



**CONVERSATIONS**  
A Global Forum

# Francis Fukuyama

in conversation with  
Ann Bernstein

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To mark 25 years since its establishment, in November 2020 CDE initiated a series of discussions with global experts and prominent individuals in South Africa to discuss important questions on democracy, business, markets and development. The series was relaunched in 2022 as CDE Conversations. This was the third event in the new series.

CDE hosted Professor Fukuyama in the preceding CDE@25 series during 2021. That conversation was titled, [Populism after Trump](#).

This May 2022 Conversation, titled '[War in Europe and its implications](#)', is about Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the global implications of this war.

**Ann Bernstein:** We are fortunate to have Francis Fukuyama with us again. We last talked in March 2021, when it was a rather different world.

It is three months since Russia's unprovoked invasion, and the war continues to tear through Ukraine with enormous implications for that country and the world. You have a special relationship with Ukraine, and many of its present and up-and-coming leaders. Why did you think it was important to get involved there, long before the current conflict?

**Francis Fukuyama:** Beginning in 2014, after the Russian intervention in Crimea and Donbas, it felt like Ukraine had become a front line in the global struggle for democracy. Russia was positioning itself as the leading illiberal power and was using military force to extend its influence over parts of what had once been the Soviet Union. They had intervened not just in Ukraine, but in Georgia, Moldova and several other places on Russia's periphery. So, it felt important to help Ukraine build and strengthen their democratic institutions. For that reason I travelled to Ukraine many times. I have many friends there and have a strong personal stake in the outcome of this conflict. Ukraine has long struggled with systemic corruption and poor governance. Once we, at the Centre on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law at Stanford University, did a number of training programmes in Ukraine, I became convinced that Ukraine would solve these problems. There was a whole generation of younger Ukrainians who identified with Europe and did not want to get sucked into the corrupt authoritarian Russian orbit and way of doing things.

**Ann Bernstein:** Did you see the war coming?

**Francis Fukuyama:** The US intelligence community did predict a full-scale attack with the goal of seizing the capital, but most observers, including myself did not expect an invasion on that scale. I had thought that the Russians would first use economic pressure, by blocking Ukrainian exports out of Black Sea ports, for example. So, I was surprised when they went after Ukraine's capital Kyiv.

**Ann Bernstein:** Putin has argued that liberalism is obsolete and that it is not for the Russian people. But he has an emerging democratic country, Ukraine, on his border, which is culturally very similar to Russia, moving in a more liberal direction. What is the war really about, in your view?

**Francis Fukuyama:** Putin has said the war is about national security, and several people have put forward that argument. They say NATO has been expanding since 1991, after the Soviet Union broke up, and that at its 2008 Bucharest summit NATO made a commitment to consider the membership of both Georgia and Ukraine. Putin has presented this as an intolerable security threat to Russia, which necessitated the actions he took.

This security argument is just an excuse. In the succeeding 14 years since that summit, NATO has made no effort to get these countries in. Everybody knew that Ukraine was a divided country and there was no consensus for joining NATO. Nobody wanted to confront Russia directly and nothing happened after Russia annexed Crimea and intervened in eastern Ukraine in 2014. Even if Putin did feel that NATO expansion was a threat, does it make sense to launch a major invasion of a country of over 40 million people as an appropriate remedy for that? I don't think so!

The real motive for the war was rather different. Ukraine does present a threat to Russia, but it is not a security threat. Ukraine was developing a new political model in the region, and that was the real threat. It had held a number of incredibly free and fair elections and the election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy was a great example of what can come from that. Zelenskyy was a political outsider, a former comedian, who promised to become what his TV show had been called, Servant of the People. During the election, about two-thirds of all the sitting parliamentarians lost their offices, because Ukrainians were tired of and disgusted with the corrupt elites running the country. This did not necessarily solve all problems, but it showed that voters were making genuine democratic choices.

Ukraine is a free country. People were able to say what they thought about government, corruption and the oligarchs in power. Compare that to Russia. If you say anything critical about the war going on right now you are committing a criminal offence. Journalists and ordinary people have been sent to jail. That is the threat that Putin sees in Ukraine's system. And, in addition, he had a desire to add the 40 million people living in Ukraine to Russia's 140 million.

