

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Joining us today is Professor Julie George, who is an associate professor of political science at Queens College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She is also a visiting associate professor at the Harriman Institute at Columbia University. Her areas of specialization are the politics of identity, state-building, democratization, and governance in formally communist countries in Eurasia, especially in the Caucasus.

Tanya Domi:

She is the author of the book "The Politics of Ethnic Separation in Russia and Georgia." She has published articles and chapters in various outlets, including Electoral Studies, Current History, Europe-Asia Studies, and Post-Soviet Affairs, among others. She is also an associate editor at Nationalities Papers and Communist and Post-Communist Studies.

Tanya Domi:

The Russian war against Ukraine actually began in February 2014, and was relaunched into another hot war on February 24th this year. From a legal standpoint, this war appears to be not only an illegal one, but has been a war crime from day one, reflected in the indiscriminate shelling of apartment buildings, hospitals, schools, and theaters, noting not a single military target among these attacks. Estimates as many as 20,000 people are dead in the city of Mariupol, that now includes the identification of three mass graves. This war is also characterized by systematic and widespread rapes of women and girls by Russian soldiers, according to the Ukraine government.

Tanya Domi:

The International Criminal Court, which has received more than 38 referrals on the Ukraine war to the court by signatories of the Rome Treaty, has opened an investigation, announced by its prosecutor during the first days of the war, and has since made a trip to Ukraine to consult with the Ukraine prosecutor general. How there will be accountability for these war crimes remains to be seen. The indiscriminate attacks on Ukrainian civilians is not only a challenge for accountability for these war crimes under the rubric of international justice, but also with respect to the political will of the international community. We will discuss this and much, much more today.

Tanya Domi:

Welcome to The Thought Project, Professor Julie George.

Julie George:

Thank you for having me.

Tanya Domi:

We are now going into the third month of this war, the Russian-Ukraine war, over the weekend. Where does this go? Will Putin extend this war into Moldova? There are some reports that indicate there have been explosions there in the breakaway region of Transnistria, which seems to be an easy target for Putin tactically and politically, with pro-EU politicians leading Moldova, two women leading the government, the president and the prime minister both women. You know that he'll want to take them down. What are your thoughts?

Julie George:

It's very hard to predict how the war will unfold, in part because we predict the future based on previous events, and a lot about this war is unprecedented and very different, and reflects a different tactic taken by the Russians and by the Russian leadership. The Transnistria issue, just front and center, Transnistria is a breakaway region in Moldova, and it is breakaway since 1993. There was a very, very brief war there. The Russians stationed peacekeepers there in the hundreds, so we're not talking about a very large force.

Julie George:

Nonetheless, it's been a place that has been persistently and stubbornly independent from Moldova. Even though it is technically within the territory of Moldova, it has its own currency. You can't use your ATM card there. It's a very interesting place. I actually have been there a couple of times. Transnistria is also interesting with regard to Moldova because it is about a third ethnically Russian, but about a third of the population is ethnically Moldovan, and about 20%, 25% is ethnically Ukrainian. It's not the kind of breakaway region that you see in some of the other places in the former Soviet Union in that it doesn't have a dominant-

Tanya Domi:

Right, a monolithic. Right.

Julie George:

Ethnic majority. Right.

Julie George:

The Moldova-Transnistria tactic, to my mind, looks to be basically along three lines. The first is an effort by the Russian military to dominate and take southern Ukraine, and dominate that Black Sea coastline, which is not something they've been able to really effectively do thus far in the war. We can see early stages of it, especially in the east, but it's harder to get that far west inside the Black Sea.

Julie George:

Certainly, one of the generals had made some comments about going on and going forth to take in Transnistria or to have that land route to Transnistria. On its face, though, there's no real good reason why the Russians would want actually to annex Transnistria. It's a very tiny sliver of space. It's mostly, I think, interesting as a way to block the train route from Ukraine into Europe. I think that step two may be something to disrupt those supply lines.

Tanya Domi:

That's the tactic.

Julie George:

Yeah, perhaps that's the largest interest.

Julie George:

Then the third there is, I think, to signal an intention or desire to escalate towards the West. I think this is... If it is a tactic, which the Russians have said they haven't done anything; they're blaming the Ukrainians on it. The Transnistrians are blaming the Ukrainians on it. The Moldovans are blaming the Transnistrians on it. The Ukrainians are blaming the Russians on it. So nobody is taking any sort of responsibility here, and all of the lines of blaming are going in different directions, especially with the Moldovans blaming the Transnistrians and not blaming the Russians, which is a surprising bit of argumentation.

