the war or the demands of the people and can't keep the government afloat, it depends to a great extent on aid from the West. And I would estimate up to now that the West has given Ukraine somewhere between \$350 billion and \$400 billion in aid. This is a remarkable number. Last year, it was decided that it would be necessary to keep Ukraine afloat, to give it about \$105 billion, which could be used in both 2026 this year and next year, 2027, to pay the bills. And that basically meant that you would need \$52 billion this year for Ukraine and \$52 million next year for the Ukraine. And that money, of course, was allocated.

But what recently happened is that Ukraine discovered that it needs \$27 billion, \$27 million more dollars just to make it to the end of this year. So that \$105 billion that was designed to cover 2026 and 2027 is not sufficient. You need another \$27 billion. And very important, what happened is that the Europeans began to say that it is not clear that we can raise \$27 million. We've been stretched to the limit for the most part, and digging up another \$27 billion on top of the \$105 billion that we've already given you is probably not possible. But even if they do come up with the \$27 billion, what you see is happening here is that the money from the West is drying up. And of course, President Trump has made it clear that he has no interest over the long term of continuing to sustain the flow of aid to Ukraine that we have been giving up to now. He wants to cut back. He wants the Europeans to pick up more

of the slack. He wants the burden of providing financial aid to Ukraine to fall on the shoulders of the Europeans, and he wants to get the Americans out of the business of supporting the Ukrainians financially. But the Europeans, of course, are not in a position to do that. The Europeans are not, in my opinion, going to be able to raise \$27 billion, more than the \$105 billion they've allocated for 2026 and 2027. So you see, when we talk about the economic dimension of this problem, that what's happened here is that the infrastructure in Ukraine has been in large part destroyed, therefore, its economy has been destroyed, and therefore it has to depend to a great extent on Western aid. And that Western aid is not enough, and it's beginning to dry up.

Now, one other point on this, Iuliia Mendel points out that if you look at the debt level in Ukraine, it's 110% of Gross Domestic Product GDP. 110% Gross Domestic Products is evidence that this economy is deeply indebted and in deep trouble. And, of course, the IMF has said, explicitly, that this situation is unsustainable, and something has to be done to restructure the debt. Good luck with that, given the fact that it is quite clear that the Europeans and the Americans are going to slow down in terms of giving aid to Ukraine moving forward.

Now, the next point I want to talk about is the territorial disaster that has taken place in Ukraine. You want to remember what I've said so far is that there has been a demographic disaster and there has an economic disaster. Now I want to talk about the territorial disaster. And you want to keep in mind as I talk about territorial disaster that it is linked to the economic disaster that I'm just finishing up with now. Regarding the territorial disaster, Ukraine has already lost 20% of its territory. The Russians have annexed four oblasts, and they have annexed Crimea. They've not conquered all the territory in three of those oblasts. But nevertheless, they've annexed four oblasts and Crimea, and they control about 20% of Ukraine's territory. That means that Ukraine has lost a fifth of its territory. And it has no hope of reconquering that territory, despite what one hears in the mainstream media. That 20% is gone. Now, very importantly, you want to understand that before the war, 25% of Ukraine's GDP was found in that territory, 30% of its industrial production was found in that territory – here, we're talking about the 20% that Ukraine has lost – and furthermore, 25 % of its population was located in that territory; this, of course, is one of the principal reasons that Ukraine's population has shrunk so much, because that part of the population that was located in that eastern one-fifth of Ukrainian territory that the Russians have now conquered no longer counts as part of their population of Ukraine.

So again, you see that not only has Ukraine lost a fifth of its territory, it's lost territory that contained industrial might, that contained GDP, and contained population. Then to take this a step further, it is not clear that Ukraine will not lose more territory. The Russians make it clear from time to time that they are incentivized to take more territory. And what is particularly worrisome from a Ukrainian point of view at this point in time is that the Russians might take Odessa. And if they take the Odessa Oblast, that will in effect permanently cut Ukraine off from the Black Sea. And that will have devastating consequences for the Ukrainian economy moving forward because so much of Ukrainian

agricultural and industrial production goes out through the Black Sea and huge numbers of imports come in through the Black Sea. So if the Russians control Odessa or they take over Odessa and they annex Odessa, this means that Ukraine will be permanently a landlocked country, which will have devastating economic consequences. To go back to the 20% number, as I've said, and almost everybody agrees on this, Ukraine has lost about 20% of its territory, I would estimate that there's a reasonable chance that it will end up losing 40% or 35% of its territory. It remains to be seen, but given the direction that the war is taking, it is clearly possible that Ukraine will end up losing much more than just 20% of its territory, which will have a significant effect on its GDP moving forward, on its population size moving forward and on its industrial production moving forward.

