

Gaslit Nation Transcript

06 April 2022

“Putin’s War on Ukraine: Democracy vs. Fascism”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/putins-war-on-vs-64542048>

Andrea Chalupa:

You're about to hear opera singers in the Western city of Lviv, Ukraine, around 40 miles from the Polish border, performing the Ukrainian National Anthem in the street hours after Russian forces shelled a nearby military training base, killing 35 people, according to CBS News. In this episode, you're going to hear some of the Ukrainian voices we've featured on the show over the years, telling the story of a nation we've long told you was on the front lines of resisting the fascism the whole world is up against. This is Gaslit Nation.

Opera Singers:

[singing Ukrainian National Anthem]

Andrea Chalupa:

This interview was with Nataliya Gumenyuk, a leading Ukrainian journalist.

[clip from [“Lessons From Ukraine Five Years After the Revolution”](#), 13 February 2019]

Andrea Chalupa:

So, Ukraine is seen as a testing ground for Russian aggression from election hacking, to the information war, to the invasion itself, where one security analyst in Berlin told me that the Russian military is using heavy machinery on Ukrainian soldiers that American soldiers haven't even had to fight against. So having Ukraine suddenly be known to a Western audience where for many years I felt that Ukraine was seen through a Russian lens, and a lot of books of Ukraine's history in academia basically treated it like a little Russia. And I would tell somebody growing up that I was Ukrainian, and their mind would immediately switch to, "Oh, you're Russian." And so now the revolution that happened, which was an incredibly dramatic event on the world stage that grabbed the world's attention, that really defined for people that there was a very big difference between Ukraine and Russia. And, of course, the war that followed, the shock of Crimea being taken and then Putin invading, and now it's even bigger with Paul Manafort (Yanukovich's guy) coming over and leading Donald Trump's campaign for president. What has that been like for you, seeing your country suddenly matter greatly in terms of providing valuable inside information and context to very serious issues that are being faced right now in America? How has that sort of story unfolded for you personally, what you've been observing and what your impressions are?

Nataliya Gumenyuk (03:48):

**For the Western audience it's very important to understand that something which has happened in Ukraine can happen everywhere.** There was no reason for the war. It's exactly the strangest thing. You read about the conflict in the books. You read about Bosnia. You read about Northern Ireland or something like that, and you think that, "Oh, there is a conflict. There is a reason. There is a history behind that." And then, you're living in the place and you see that the real military conflict can happen in

the 20th century just like that if somebody wants, and the world can't do anything about that. That's really a tragedy because you couldn't believe in 2014 that if a country which has, for instance, signed the Budapest Memorandum when Ukraine kind of had given up its nuclear weapons in 1994 with a guarantee that one of the countries, for instance Russia, would guarantee the Ukrainians sovereignty...

Nataliya Gumenyuk (04:56):

It just didn't happen and the world couldn't do it, even so far. We have sanctions, we have some other things, but it's way too little. It's way too little. And also, you see how the conflicts are created. Another story: I've been following the whole case of Paul Manafort as closely as possible being here and, you know, it's interesting because for us it was so obvious that he is a crook, that Ukrainian money had been laundered, and that's the money of the Ukrainian taxpayers, and he has been paid a lot of money for actually creating the conflicts inside of our country for political reasons. And it has taken really a lot of time for the U.S. audience and citizens to get into that. And I think the point is that in Ukraine, it's hard to imagine what's worse. You know, I know that there is an investigation going on and people are trying to understand what Manafort had done, but for an average Ukrainian, you're kind of puzzled about what else you should find about Paul Manafort.

Nataliya Gumenyuk (06:06):

He's done the worst things you could have. For instance, he really made it happen that the president had won. The candidate he supported, Viktor Yanukovich, was very divisive with a very, kind of, the policy which was built on creating conflict in society, was a very alienating campaign, was trying to find the, you know, like this divide and conquer situation. And he had used all these dirty tactics to get his client to win the elections. In the end, the client who won the elections had become a dictator who was shooting his own people in the streets. And we lost, five years ago, almost 100 people. Almost 100 people—innocent people—who just went to the streets to protest, went to the streets to protect their security, dignity. And what else Manafort could have done? What else should we find about him? So for Ukrainians, they are following the story but they are not really, you know, like they are looking forward and saying that, like, "Oh, the American media would like to find something else in Manafort. Is he really that bad?" Yes. He was really that bad.