Julie George:

I'm not sure where the intelligence is on that, if anywhere. But it seems to me that this is a statement vis-a-vis the West, with the Russians saying, "We are not going to accept failures in this war, and when faced with pushback, we will escalate and go on the offensive." The easiest way, the quickest way, to signal that is to look towards Transnistria outside of Ukraine, at least. It seems to me, I think, more of a signaling device, as opposed to a desire to expand further into that region.

Julie George:

But again, as with many analysts of this war and commentators on this war, we are proven wrong every week. Just sitting down at this desk, that's my view.

Tanya Domi:

Just this afternoon, President Biden asked Congress to appropriate \$33 billion more in aid to Ukraine amid growing concerns that Russia might widen the reach of this war. NATO, with comments by U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, has made repeated comments that the NATO Alliance seeks to degrade the Russian military to the extent that it could never launch another invasion again. They've been repeatedly saying from the podium, "Russia is failing. They have not strategically taken control of Ukraine. They won't be able to do that," and they want to make sure that they can't ever do this again. What do you think about that strategy? There's a

communication strategy there, and then there's the weapon transfer effect, where we haven't seen this, really, probably since Lend-Lease during World War II.

Julie George:

Yeah, I think that's right. I was thinking Lend-Lease just as you were saying all these things. Absolutely, it signals a very strong support for the people of Ukraine and for the sovereignty of Ukraine, and signals a very intent and explicit NATO support. Here's this organization that wasn't allowing, yet, Ukraine to enter, and yet-

Tanya Domi:

Or Bosnia and Herzegovina, and some other countries.

Julie George:

One of some aspirational countries.

Julie George:

Here, it's interesting to see the U.S. double down on this. I think most of the signaling, though, is to the Western partners, to signal a path forward for unity, to signal leadership. I think that, especially for Europe, especially for...Well, less so for Poland or Romania, who are very sensitive to threats of Russian imperialism. But for Germany, for example, that risks losing its gas, a country like Bulgaria, these are countries that are vulnerable to this Russian energy dependence, and as such, will face a different sort of challenge in addressing the cost of the war, unlike the Americans. The Americans, we face military costs for the war, and perhaps we have some concerns for nuclear strikes or those sorts of things, but it's really Europe that's in harm's way here, central Europe, Eastern Europe, and then Western Europe.

Julie George:

Given that, I think this is a signal that NATO should unify, that it should stay together, that the Americans are willing to put a great deal of money into the framework for that to bolster the support. And it's a signal to Putin that the expectation for a quick war, the expectation for an easy victory, the expectation for American acquiescence and European acquiescence to this just brazen occupation of a sovereign state is something that the U.S. will resist and is willing to put some money into it. I'm not sure how effective that message will be vis-a-vis the costs that central Europe is going to bear, especially for Germany, which is a pivot in NATO. But I think it's as symbolic as it is material.

Tanya Domi:

Interesting/ Poland also lost access to gas yesterday. I believe it was yesterday. They did not get gas because they yielded to the sanctions and refused to pay in rubles to the Russians, so the Russians turned it off. I think you're right about the question, how much is central and Eastern Europe going to bear here, and how much can they bear?

Tanya Domi:

I wanted to talk about this a little bit later, but it's pretty remarkable that Biden has actually rallied Europe in a way that, if you asked me this two months ago, I would've said, "No way." I have seen basically... I have a different area of interest than you do, but we've seen a United States that's been really apathetic and withdrawn. It's maybe trying to maintain some relationships, for example, in the Western Balkans, where I'm at, but you just don't see a lot of people jumping up and down for America and their friendship, except maybe the Kosovars and the Albanians in the Western Balkans. If somebody would've told me that Biden would step up and rally the vast majority of Europe, I would've said, "Okay, I want to see that. I can't believe it." But I give him credit.

Julie George:

Yeah. I do too. I wonder would it have been had Biden not been secretary of state under Obama and seen the reset efforts with Russia fail so miserably, without that context. Of course, he's been a senator for a long time before he entered the executive branch.

