

# Fletcher, Russia, and a Path Forward: A Conversation with Evelyn Farkas

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**Interviewers:** *Emma Soderholm, Rose Fusco, Carina Ritcheson*

**Interviewee:** *Evelyn Farkas*

On February 8, members of our Editorial team had a Zoom conversation with Evelyn Farkas, the Executive Director of the McCain Institute and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia (2012-2015). Topics of conversation ranged from what drew Farkas to the field of international relations, how she arrived at Fletcher, reflections on her time in the Department of Defense, her analysis on Russian political and military behavior, and applying her skills to the private sector.



**FSR: Alright, so one thing that we just wanted to start with is a question that I think a lot of Fletcher students want to know: What experiences in your life led you to pursue a career in international relations?**

**FARKAS:** I like to say I come by my interest in international affairs honestly. Which is to say that I am the child of Hungarian political refugees. My parents fled communist Hungary in 1956 after the failed revolution... I was born in the States, but born into a home where the only language was Hungarian. I didn't learn English until I went to school, to kindergarten. I basically grew up with two cultures, as very much a kind of interpreter and as somebody who recognized that I had to pay close attention to how other people were behaving in order to figure out my environment because I wasn't necessarily going to have my parents helping me with all the cues. And, of course, having already learned—growing up with one language—when I went to high school, there was no question that I was going to study foreign language. I studied French—didn't like it. I studied German. When I went on to college, I knew I'd do something international, I didn't know what it would be. Then, there I did a semester abroad in Germany and then I went to work at the Council on Foreign Relations. I had thought I'd be a lawyer, but really by then I had decided I wanted to be a diplomat and a lawyer was just a means to becoming a diplomat perhaps. I saw that most top diplomats, like secretaries of state, were lawyers.

**FSR: I think a lot of students at Fletcher feel this pull between being a lawyer and doing some kind of [diplomatic] focus in a masters or PhD program. Do you think that choosing not to do law was a positive thing? If you could go back, would you go back and do law?**



Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts | Daderot | Public Domain

**FARKAS:** No. I'm glad that I didn't. Basically, what helped me recognize that I wasn't going to become a lawyer was that my LSAT scores were kind of mediocre. I thought, "Well, if I get into a mediocre law school, to really excel, I'm going to have to try and get on law review." And thinking through it all, I realized: "But I don't know if I love law. I love international relations!" So then I took a pause and worked in Austria overseas, and it's there that I decided to take the GRE and focus myself on international affairs and getting a masters. Then I ultimately ended up picking Fletcher.

**FSR: The next question builds on that: why Fletcher? What about programs at Fletcher appealed to you and supported some of the goals you had for yourself?**

**FARKAS:** I wanted a top school. I wanted to increase the chance that I would be in a good network with smart people and that I would be challenged by the professors. Then, I had the luck of meeting someone while I was living overseas—while I was living in either Austria or Hungary—who was dating

**“I wanted a top school. I wanted to increase the chance that I would be in a good network with smart people and that I would be challenged by the professors.”**



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry shakes hands with Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic after signing an Accession Protocol to continue Montenegro's admission to the North American Treaty Organization amid the biannual Foreign Ministerial Meetings on May 19, 2016, at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. | U.S. Department of State from United States | Public Domain

someone related to Professor von Lazar, and he was a Hungarian-American Fletcher professor at the time. He actually encouraged me to apply for the January cohort. So that was somebody who was urging me to start earlier than I had planned because I had a two-year contract that ended at the end of the calendar year. I had anticipated that I would have to wait longer to apply and start in the fall. He said, "No, you can come in January." It probably was a little easier to get in! I also had this professor who had a reference for me, so maybe that helped as well. It certainly helped me feel more comfortable with the idea of going to Fletcher. But Fletcher was always one of my top choices, so it wasn't much of a debate once I got in.