Putin's motives were plainly visible before the war. For example, he wrote a long article last summer, in which he said that the Russian and Ukrainian people are one. He gave another long speech on the eve of the war, in February, in which he laid out his case that Ukraine was an artificial creation – he did not see it as a real country and believed that it should be part of Russia. He saw himself following the examples of Catherine the Great, who annexed Crimea, and Peter the Great, who consolidated the Russian empire.

This vision is opposed completely by the people in Ukraine who have developed a clear national identity. It is true that culturally Ukrainians and Russians are very similar. Most Ukrainians speak Russian, the food is similar, the orthodox Christianity in both countries is similar. But a distinct national identity exists nevertheless, partly built around the Ukrainian language and separate Ukrainian traditions, many of them linked to the desire to live in a free country. Their version of culture includes the political institutions that make Ukraine a liberal democracy.

**Ann Bernstein:** In March this year, you surprised many people by saying that Russia is heading for outright defeat in Ukraine. And in late April you doubled down on this view, saying that Ukraine will succeed in driving the Russians out of the territories they now hold. Why were you so convinced about Russian defeat then and, what is your view now, at the end of May 2022?

**Francis Fukuyama:** My optimism at the time was based on my reading of how the war was proceeding. The difference between the morale of the Ukrainians and the Russians was incredible. Since the beginning of the war, hundreds of thousands of Russians have left Russia. They do not want to serve in the military, and they do not want to be associated with Putin's regime. This is especially true of younger Russians. In stark contrast, a quarter million Ukrainians living in other parts of Europe came home to fight for their country.

Russian military equipment has not been well maintained because the maintenance money had been skimmed off in corruption. The soldiers that were captured early in the war said that they were not told they were going

to invade Ukraine. They thought they were just going on an exercise. The military leadership in Russia and the overall strategic plan was premised on the unrealistic assumption that Ukraine wanted to be liberated and would join Russia voluntarily. Russians were genuinely surprised when no Ukrainians were willing to come over to their side.

The Russians planned this invasion very badly, which reflects the shortcomings of their authoritarian form of government. Everything is directed from Moscow and lower-level commanders generally show no initiative. Around 10 Russian senior naval officers have been killed, partly because the lower ranks are so appalling that very senior officers have to be sent to the front to direct operations.

The Ukrainian army has been receiving training from NATO and operates in a much more decentralised manner. All of this made me think that Russia, despite the superiority of numbers, was not likely to do that well, a feeling that was reinforced when the Ukrainians drove Russian troops out of the area around Kyiv, and, more recently, the area near Kharkiv, Ukraine's second city.

Things have changed since then, though. The war has slowed down and the Russians have concentrated their forces on a narrow front in the Donbas, and ensconced themselves in southern Ukraine, where they hope to cut Ukraine off from accessing the Black Sea. It is clear that Russia has been weakened. Something like a third of the massive invasion force that Russia mobilised for the war has now been destroyed. They have lost 3,000 armoured vehicles, and suffered 50-60,000 casualties, dead and wounded. We do not know what kinds of losses the Ukrainians have suffered. Zelenskyy has said that they were losing 50 to 100 soldiers every day, which would be a very high number. It is possible that the conflict will degenerate into World War I-style trench warfare, where neither side can make significant gains. I may be wrong about Ukraine succeeding in driving the Russians out, but it is too early to tell.

**Ann Bernstein:** How seriously do you take Putin's threat to use chemical, biological or even nuclear weapons? There are people saying the more things fail, the more likely he is going to do something completely unexpected and terrible.

**Francis Fukuyama:** Putin himself has not directly made that threat; he has just talked about his nuclear arsenal to remind people that Russia is also a great power. The people who have made this threat are really just talking heads on Russian state TV, who have been totally irresponsible. There is an international norm to refrain from threatening populations with nuclear weapons, but these Russians are talking about attacking Paris, London and targets in the United States. I do not think anybody will do anything like that, but it is extremely irresponsible to normalise the use of nuclear weapons against large population centres in any way. The likelihood that Russia will use weapons of mass destruction is still low. They have not made any moves to operationalise the threat, like putting their nuclear forces on a higher state of alert or pulling their missiles out of storage facilities. They would need to do these things if they were really preparing to use nuclear weapons.