Julie George:

I guess I'm not surprised. I was impressed with... What struck me first was, right before the war began, was the Pentagon releasing the information indicating that the Russians were ready to attack, imminently going to attack. It struck me that this was a different way of addressing the intelligence with strategic transparency, because we don't know everything that the Pentagon knows. But we do know the things that they want us to know, and they're releasing information in a variety of different ways.

Julie George:

I think that reflects a difference in Biden's approach to Russia. Instead of keeping some of these things silent or moving in informal circles or backchannels, these things are hitting the New York Times front page in a way that showcases the brazenness and also emphasizes it. It's hard to have a disinformation campaign when the movements are predicted weeks in advance, and then the movements occur exactly as they were predicted. It creates a credibility in the messaging on the American side, and it provides some argumentation on the part of Ukrainians that these aren't false flag events, that these are real things, because we can see these events happening in real time as they're predicted through intelligence and then acted upon. What that does is it undermines one of Putin's strongest strategies, which is the disinformation campaign and propaganda war. He can only maintain that now within his own country or with partisans who are buying into the media that are pretty pro-Kremlin-

Tanya Domi:

Or his allies.

Julie George:

Exactly.

Tanya Domi:

Right. I agree with you. I think that they have been using intelligence from the podium in a way we've never seen an American government do it. I think it is because of the context of Russia. As you said, disinformation is one of their major methods of hybrid warfare, and the United States has basically nullified that effect.

Julie George:

I think, yeah, with the United States, it's also interesting because Biden has an ally in this, in a way, and that is Volodymyr Zelensky, who provides a very, especially for a Western actor, for the countries in Europe, a very appealing ally. I think with Zelensky making the emotional and moral and ethical argument, with American monetary support and diplomatic support and Lend-Lease-level military support, we're not talking an intervention, but we are talking extensive armament, those things combined provide a kind of... They provide a sandwich for Europe to then respond.

Julie George:

It puts naysayers or people who are hesitant on their back heel, because you have one who's physically in harm's way, and his country is, of course, being heavily under fire, and then the other on the other side saying, "This is what we're doing with this steady alliance that's now growing in force and in concentration." The question is whether it's going to be enough to sustain a long war because, of course, all these things, they start with this emotional response and this strength of response, the urgency of it; but as the war becomes a war of attrition, then it's, of course, harder to maintain and support.

Tanya Domi:

For sure. You do have to give Zelenskyy a lot of credit. He made the values argument, and he's making it every day routinely to the Europeans and to the United States. The United States didn't have to make the values argument. They just said, "We affirm those values, and we're going to support you." It's interesting to see him make those arguments to the Europeans and see them respond in such a positive way. For that, they are given this gift of Zelenskyy in this situation that makes it a lot easier for democracies to say, "Yes, we're going to step up and stand with you."

Julie George:

Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

Nonetheless, this war, from day one, in my view, given that I teach, also, human rights law, the laws and customs of war, this has been a war crime from almost day one. We're looking at massive, massive destruction of mostly civilian locations, hospitals, schools, apartment buildings, theaters. It's just a relentless shelling and

destruction and mass killing of civilians on a level that we haven't seen in Europe in a long time. This did happen in the Balkans in the '90s, but this is different because Putin has been at a level of power and visibility, and now it's playing out all across Europe and across the world, despite the fact that he's been doing this since Chechnya and did it in Syria. Now you have more calls for indictments of him than I've ever heard of a head of state in a very, very long time.

Tanya Domi:

We're talking about massive upheaval, massive destruction. More than four million refugees from Ukraine have crossed into seven countries, and these are a massive flow of human beings. The update from UNHCR, since the 25th, is that there's more than 5,372,654 refugees in total. It's just mammoth.

Tanya Domi:

The consequences of that for the country, I'm sure the economy is in slow destruction, if not already there. It's in really dire straits. People are not able to live there because it's dangerous; and even if they could, maybe their houses now have been destroyed. It's a massive emergency in terms of a humanitarian crisis. The unfortunate thing is all systems and all organizations are being taxed under these conditions, too, that would provide support. What are your thoughts about the international reaction and response to the situation?

Julie George:

I'm in no position to judge, really, the international response and the ability to get humanitarian goods and services on the ground. I know there have been moments of criticism, for example, for people of color, for example, seeking to flee, not being able to receive the resources that they required. Of course, when you're looking at these numbers, the scramble is really... We're only, what, I guess, two months into the war?