Now let's talk about the political dimension of this conflict and elaborate on why this is a political disaster. First of all, it's very clear, as Iuliia Mendel emphasises, that this war and the continuation of this war year after year has undermined democracy. There's great emphasis placed on censorship and curtailing free speech inside of Ukraine. The election that was scheduled a year ago was deferred, and there's no evidence there's going to be an election any time soon. And political rights, more generally, have been curtailed. This is hardly surprising. Any time a country fights a total war, and this was true of all the countries in World War I, in World War II, the government goes to great lengths to curtail democracy. You find yourself engaged in what is sometimes called a total war, and when you're engaged in a total war, democracy is almost invariably undermined. And for sure, the Ukrainians are involved in a total war. This is an existential war for them. They're fighting for their life, and they're doing everything they can to mobilise the country to win this war. And when that happens, whether it's Ukraine or Germany or Britain in World War I, or even the United States, democracy is undermined in very important ways, which is why you want to minimise the number of times you fight wars. And if you do fight wars, to spend as little time as possible fighting those wars, because creating a national security state and fighting wars all the time, and especially fighting existential wars, is guaranteed to undermine democracy. And unsurprisingly, Ukraine, which was a flawed democracy going into the war in 2022, has seen its democratic institutions eroded in serious ways and this of course will be very difficult to recover from.

One other very important issue here when we talk about what a political disaster this war is has to do with corruption. As almost everybody knows from just reading the newspaper every day, there is a huge amount of corruption inside of Ukraine. And all of this Western aid, remember I was talking about somewhere between 350 to 400 billion dollars in aid coming into Ukraine, all of this aid just lends itself to corruption at the elite level, and of course the Ukrainians have not disappointed us on this front. There is significant corruption. So you see, this war has been a political disaster because of what it means for democratic institutions and because of what it means for jacking up the levels of corruption, which of course were high before the war even started. I mean, Ukraine was known as a highly corrupt state before February 2022, and that situation has just gotten worse at the elite level, for sure, since the war started.

Now, let me talk about the security dimension and explain to you why this has been a security disaster. And I want to make two major points here. The first is that Ukraine, for purposes of security, wants very much to become a member of NATO. And if it can't become a member of NATO, it wants a security guarantee from the United States. It's quite clear, and Iuliia Mendel says this explicitly, that the question of Ukraine joining NATO is off the table. Ukraine is not going to join NATO. And it's not going to get a security guarantee from the United States or a security guarantee of any consequence from any European country. So Ukraine is going to be on its own. This war, which was fought in large part so that Ukraine could become part of NATO, is a failure. Ukraine is not gonna become a part of NATO. It's not gonna get a meaningful security guarantee. And that is to say it's going to be on its own, it's going to have to provide for its own security. My second major point here under the security dimension is that Ukraine is going to end this war much weaker than when it started the war. Now the key point you wanna keep in mind is the two building blocks of military power, the two building blocks of military power are population size, number one, and wealth, number two, to generate military power and of course, Ukraine needs military power to protect itself. Remember, there's gonna be no membership in NATO, there's going to be no security guarantee from the United States or any other country. Ukraine is on its own. So it's going to need a powerful military, or as powerful a military as it can build, to provide for its own security.

But what I'm telling you is that it's not going to be able to build a powerful military because the two building blocks of military power are population size and wealth. And we talked about population size, we talked about the demographic disaster that Ukraine is facing, and with regard to wealth, we talked about the economic disaster that Ukraine is facing. So you see that from a security perspective, Ukraine is in absolutely horrible, horrible condition. It's in an absolutely horrible condition. Let me just put all the pieces together and review what I've said to you here. From a demographic point of view, this is a country that's half the size it was when it got its independence in 1991. And if you look at what's happening in terms of the birth rate and the death rate, this is a country that is continuing to shrink in size. This is a demographic disaster that Ukraine is facing. Furthermore, it is facing an economic disaster. Its infrastructure, its economy has been destroyed. It's heavily dependent on support from the West and that support is drying up. Furthermore, from a territorial point of view, it's lost 20% of its population. That population contained all sorts of wealth, all sorts of people, all sorts of industrial production. It's gone. And it's not clear that 20% will be all the territory that it loses. It may lose somewhere in the order of 35-40% of its territory. The war has been a political disaster. It undermined the democratic institutions inside of Ukraine, which were never too strong to begin with. And furthermore, it's fueled corruption at the elite level. And then finally, as we just talked about, at the security level, this has been a disaster there as well. Ukraine's not gonna join NATO, it's not going to get a security guarantee, and militarily, it is going to be weaker moving forward. Its ability to generate military power today is much less than it was in 1991, for sure, and in 2022, right before this war started as well.