**FSR: You've had such a diverse experience in what you've done. One of the things that stands out is your experience being the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia. What policies during that period in the Obama administration influence you and your thinking the most, and what changes in the region during your tenure do you think impacted Americans the most?**

**FARKAS:** There were two things that we had a big hand in, policy-wise, and in shaping and implementing the policy. One was NATO enlargement to include Montenegro. There I learned the value of putting your heart and soul into something and organizing bureaucratically to get something across the finish line. Getting Montenegro into NATO was no one's objective except my office's objective and we basically did it with the help of then Vice President Biden. So that was one where I learned the value of, not just having the right intellectual arguments, but the persistence that comes from the heart.

The second thing that I was involved in, which still reverberates to this day, is the war that Russia launched against Ukraine in 2014. There I learned a lot of lessons. We were being very reactive. We were not proactive enough, and we didn't work hard enough to establish deterrence. So, we weren't proactive enough, we weren't preventative enough, and much of the policies that I argued for at the time were later adopted. The arguments I made at the time were born out of experience once they were implemented. Which is to say that my office argued for giving lethal systems to Ukraine, and at

the time it was feared that would lead to escalation. We laid out a very clear argument for why it wouldn't, which was demonstrated as accurate once the next administration approved the lethal assistance. But ultimately what I learned there had a lot to do with the really momentous decisions that President Obama had to make about how to manage this aggressive foreign policy that Putin launched. It involved more than just invading his neighbor, there many aspects which included—after I wasn't in government—interfering in our elections in 2016. I learned a lot from that whole experience.

**FSR: That leads right into our next question. You were one of the first people in government to call out this Russian interference in the 2016 Election. Can you recall something that triggered your attention that something was going on? Was it a particular event? Or was it a culmination of details?**

**FARKAS:** It was around the summer of 2016 when there were many media reports about Trump people meeting with Russians. I had several journalists calling me, and they seemed to think that what they were onto was something credible. That got me a little bit concerned that some people in the administration must have been aware of this collusion. When the journalists called me and they seemed to know about the dossier, it turned out the dossier wasn't the most accurate thing, although there were probably elements that were true. But the fact that they were hearing a lot about Trump people working with Russians concerned me. The final straw was when in October, two government agencies—Department of Homeland Security and the Director of National Intelligence—issued a joint warning to the American people saying that the Russians were interfering. I suddenly realized, “Ok, my Obama colleagues—who are really cautious about calling out what Russia was doing and certainly would've been cautious about talking about something that was basically a conspiracy—



Evelyn Farkas testifies before Congress on 2016 U.S. Presidential Election interference

the fact that they are speaking about this,” albeit still in more muted terms than I was, emboldened me to speak more bluntly about it. Because I knew they were cautious about it, and they had to shed some of their caution in the public interest to speak about it and publish this report.

**FSR: We're going into an election year this year. Since 2016, there's been a focus on election interference, rightfully so. Do you think there are any issues voters and election officials should be on the lookout for this year?**

**FARKAS:** Absolutely. I think they need to be really careful about the origin of money flowing into campaigns. They need to be on the lookout for false allegations using artificial intelligence and other means. Our electorate needs to be educated also to develop an immunity against fakes. Then of course, the overt things they're doing like wooing Tucker Carlson, getting American members of Congress to parrot their arguments, and even President Trump to speak positively of brutal people like Vladimir Putin. There are all kinds of things the Russians do. They use economic means, like blatant corruption, they'll try to buy their way covertly into our system. They will use economic blackmail vis-a-vis our partners. But I think the electorate is always subject to disinformation through social media and the internet.



**FSR:** Shifting gears just a little bit. There's been a lot of rhetoric about the Great Power Competition and where the U.S. should focus its attention towards Russia or China. Where do you think the U.S. should be focusing its attention?