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Julie George:

It's really early yet to know where things are going, where things are missing. What's interesting about Ukraine is the experience of being in Ukraine, it strikes me, as someone who's sitting on the outside, of course, and who's not physically there, is that there's a great deal of geographical variation in terms of things that are working economically and things that are-

Tanya Domi:

And where they aren't.

Julie George:

And where they're not.

Tanya Domi:

That's true.

Julie George:

Right. In southern and in eastern Ukraine, predominantly eastern Ukraine, I think, especially where the agricultural areas are more concentrated, that's going to be a slow burn of realization as harvests don't get in-

Tanya Domi:

Come to pass. Right.

Julie George:

Exactly. We're looking there at what a year-and-a-half time horizon of understanding what the economic toll of the war is going to be, and that's presuming that it ends sooner rather than later. There's no clarity that that would be the case. It is a disaster.

Julie George:

Of course, part of it has a lot to do with our attention. You're a Balkans specialist. I'm a Caucasus specialist, Eastern European specialist. So our attention is on Europe. I imagine if we were specialists of South Asia, Central Asia, or the Middle East, our attentions would also be there, and the numbers would be similarly high, and the cost, of course, and the burdens similarly horrific.

Julie George:

It's nothing that we would ever compare with anything, except to just note the horror of the moment. But it is striking just to see the willingness to target civilians at the beginning of the war, is not something that I have seen in a long time. Although, admittedly, I don't have expertise in Syria, and I suspect that there are a lot of similarities there.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely. Absolutely. For sure. Hospitals. As a matter of fact, people in Syria stopped marking hospitals as hospitals because the Russians would shell them, as an example.

Tanya Domi:

This also brings up the issues of past suspensions. Yugoslavia was suspended from the OSCE, and then the secession state of Serbia was suspended. Then also in the UN, you can be suspended from the UN General Assembly. That's where everything begins, and gets referred to the UN Security Council. In that case, South Africa was suspended from the UN for 20 years. There's some discussion right now going on about actually doing away with the veto in the UN Security Council. I'll believe that when I see it, but there is discussion going on.

Tanya Domi:

Right now, given the way Putin is prosecuting this war, and doesn't agree to ceasefires, doesn't agree to make plans with humanitarian exits that the Red Cross generally negotiates, doesn't uphold anything, I think the Russian Federation memberships in these bodies should be up for consideration of suspension. What are your thoughts on that?

Julie George:

I read an interesting thing where the Ukrainian delegation at the United Nations questioned why it was Russia who got the Soviet Union spot on the Security Council, as opposed to Ukraine or to any of the other-

Tanya Domi:

Oh, that is interesting. Yes.

Julie George:

As opposed to any of the other republics. Why it was automatically assigned to the Russian Federation.

Julie George:

I don't know. I guess this is my international relations, political science nerd hat coming on. The organizations are there to provide avenues for negotiation. That Russia is not availing themselves of those avenues is relevant, I think.

Julie George:

I don't know the right answer here. It strikes me that at some point, at some stage, Russia will need to have help being an honest broker. If we make it too punitive now and too hard for them to reenter that arena, then they're less likely to do so. The feeling of moral outrage and righteousness, which I think is warranted here, I wonder if it's not more important to keep them in. At the UN in particular, and also the OSCE, because of the requirements for votes in both places, and the power that Russia has disproportionately in the Security Council with the veto power, it means that they can thwart the UN, and the UN could be less of an actor here, and arguably the OSCE as well.

Julie George:

There are other paths forward in supporting Ukraine. The Americans have used the NATO option as a way to work around the Russian veto for the last 20, 30 years.

Tanya Domi:

That's true. Did it in Kosovo.

Julie George:

Yeah. And Afghanistan, right?

Tanya Domi:

Sure.

Julie George:

That's a well-worn tool, and certainly the tool that Biden is using... or that Biden is hoping to lead, not just using, of course, because it's not an American organization; it's an international one. I think there are other avenues. I think it's important to keep the Russians in the sphere of international politics and in the world's sphere, I think.

Tanya Domi:

And notice them out now.

Julie George:

Exactly. Those states that are declared pariah states will become pariah states if they're not already, and maintain that status. We see that with North Korea.