So this war has been an unmitigated disaster for Ukraine. And this, of course, is why Iuliia Mendel is arguing that Zelensky's continuation of this war is leading to national suicide. I

think the evidence, when you look at it carefully, is overwhelming that she is correct. Now, I want to conclude with two final points. First, I wanna compare this to the situation in Russia. As you know, I was in Russia between September 5th and September 12th, and I spent a lot of time talking to people and looking around and assessing what the situation is in Russia. And when I read Mendel's piece, I couldn't help but think about the contrast with Russia. The situation in Russia is the polar opposite of the situation in Ukraine. I don't want to argue that Russia hasn't suffered from the war, because it certainly has. But if you think about it carefully, the situation is just fundamentally different in Russia than it is in Ukraine today. Now, Russia clearly has a demographic problem, independent of the war, similar to the demographic problem that Ukraine had even before the war started. Both of these countries had a demographic problem before the war, for sure. But what's happened with the Russians is they have conquered a huge swath of territory in Ukraine, and those people in that swath of territory who were previously Ukrainians have now become Russians. So as a result of this war, the Russian population has increased significantly in size.

Furthermore, in terms of territory, Ukraine has lost 20% of its territory. Well, who has captured that territory? The Russians have captured that territory. So the Russians have gained territory, and gained population as a result of this war. And in terms of their security, remember I argued that this war is a security disaster for Ukraine. It has not been a security disaster for Russia. Even if Russia wins an ugly victory and Russia pays a price for fighting this war, the fact is that militarily Russia is in much better shape today than it was when the war started in February 2022. The Russian army is a much more formidable instrument today than it was in 2022. And furthermore, Ukraine is much weaker today than in 2022. If we were to review what has happened in each year of this war, what you would see is that the Ukrainians did very well against the Russians in 2022. 2022 was the high water mark for the Ukrainians. And then in 2023 they launched a major offensive in June of that year. And the reason they launched that major offensive is they thought that they could effectively knock the Russians out of the war, or at least do serious damage to the Russian military and Russia's strategic position in eastern Ukraine. So in 2023, the Ukrainians felt they were on a roll. They had control of the commanding heights. But if you look at what happened that year, towards the end of that year 2023, what happened in 2024, what happened in 2025 and where we are in 2026, you see that Ukraine's security situation has significantly deteriorated and Russia's security situation has improved markedly.

All of this is a way of saying that Russia is in much better shape today than it was in 2022. And again, I don't want to make light of the fact that the Russians have suffered as a result of this war, that many Russians have died or been badly wounded, just as many Ukrainians have died, or have been badly wounded. But the fact is that the price that Ukraine has paid up to now, and will pay in the future, is much, much greater than the price that the Russians have paid and will pay moving forward. My final point, and this is a point that Mendel makes very clearly, is it's not just Zelensky who is responsible for leading Ukraine toward national suicide. It's the West as well. And as I'm sure almost all viewers know, the West has often talked about using Ukraine as a battering ram to weaken Russia. And, of course, as Mendel makes clear, it is the Ukrainians, not the Europeans, nor the Americans who are paying the

price for fighting this war against the Russians. And she's actually very angry. And you can see this both in her article that she wrote in The weekly Standard and also in her speech before the European Parliament; that was the day after her article appeared, that she spoke to the European parliament. She talks about people in the comfortable West; that's her rhetoric. People in the comfortable West. She makes it clear that she thinks that people in the West who are not paying the price of having to fight against the Russians are very comfortable making the argument that Ukraine should pay the blood price here. And this makes her very angry. And she has this one line that sticks in my head, which says that Western political elites would rather see Russia burn than Ukraine saved. Think about Western political elites. Would rather see Russia burn than Ukraine saved. And her point is that Ukraine is not going to be saved. It is committing national suicide. And as I say, this is a controversial argument for sure, but I think if you look carefully at those five dimensions that I've outlined, what you see is that Ukraine is facing a disaster on every one of them. And this war, in the end, is a complete catastrophe for Ukraine. On that sad note, let me conclude this episode and wish everybody good speed. Thank you.

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