The other issue is that any resort to nuclear weapons would possibly lead NATO to join the war directly. That would be very bad for the Russians, even if the West did not respond with a nuclear strike of their own. That is why I think the threat is probably not as great as some people have suggested.

**Ann Bernstein:** What would happen if Russia was defeated in this war – whatever we may mean by 'defeated'? Could Putin survive? Does he have to be defeated totally or perhaps just pushed back to the East, as you suggested? What would happen more broadly in Russia? What does this war tell us about the state of Russia?

**Francis Fukuyama:** Nobody really knows, but I do think that Putin will never be unseated by a 'colour revolution' or spontaneous demonstrations against him. From what we can tell from the limited polling that goes on inside Russia the invasion has generated, not surprisingly, a lot of nationalistic support from the Russian people. If there was a threat, it would come from people in the military, the domestic intelligence services or other so-called power ministries, who would decide that Putin had become a liability and, because of the sanctions, gotten the country into a lot of trouble. Putin will only be unseated at this point by a secret conspiracy, like the one that unseated Nikita Khrushchev in 1964, and you would not hear about it until after it happened.

In many ways, Russia is still living in the 19th century. It is still a colonial power. Unfortunately, there is something about the way the Russian national identity has developed that makes many Russians feel that they cannot be authentically Russian if they do not dominate weaker countries on their periphery. That has been the basis for a lot of Russian foreign policy since 1991. Putin himself said that the collapse of the former Soviet Union was the greatest tragedy of the 20th century, and that echoes the feeling of a lot of Russians. They believe that they deserve to be a big empire with colonial possessions, because that is what it means to be Russian.

**Ann Bernstein:** Many people, especially in Russia and China, argued before this war that the West was in decline, that democracies will not fight for their values anymore, that the West will not defend the liberal world order or the international system. But in many ways, the reaction to Russia's invasion and the resulting devastation has seemed to demonstrate the strengthening of the West, of NATO and of democratic values in critical Western countries. How do you see this, how important has this been and will it last?

**Francis Fukuyama:** The NATO unity in response to this invasion has been remarkable. One reason was the extent of the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. This is not a conflict in which there are complex, nuanced rights and wrongs on both sides. It was such naked aggression that it shocked many people, especially in NATO countries sufficiently threatened by Russian power.

The most remarkable change was in Germany, where Olaf Scholz, the new Chancellor, announced a doubling of the German defence budget and the ending of a 40-year period during which Germans felt a special obligation to open doors for Russia and include them in the larger European security framework. Former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder was one of the chief lobbyists for Nord Stream 2, which would have doubled the Russian natural gas coming into Germany, and therefore doubled the dependence of Germany on Russia. All NATO countries, including Germany, have stepped up to the plate in terms of delivering weapons and supplies to Ukraine.

Will that unity last? The immediate NATO unity is not likely to persist as the war drags on, and some of the old divisions will reappear. We are already seeing cracks. President Macron has started talking about the need for a ceasefire. In the US, there was a recent editorial in the New York Times saying Ukraine may have to make some concessions to get to a peace agreement. The Italians seem to buy into this.

If the war does bog down into a very bloody and costly stalemate, then NATO unity will start to fracture and more people will propose the introduction of concessions to get a ceasefire agreement. These calls will be muted if the Ukrainians regain the momentum and start pushing the Russians out of places that they occupied. Then there will be a continuing consensus on the need to arm Ukraine to the point where they can recover those territories.

**Ann Bernstein:** The German change of policy has been quite remarkable. Although I have read in several places that while they are talking big about the quantity of arms they will send to Ukraine, the actual delivery is much less, and they are contributing a lot less than much smaller countries closer to the conflict. Do you have any feel of that?

**Francis Fukuyama:** That is all true. I think there is still a lot of resistance, especially from the left wing of the Social Democratic Party, where many still cling to the older idea that they have to accommodate Russia and bring them into the European family of nations.