Julie George:

What we're seeing with Russia here is the flexing of an authoritarian system, and it's a flexing that we expect to come out of China with Taiwan. These are two of the largest, most important countries in the world. To isolate them really is to undermine the entirety of the organizations themselves in a way, because it's easy to deal with people you like. It's quite harder to deal with people who are acting as spoilers in the moment. Both have a long history in the organization. Both have a role there, I think. China, didn't mean to bring into this entire thing.

Tanya Domi:

No, but China is a factor. They are looking at China like, "Will China stay away from Taiwan right now, given what they've seen in terms of the sanctions that have been applied?" That's a warning to Xi. The most important thing to Xi is money and power, staying in power and having access to capital. It seems like that really drives China's impetus in their relationships with countries in terms of their trade policy, how they use money in soft power situations.

Julie George:

Sure. Yeah. We were talking about Biden before and his actions, and his strong action with Ukraine. A lot of this is geared not just towards Russia about Ukraine, but it's towards China-

Tanya Domi:

As well.

Julie George:

... as a deterrent.

Tanya Domi:

Sure, a deterrent factor. Right.

Tanya Domi:

Given that you are a Caucasus specialist, how is this war affecting the Caucasus? We have some parallels here in some ways, the way I care about the Balkans. They're small countries, and everybody goes, "Oh, what's going on over there?" Same thing about the Caucasus. Although, because of their proximity to Russia, they may get more attention at times. How is this war affecting them? I was just in Sarajevo in March, and there was palpable fear. People were very, very concerned.

Julie George:

The Caucasus are the countries just south of Russia, Georgia being the one that is closest to Ukraine, shares a Black Sea coastline, although it doesn't touch Ukraine. Then there's Armenia, which borders Georgia and Turkey, is a landlocked country. Then there's Azerbaijan that kicks out into the Caspian Sea, and there's a great deal of oil wealth.

Julie George:

This is huge for the Caucasus, and it's huge for the Caucasus for a number of reasons. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia on the same sort of notional argumentation as Russia is using to intervene in Ukraine, which is to protect the humanitarian interests of Russian citizens there. In the case of Georgia, they weren't ethnic Russians, but they were people in separatist areas who had sought to declare independence and, in some cases, join the Russian Federation and leave Georgia. These were longstanding conflict areas, kind of like Transnistria.

Julie George:

Then the war in 2008 occurred in Georgia, which was a very short war and was not well-publicized in the same way that we see in Ukraine for this most recent invasion. The Georgians did not receive the kind of military support, of course, that Ukraine is getting. Although, Ukraine has been at war with Russia since 2014, and really this most recent, the February events, have really changed the canvas for how the Americans are intervening. It's not the case that Georgia is alone and half-hearted Western intervention when it comes to a Russian invasion. So there's that history for Georgia.

Julie George:

In Armenia and Azerbaijan, they have a longstanding territorial dispute over the territory Nagorno-Karabakh, which was historically part of Azerbaijan and is in Azerbaijan's sovereign territory as recognized by international law. But the enclave is predominantly ethnically Armenian, although one of the reasons why it is ethnically Armenian is because most of the Azerbaijani citizens are Azeri ethnic. Azeri population were pushed out during the war, which was in the early 1990s.

Julie George:

They had a recent outbreak of the war in 2020, and some of the most recent and most heavy violence that have really happened in the area since 1994, because the war was as yet unresolved. Russia was the neutral player that brought peace there and provided a security guarantee for Nagorno-Karabakh. As a way to stop the violence, Azerbaijan was seeking to, in their idea, take it back, restore their sovereignty over the territory. The Armenians were supporting Nagorno-Karabakh as being an independent actor, although not trying to annex it necessarily. It was a brutal, brutal, brutal couple weeks' war that the Russians provided then neutral support for and were able to diplomatically, and with some levers, obtain a ceasefire for the combatants.

Julie George:

In Georgia, in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which were their two separatist regions that were part of the conversation of this 2008 war, then were recognized as independent by Russia, and then Russian troops put in both of those enclaves, which represent about 20% of Georgian territory. Those regions also receive a Russian security guarantee to protect them from any kind of Georgian action to try to take back the territory that is part of their sovereign borderline as established in international law.