**FARKAS:** The urgent threat to U.S. national security interests and the international order is the Kremlin, is Russia. Having said that, China does pose threats to our national security. China is clearly trying to erode U.S. economic, political, and military power, but China is not as urgent. If Russia's aggressive foreign policy is defeated, then I would expect the relationship with China to be more manageable. China will be chastened. China will be less emboldened if we are able to defeat Putin's foreign policy, ideally in the battlefield in Ukraine. The same goes for the array of other bad actors, just to preempt what you might ask, like Iran and North Korea. All of these bad actors, if they view the United States as lacking political will or somehow politically weak, then they will try to take advantage. If they succeed in taking advantage, it's a reinforcing process. So, once the world has seen that they have somehow taken advantage of us, then we will appear further weakened. So I do believe that it is imperative that we deal with the Russian threat first. Also because, if Putin prevails in Ukraine, he will turn to the other former Soviet states and it will be quick. The Republic of Georgia and others. But then he's going to look at the Baltic states, at Poland, he's going to look at NATO because it's the only alliance

that can prevent him from expanding his influence militarily, and even politically. He understands that if he breaks the will of NATO, if he tests Article 5, which means that we all have to come to the aid of an ally, if he tests it by undertaking some sort of attack against a Baltic state, Poland or Romania, and we don't invoke Article 5, in effect, NATO will be dead. Then Russia will have its way. Russia will undermine democracies and it will come after the United States more aggressively. If, however, Article 5 stands, then we're at war with Russia. So, either way the best thing we can do for ourselves, and the cheapest thing we can do is to support Ukraine. With less than 3% of the annual defense budget that we're giving Ukraine they've decimated Russia's military so that it's half the strength that it was before the war. It's a bargain, and it's a better outcome for us to have the Ukrainians defeat Russia than for us to have to go to war with Russia. Or alternatively, not fight and then our entire democracy is in danger.

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Pallets of ammunition, bound for Ukraine, are secured inside a commercial aircraft during a security assistance mission at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware, Jan. 13, 2023. The United States has committed more than \$24.5 billion in security assistance to Ukraine since the beginning of Russian aggression. | U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Amanda Jett | Public Domain



NATO Summit in Washington, July 9-11, 2024 | usembassykyiv  
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**FSR: Is giving Ukraine more aid our solution?**

**FARKAS:** Yes. We should continue to give aid to Ukraine as long as the Ukrainian government is fighting for a democracy. As long as they are doing what they have been doing, which is being mindful of the rules of war. And as long as they are more or less prevailing, as long as they're holding out. It's in our national interest.

**FSR: I'm curious what you think about having the Israel-Ukraine military aid tied together to pass Congress. How is that influencing policy decisions?**

**FARKAS:** I think it's not helpful. Support for Ukraine is strong and is bipartisan. Where it is missing is on the far-right. Support for Israel is also strong and bipartisan, but is missing on the far-left. So, if you put them together in one vote, now you're taking out the far-left and the far-right. Ukraine doesn't deserve that. Ukraine deserves, and Israel deserves also, to have its separate vote. In this new version that they're discussing today, I believe Taiwan is included along with humanitarian assistance to Gaza and elsewhere. I think the humanitarian assistance to Gaza and elsewhere can smooth the way for those who maybe wouldn't want to vote for

the Israel legislation. If all you're missing is the far-right, isolationists, who are pro-Kremlin, then it will pass in the House.

**FSR: During your current role as Director of the McCain Institute, have you felt a pull between thinking academically and practically between your time in think tanks, academia, and then in government?**

**FARKAS:** No, because I think the education you get at Fletcher is incredibly practical. I mean, yes, everything you do has to be rooted in history and some kind of methodology or lens. At Fletcher, we learn how to try on certain lenses, like Democratic Peace Theory, right? Are democracies more likely to remain at peace with other democracies? Well, it turns out, yes. My practical experience tells me that. But you also learn that there are individual components to each case. I always found that my education informed my ability to assess. Then, to be pragmatic, you have to have a certain mindset that you're not going to have the perfect answer. Decision-making is a world of imperfect information. You have to have the courage—frankly—to make decisions or recommend decisions to your bosses without the perfect information. If you want to make the world a better place, which I think everyone

who goes to Fletcher does, then you have to, as Teddy Roosevelt said, “Get into the arena.” You have to be willing to make decisions based on your knowledge and your training.