They have been slower to make weapon deliveries than other countries, but they have nonetheless been doing it. Better late than never, and eventually they will step up to the plate. The trouble is we do not know whether that is going to be soon enough to affect the outcome. The Ukrainians need longer-range artillery and other defence systems are not being delivered. It is a struggle.

**Ann Bernstein:** What do you think of how the US and President Biden have responded?

**Francis Fukuyama:** Biden has done a pretty good job. The US has given Ukraine decisive support, even though they have not become directly involved and clearly want to avoid direct war with Russia.

Americans also made a big effort to increase natural gas exports from the Middle East and the US to replace the anticipated cut-off of natural gas from Russia. Europeans are very dependent on Russian gas and there is still a scramble going on to reduce that dependence.

One area that has received insufficient attention is the exporting of agricultural commodities. Russia and Ukraine were the biggest and second-biggest wheat exporters prior to the war, and the Russians have deliberately blockaded Ukraine's ability to ship commodities out. People in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and South Asia are dependent on these grain exports, and bread prices throughout the Middle East, for example, have skyrocketed when they were already high due to Covid-19. I would think that a strong case could be made for a UN effort to reopen blocked shipping channels, as long as it involves commercial vessels on international waters.

**Ann Bernstein:** You have said that the wider implications of the invasion have already damaged the world's autocrats and right-wing populists. Can you talk a bit about why you said that and how you think this is playing out?

**Francis Fukuyama:** Putin is at the centre of an international network of populist nationalists, including Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour in France, Donald Trump in the US and others. There is a deep connection between Putin and other populists. For example, at the beginning of the war Donald Trump called Putin brilliant. He said: "Putin ordered that two territories in Ukraine should become independent of Ukraine, and nobody could stop him. I wish I could do something like that on our southern border." This aspiration to untrammelled strongman authority is common to populists around the world. They are democratically elected, but they do not want to be limited by courts, legislatures, the press and critics. Putin has all these qualities, which is why many populists have gravitated towards him.

So, if it emerges that Putin's use of strong-arm tactics has landed his nation in deep trouble, which is in some ways already the case, the model of dictatorship that he represents is going to look a lot less attractive.

People should also pay attention to what's happening on the other side of the world. In China the government is pursuing what I think is an insane zero Covid policy. They have had the 25 million residents of Shanghai on lockdown for several weeks, which is economically hugely damaging, and cruel. They are separating children from their parents; people cannot get medical attention. It stems from a similar source to the decision making about the war in Russia. There is a single leader at the top operating without checks and balances. I have no insight into Xi Jinping's thought processes, but he undoubtedly committed himself to the zero Covid strategy, and

now does not want to admit, the way Australia and New Zealand have admitted, that his strategy is not working, and we should rather try something else.

Authoritarians have pointed to numerous democratic failures in recent years, and in some cases they have been right. But it is clearer than ever that there are authoritarian failures for which people have to pay a very high price. As a result, the perceptions about which kind of political system is more reliable in the long run, may shift.

**Ann Bernstein:** One can only hope. I read in *The Economist*, that while the focus has been on Shanghai and the extreme lockdown in that city, there were more than 350 million people being locked down in similar fashion in other cities. Can we talk a bit more about China? What lessons do you think China might be learning from the Russian invasion so far?

**Francis Fukuyama:** One observation is that the Chinese are smarter and more cautious than the Russians. Putin is a big risk taker. The Chinese are not huge risk takers. They have a long-term view that they can afford to wait. The Chinese are probably quite dismayed about what is going on in Ukraine. Their Russian allies have really made a mess of things and it is not good to be associated with that kind of failure. They also have to worry about the possibility of secondary sanctions hitting them if they seem to be too supportive of Russia in terms of buying their exports and other kinds of economic cooperation. However, they have not broken openly with Russia, and they continue to support the Russian position. The two authoritarian countries are still allies.

**Ann Bernstein:** What about Taiwan? There are surely a lot of lessons for them in terms of what Ukraine has managed to do, which has been quite remarkable.

**Francis Fukuyama:** It is true that China wants to reincorporate Taiwan and they have said that they will do it by military means if necessary. Many people suspect that Xi Jinping wants to accomplish this before he steps down, but we do not know this for sure.