Julie George:

So here you have these three areas which are highly insecure, which have Russian troops deployed at a time when Russia needs their troops, and Russia is there to provide a security guarantee for these areas at a time where it is militarily embattled and appears to, while not maybe losing the war in Ukraine, not being able to fulfill its desire, and looks to be a war of attrition in Ukraine.

Julie George:

With lifting of those security guarantees for all three areas, it threatens every single country of the Caucasus in some sort of strategic disarray. We've seen it mostly with the Karabakh conflict, in part because it was the one that was just more active. There have been Russian troop movements away from a Abkhazia, as I understand-

Tanya Domi:

Oh, really?

Julie George:

... that the troops that were there were moved over to Ukraine. One would expect that to be the case, given the number of troops that the Russians have lost. Of course they would want to consolidate their security forces.

Julie George:

There's no sound out of Georgia that... The Georgian government right now is performing a fairly pro-Russian policy, which is against the desires of the popular

opinion and also against the expectation, because they're the West's closest ally in the region. They're operating an interesting mixed foreign policy of lukewarm challenges. They've not joined the sanctions campaign and some of these other things, although they did fill out the EU forms that Ukraine filled out, as well as did Moldova. So Georgia is playing a dual line here. I think the ones that are most affected by this are Azerbaijan and Armenia because they are the ones who are more fully in the Russian-

Tanya Domi:
Sphere.

Julie George:

In that Russian sphere. But they're also adversaries vis-a-vis one another. The ability of Russia to maintain those bilateral relationships of alliance while these two actors maintain the rivalry, and then also offer the security guarantees, it's an area that we're all watching with a lot of interest and a great deal of fear.

Tanya Domi:

I bet. On the first day of the war, the European Union sent 500 additional soldiers to Bosnia to reinforce the EUFOR mandate. There's a lot of advocacy right now for a NATO reinforcement in Bosnia as well. What's interesting is that the Russian ambassador to Bosnia, while I was there, threatened them and said, "You can join NATO if you want to, but we will react and use Ukraine as the example." It was just out-and-out brazen.

Tanya Domi:

What's also probably interesting because of what now happened, it's probably the airspace over Europe is going to be blocked to Russia to even try to deploy aircraft or anything towards the Balkans. That's something that a lot of people are talking about down there.

Julie George:

I think the Russian strategy here is uncertainty, is building uncertainty, right?

Tanya Domi:
Yes.

Julie George:

It thought that the West would not react. Now that the West is reacting, Russia wants to stop it from helping Ukraine, because the longer the West helps Ukraine, the harder it is for Russia to win, period, or the harder it is for Russia to win as costlessly as they need to win, given their economic situation and the long views of the sanctions.

Julie George:

I think the current strategy here is to be as threatening as possible, to as many plausible places as possible, in order to get the West to do what it has done in the past, which is be risk averse. I'm not going to... People will use the word appeasement. I don't think it's appeasement. I think it's smart politics to avoid conflicts, frankly. If someone is really intrigued and wanting to start a conflict or wanting to engage in a conflict, you really have to wonder why they would be so interested in doing such a thing.

Julie George:

I think the risk aversion of the West is well taken, but it's certainly something, the willingness of the West to actually say, "Okay, no, actually, we do have a red line, and it appears to be Ukraine, and it appears to be this invasion of Ukraine, not the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, which wasn't a red line. But now this is our red line. We're sticking behind it." I think all of these things, the threats to Finland and Sweden for joining NATO, if they decide to join NATO, the threats against Bosnia, all of these are the Russians trying to figure out whether that red line is actually really there.

Tanya Domi:

And if they can impeach it. I would say, though, I do think there is something happening in terms of international law and accountability that we've never seen before. That is, in the first few days of the war, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court came out and announced, "We're launching an investigation. Also, just want you to know, we've totaled up crimes. We're going back to 2013, and we're including rapes in this list of crimes that occurred during the annexation of Crimea."

Tanya Domi:

The other thing that's happened is that there's a number of EU initiatives called EU Just, where they're collaborating the prosecutor generals of Poland, of Ukraine, and another third party. I forget which country. But they were all coming together, and they're all going to share information among themselves about crimes. They're also working in partnership with the ICC in sharing information there.

Tanya Domi:

The other thing that's possible is, even though it's highly unusual and rarely happens, an indictment of a head of state. I do think we could end up with the scenario where Mr. Putin won't be able to travel beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, that, in fact, the crimes are almost prima facie. It's so openly happening, so brazen, and the documentation of it. This is the first, I would say, social media war, where everybody can document. You also have thousands of journalists there reporting on it. PBS actually has a tracking documentation project underway.