**FSR: Can you think of a policy decision or idea that had unintended consequences or didn’t come into fruition how you expected it to?**

**FARKAS:** I think the biggest one was when President Obama decided that he wasn’t going to give lethal assistance to Ukraine. We failed. We recommended that he provide lethal defensive assistance to Ukraine. We felt it would save Ukrainian lives, and more importantly cost Russian lives, which we felt was important towards trying to deter Putin. At that time, he [Putin] was still sensitive to the body count. They’ve found ways to get around that these days and have increased the amount of repression. Even if you increase the body count, you don’t have much in the way of protests in Russia. I learned a stark lesson about presidents assessing risk. I had always understood that at the end of the day, when it comes to any hard decision you make, you are probably assessing risk. I think I probably learned that at the WMD Commission because we were looking at the risk of weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of terrorism, so we looked at different countries and different scenarios and we had to decide what would be the most dangerous. We looked at probability and outcomes, so some things were less probable, like a nuclear bomb going off somewhere or a nuclear missile striking somewhere. Other things we found, like the bio-threats, were actually more likely. Maybe not as catastrophic as nuclear, but more likely. So, we actually decided in our final report that was published as a book called *World at Risk*, that the [bio-treat] was the worst-case scenario for us because that was a place where the risk was so high and we felt that the outcome was bad enough. We concluded that we should focus on that threat before we even look at the chemical or nuclear threat.

**FSR: If you had to give one piece of advice to Fletcher students, and students who want to go into what you do, what would that be?**

**FARKAS:** I always tell the young people: always ask. If you see something you want to do, an opportunity... I was at the Council on Foreign Relations, and I heard about a trip to Hungary, and this was in 1989, and the Wall had just come down, and I was really junior, and I just asked. I said, “Look, I speak fluent Hungarian; maybe you can use me as your rapporteur on this trip.” And in fact, the first time I asked, the Vice President said, “Oh, I don’t know if we have the money.” So I did some quick calculations because I knew at the time that a charter flight to Hungary was like \$600, or something, round-trip from New York. So I said, “Well, I’ll pay my airfare.” It is a good thing I didn’t offer to pay for the hotel because they stayed in quite a swanky hotel. But the lesson I learned was: Oh my god! You have to ask! So, I think always ask and be open to opportunities. You can’t plan your career. I had this hokey calendar growing up with little phrases. One that always stuck with me was, “Luck is where preparation meets opportunity.” You’re getting prepared at Fletcher, and then your luck is going to be when you’re already prepared, and some opportunity comes along. You can take that opportunity because you’re prepared and because you have the guts to take it.

**FSR: Thank you so much for your time. We really appreciate it.**



President Barack Obama holds a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk of Ukraine in the Oval Office, March 12, 2014. | Pete Souza | Public Domain



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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Evelyn N. Farkas has three decades of experience working on national security and foreign policy in the U.S. executive, legislative branch, private sector and for international organizations overseas. In 2019-2020 she ran to represent New York’s 17th Congressional District in the House of Representatives. She is currently the executive director of the McCain Institute at Arizona State University. Prior to that, she was president of Farkas Global Strategies and a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Atlantic Council and national security contributor for NBC/MSNBC.

She served from 2012 to 2015 as deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia/Ukraine/Eurasia, also covering the Balkans, Caucasus and conventional arms control. From 2010 to 2012, she was the senior advisor to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe and special advisor to the Secretary of Defense for the NATO Summit. Prior to that, she was the executive director of the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism and senior fellow at the American Security Project. From 2001 to 2008, she served as a professional staff member of the Senate Armed Services Committee responsible for Asia Pacific, Western Hemisphere, Special Operations Command, and policy issues including combatting terrorism and export control.

From 1997-2001, Dr. Farkas was a professor of international relations at the U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College. She served 1996-97 in Bosnia with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). She has published numerous journal articles and opinion pieces and *“Fractured States and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, Ethiopia, and Bosnia in the 1990s”* (Palgrave/St. Martin’s Press). She speaks Hungarian and German and has studied French, Spanish, Serbo-Croatian, Russian and Hindi.

Dr. Farkas obtained her M.A. and Ph.D. from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Board of Directors for the Project 2049 Institute, American Friends of the Munich Security Conference, Supporters of Civil Society in Russia, and previously served on the Board of Trustees of her alma mater, Franklin & Marshall College, Leadership Council-Women in National Security, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and as a D.C. family court-appointed special advocate.

*Note: This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