A few of my friends in Taiwan have said that the Ukrainian war served as a wake-up call to get much more serious about defence. Until now, nobody in Taiwan really took the threat of China invading them seriously. The Russian invasion has been important in shattering some of that complacency because it shows that great powers can do things like this. But whether this leads to a real shift in Taiwan's own behaviour and in its defence policy, we are yet to see.

**Ann Bernstein:** I often hear in South Africa the following complaint: "Why does the world care more about this war than other wars in other parts of the world, especially Africa?" Is this racism or is it that the risks and global implications of this war are much greater? How would you respond to this?

**Francis Fukuyama:** I would have a two-part response to it. The first is that the moral stakes in the Ukraine invasion are much clearer than in other kinds of conflicts. A peaceful democracy that posed no threat to its neighbour has been subjected to massive military aggression across a universally recognised international frontier. Many conflicts in Africa have not been of that sort. Nigeria did not decide one day to take over Benin, or Togo or any of its other neighbours. Many conflicts in Africa have been civil wars – like the conflict in the DRC, which was an extremely complex internal war where the rights and wrongs were much less clear than they are in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

That is not to say that there have been no conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa with the same degree of moral clarity. The Rwandan genocide back in the early 1990s is one example, and it was a huge moral failure on the part of the

West not to have intervened. Observers of the situation should have known what was happening and been ready to send a peacekeeping force, with the backing of the Western world and the UN Security Council.

So, I do think that the West needs to pay more attention to conflicts in other parts of the world, but the grossness of the Russian action is quite extraordinary, and it does not have many counterparts elsewhere in the world.

**Ann Bernstein:** That takes us to the UN. You have said that the Russian invasion shows the uselessness of the Security Council. Then, in the General Assembly, when they voted on Russia's invasion, were you surprised at the large number of countries, including democracies in the developing world, who abstained?

**Francis Fukuyama:** I am not surprised that the Security Council failed to act. The permanent members of the Security Council are great powers with many differences, and if you give all of them a veto, the council will never intervene in any conflict that involves them. That has been the long-standing problem with the Security Council, and I do not think it is fixable.

It was disappointing but not surprising that some of the democracies in the UN that were not part of the Security Council did not take a stronger stand. South Africa and India are two of those countries. The defence of global democracy has never been as important in the national identities of many democracies around the world as it is in the US or in parts of Europe. There are also economic interests overriding interest in defending a principle.

However, it is worth highlighting a terrific statement made in the UN at the start of the war by the Kenyan representative. He said we in Africa have co-ethnics that live across international boundaries, and if we decided that to correct that we are going to launch invasions on our neighbours, then there would never be any peace in Africa. That points to another reason why countries around the world have an interest in opposing this Russian action. If you allow countries to violate other people's sovereignty in this way you will never have a peaceful world. I know people will bring up the US invasion of Iraq, and they will be right. I think that was a huge mistake in American foreign policy. It should not have happened. Unfortunately, it set a precedent for a great power invading a smaller country, and we are going to regret that for some time to come.

**Ann Bernstein:** You have a new book out, *Liberalism and its Discontents*. It is a short book consisting of brilliant, elegant statements on the central ideas of liberalism. I would strongly recommend it to everybody. In closing, would you like to say something about the new book?

**Francis Fukuyama:** The book is a defence of classical liberalism, by which I mean a system devoted to protecting individual rights, placing limits on government power and ensuring the rule of law. It is not necessarily connected to a particular economic model. In the US the word liberalism is associated with centre-left politics, and in Europe it is associated with centre-right politics. In reality, it applies to a broad range of countries that have strong judicial systems and constitutions that put checks on executive authority. It is closely related to other important phenomena like the belief that we can manipulate nature by understanding the objective world outside of our subjective consciousnesses, and it has been under attack, from both the right and the left in recent years. The book sets out to remind people why it is better to live in a liberal society than in a closed, authoritarian, illiberal one.

**Ann Bernstein:** That is, in many ways, what the Ukrainians are fighting for now.

**Francis Fukuyama:** That is right!

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