Tanya Domi:

We've never seen these kinds of initiatives at the beginning of a war. That actually is an indicator of progress from past wars, where we've learned from them. There's been a lot of documentation also about the rape of women. Full disclosure, I've been contacted by Ukrainian parliamentarians, and they were looking for help. I referred

them to people in Bosnia that prepared these cases. They're way down the road in terms of international law in this war in ways I've never seen before, and I do think it is progress.

Julie George:

I agree. It's interesting to watch the war because, again, with the social media, I'm watching it on Twitter, I'm watching it on Reddit-

Tanya Domi:

On TikTok.

Julie George:

I'm not on TikTok, but it gets posted on Reddit, so then I watch it there.

Julie George:

Sure, the TikTok-ness of the war is quite striking. I think it is an introduction to the horror of war that we don't typically get through print journalism, and even radio journalism or television journalism, because of just the everydayness of our engagement with it.

Tanya Domi:

The routine.

Julie George:

The routine of the atrocities, and just how these are just natural components of the war. These are natural components of every war, but you didn't have people during the Vietnam War putting it all on TikTok. We didn't get it from all the different perspectives.

Tanya Domi:

That's right.

Julie George:

Or the Rohingya crisis. Syria even. There was less-

Tanya Domi:

There was no journalists there. It was just so dangerous to be in Syria.

Julie George:

There were fewer journalists. And certainly not in Myanmar. But there were also the ability of the victims to showcase their victimhood in this systematic way. Then the president, like Zelenskyy, he can then weaponize in terms of PR. It's just an interesting confluence of events. What we are watching in real time is mass rape and

mass murder, like a serial killer, like we watch on Netflix with all the serial killer specials.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely.

Julie George:

Once you put it into that terminology, then the war-ness of it actually fades away, and it's like, "Wait a second. This shouldn't happen. This is a level of brutality... It's ridiculous to even contemplate it as a reasonable policy." The way to get what you want is to mass rape and mass murder civilian populations. To me, it upends the notions of war as a strategy.

Tanya Domi:

Well, that's what I was just going to say. What's the strategy here? I don't understand this strategy. How does this advance the national interests of Russia? I think it-

Julie George:

Well, it's no way to win hearts and minds, right?

Tanya Domi:

No, but I think it actually jeopardizes in so many levels.

Julie George:

It's certainly hard to make an argument for legitimate governance, should Russia win, and be able to partition Ukraine and take eastern Ukraine. People now in eastern Ukraine are being taken into Russia.

Tanya Domi:

These are deportations. That's another war crime.

Julie George:

It's a kidnapping.

Tanya Domi:

That's right. Deportation is a war crime. They actually passed a law in Russia that children that are deported into Russia can be adopted.

Julie George:

Yes, of course.

Tanya Domi:

By Russians.

Julie George:

Well, to be saved, of course.

Tanya Domi:

Of course.

Julie George:

It's striking the logics and the argumentations that correspond with old-school colonialism and imperialism. These things were codified in the Genocide Convention in 1945.

Tanya Domi:

That's right.

Julie George:

Or 1947? Saying-

Tanya Domi:

I think it's 1948, actually.

Julie George:

1948?

Tanya Domi:

I believe.

Julie George:

We'll fact-check that.

Tanya Domi:

Our listeners will check us on that.

Julie George:

My students will mock me because they're supposed to be reading that this week.

Tanya Domi:

Okay, I think it's 1948.

Julie George:

Fair enough.

Tanya Domi:

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Well, I'm not going to ask you to make a prediction, but as you said, this war is so unprecedented on so many levels in so many different ways, I will make this prediction. The longer it goes on, the more egregious atrocity crimes will continue to happen, and I do believe that this will be Vladimir Putin's legacy.

Julie George:

I agree.

Tanya Domi:

On that note, we are going to end this podcast. Julie George, I would love to have you come back, because I hate to say this, but I think this war is going to continue for some time.

Julie George:

I agree. Well, thank you for having me.

Tanya Domi:

It's been a pleasure. Thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project. Thanks to our guest, Professor Julie George of Queens College and the CUNY Graduate Center.

Tanya Domi:

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.