

‘The devil is in the world again,’ events in Europe reveal

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“The devil is in the world again” Constanze Stelzenmüller quoted a [German Catholic cardinal](#) friend of hers as stating at the Munich Security Conference in 2022, days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

While standing in line behind him for coffee, Stelzenmüller said, “The landscape appears to be growing grimmer and grimmer, isn’t it, Your Eminence?”

Stelzenmüller, director of the Center on the United States and Europe and the Fritz Stern Chair on Germany and Trans-Atlantic relations at Brookings Institution, said his observation continues to seem, in her mind, “an apt description” of what is happening in Europe.

[Stelzenmüller](#)—along with [Fiona Hill](#), senior fellow of foreign policy at Brookings’ Center on the United States and Europe, and [David J. Kramer](#), executive director of the George W. Bush Institute—participated in a panel discussion entitled “American Foreign Policy toward Ukraine, Russia and NATO beyond 2024,” Sept. 12, at Dallas Baptist University.

DBU’s Institute for Global Engagement, in cooperation with the World Affairs Council of Dallas/Fort Worth, hosted the discussion, moderated by Rudolph Bush of the *Dallas Morning News*.

Bush framed the conversation by briefly recalling the events of the war in Ukraine—beginning with Russia’s invasion of the Crimean Peninsula in Southeast Ukraine in early 2014 and continuing to the present—describing the current war in the region as having settled into “a conflict of attrition.”

In light of complex situations at home and abroad and uncertainty about “what the international consequences might be” of the ongoing conflict, Bush asked Hill: “Why must the West be engaged in the war in Ukraine?”

A clear right and wrong

Hill said what is happening in Ukraine daily has “taken us back decades—to the kind of decades that we thought we would never be in again.” Hill pointed out this is the largest war in Europe since World War II, despite NATO having been “set up precisely to prevent or deter” such conflicts on the European continent

Referencing [Putin’s interview with Tucker Carlson](#), Hill explained Putin would like to take Europe back even further, to the 9th or 10th century, because he believes Russia has a historical claim to Ukraine.

Hill appealed to America’s own history as a reason to be engaged in Ukraine. During the War of 1812, the United States might have found itself “back under the tyranny, at that point, of the British king” within decades of having attained its independence, if not for France coming to its assistance.

“Putin is basically trying to reverse Ukraine independence,” Hill said. So, Ukraine is in the same place as the United States in 1812, fighting to reclaim independence it has held for 30 years, she explained.

“And if Putin gets away with that, the consequences, not just for Europe but for other countries, are really quite profound.”

Stelzenmüller conceded the question of why countries aligned with democracy ought to care about Ukraine is a reasonable one—particularly for people in the Global South, whose conflicts have received less attention. But, she claimed, “it’s very rare in international affairs that the question of right and wrong is as clear as it is in this case.”

“Putin attacked a country that had done absolutely nothing to provoke him.” Russia has been slaughtering Ukrainian soldiers. People are being tortured and killed and their children sent off for forced adoptions in Russia. That’s not just immoral, “it’s very clearly illegal” under international law, she stated.

Furthermore, this is the first war in modern history where legal, forensic-quality evidence of war crimes is being collected “in real time,” Stelzenmüller explained.

While the West could be criticized as having double-standards, failure to support the right to self-defense of Ukraine, when there is such a clear case of right and wrong as this, undermines “any pretense at upholding international law.”

“This is also about the security of Europe,” and it represents “an American first order of strategic interest,” because Putin has made it clear that beyond Ukraine, he wants to make Europe “a sphere of influence in Russia,” she said.

Putin wants American forces to withdraw from Europe—which, she contended, is not in America’s best interests.

Grave stakes

Kramer said nothing short of the future of NATO and America’s standing in the eyes of the world to prevent future aggressions is at stake in Ukraine.

Kramer explained Putin has no intention of stopping with Ukraine, should he be allowed to succeed there. From Ukraine, he’d possibly advance to Moldova, Georgia and the Baltic States, which are NATO members.

If the United States and its allies failed to come to the defense of the Baltic States, “that would be the end of NATO, because NATO members live

under Article 5, which considers an attack on one as an attack on all,” he said.

The world is watching how the United States responds. “If we want to help prevent Beijing from attacking Taipei, the way to do it is to help Ukraine,” Kramer said. Doing so will make communist leaders “think twice.”

“It’ll send a signal to the Iranians, to all the bad actors out there,” Kramer explained. There is an opportunity to help prevent future wars by helping Ukraine, he insisted.

Hill talked about the unique character of Putin, who has been in power in Russia for 25 years—contrasting him to George Washington, who knew when it was time to go and had no interest in becoming the king of America.

Putin, by contrast, tells his own “pseudo-history” where he is at the center, sitting on his throne like the modern Russian czar he aspires to be, Hill said. He has continued plotting, and his No. 1 goal is his own preservation.

“We’re living out somebody else’s fever dream,” Hill explained, in attempt to make some sense of the madness of Putin’s actions and his endgame.

Stelzenmüller discussed the European response to the invasion of Ukraine, noting it did not come as a complete surprise, and Europe “had been steeling itself” in anticipation.

She described a “hybrid war” Russia is waging in Europe outside of Ukraine through propaganda and intense spreading of disinformation at a level not seen since the Cold War.

Germany has experienced Russian attacks on the rail system and an assassination attempt made on the CEO of a major German defense contractor. Attacks have been carried out against internet services. [Russian](#)

[ships are in the North Sea](#) threatening pipelines. Russian mercenaries are sowing chaos in Syria and Africa, Stelzenmüller explained.

She said initially German services were quiet about who was behind the attacks, but not anymore. Now they openly name Russia to rally the people.

The panelists pointed to a significant increase in financial participation among NATO—two-thirds of members will be at or exceeding the required 2 percent by the end of the year—and Finland joining NATO after the invasion as evidence Europe is taking their responsibility and the situation seriously.

They emphasized Putin’s ability to find and exploit weaknesses and the many ways he is using his propaganda machine to sow chaos. Behind his back, in Russia, he is called “the moth,” because it is the Russian harbinger of death and destruction, Hill stated.

Hill pointed to the vulnerability of Mexico, where Russian travelers are not required to have visas. And, she said, the Spanish language outlet in Latin America is the most highly resourced arm of Russia’s propaganda network.

The panelists brought up the toll Putin’s military exploits have taken on his people and his resources. He does not have unlimited troops or military apparatus. And, the Ukrainians have far exceeded any expectation of how long they could hold up under Russian aggression.

Yet, Kramer insisted, and the European-background panelists agreed, it is in the best interest of the United States, and indeed the whole world, to stick with the stalwart people of Ukraine until Russia is defeated.

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