[transition music]

Sarah Kendzior (07:29):

This interview is with Anna Palenchuk, film producer and friend of Oleh Sentsov...

Andrea Chalupa:

...a political prisoner who spent years in a Siberian prison for his activism in Euromaidan, the Revolution of Dignity.

[clip from ["Oleg Sentsov Directs a Film from a Siberian Prison"](#), 20 March 2019]

Andrea Chalupa:

Hi, it's Andrea Chalupa of Gaslit Nation, the show that looks at the threat of authoritarianism in the US and around the world. Today, we have a very special interview but first some, background: March, 2019 marks the 5th anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea. Here's what happened. I'm going to read a short little overview now from USA Today: "Late February, 2014: Armed men assumed to be Russian troops or pro Russian militia stormed the Crimea Parliament building and locked it down. Anatoliy Mohyliov, the President of Crimea who's a member of Yanukovych's Party of Regions, was ordered out. In a session not open to the public, the Crimean Parliament allegedly appointed Sergei Aksyonov as Prime Minister of Crimea. Aksyonov is a member of a small, obscure political group called the Russian Unity Party, which won too few votes in parliamentary elections in 2012 to win even one seat in Kyiv. This new parliament in Crimea voted to join the Russian Federation, setting March 16—just two weeks later—as a date for a referendum for voters in Crimea to decide the destiny of the peninsula. There is no provision in Ukraine's constitution for such a vote."

Andrea Chalupa (08:49):

Alright, so what happens next? Russian special forces supported by pro-Russian militias continue to seize more government buildings. They seize Ukrainian military bases, Ukrainian navy ships and so forth. Six people are killed. Several are kidnapped and tortured. The hastily organized referendum by the fake Crimean parliament gave only two options on the ballot, which are pretty much both the same: vote to join Russia immediately or gain even greater autonomy within Ukraine. Crimea had a lot of autonomy to begin with. And did I mention there was a Kremlin Klown Kar of so called election observers—conspiracy theorists from across Europe—who came in to try to give this fake referendum an air of legitimacy? And then, of course, you had these so-called "little green men", the Russian special forces who conveniently left the Russian flag off their uniforms as they patrolled the streets.

Andrea Chalupa:

This is why we call it a referendum by gunpoint. It was not a legal referendum in Crimea by any measure. This was an occupation done swiftly because as it turns out, the Kremlin had this plan in place for years, since the mid-2000s. That's according to former Kremlin insiders and military specialists, as reported by the *Moscow Times*. And guess what? Guess whose work also makes a special appearance in Crimea back in the mid-2000s? Paul Manafort! According to the *Times of London*, Manafort organized anti-NATO demonstrations in Crimea in 2006. Then in 2016, while running for president, Manafort's client, Donald Trump, supports Russia's invasion of Crimea, saying in an interview, "You know, the people of Crimea, from what I've heard, would rather be with Russia than where they were." Well, let's hear from the Crimean people. One such former resident of Crimea is the filmmaker Oleh Sentsov. Sentsov was a rising star in European filmmaking.

Andrea Chalupa (10:59):

He was on his way. He was about to work with producer Mike Downey on his next film. It's a miracle to get a film made. It's an exceptional miracle to get a film made in a country with limited resources like Ukraine. The success of the international stage of Oleh Setsov would've trickled back to Ukrainians on the ground, helping lift them up as well, as Oleh likes to work with Ukrainian crews and actors. This was a big opportunity for human potential to grow in a country that needs success stories like this, but it was cut short when Russian special forces kidnapped Oleh to Russia, put him on a farce trial on trumped up charges of terrorism based on the forced confessions of two people under torture, and sentenced Oleh—who was also tortured—to 20 years in prison.

Andrea Chalupa (11:51):

It turns out Oleh Sentsov can make a film, even from a Siberian penal colony. While in Berlin for the Berlin Film Festival, I sat down with his producer, Anna Palenchuk, to discuss Oleg's upcoming feature film, *Numbers*. *Numbers* is the story of a group of numbers struggling against an authoritarian system. Anna walked me through how she manages to make a film with a political prisoner in a remote corner of the world while their emails are being closely monitored, and having to keep elements of the project secret due to security risks. If Oleh Sentsov can direct a film that he wrote from a Siberian prison, then we have no excuse but to work for democracy, for freedom of speech, for freedom of expression, in our own corners of the world. Keep Oleh Sentsov in mind next time you lose hope or feel daunted. Instead, choose hope. And take full advantage of the relative freedoms and resources that you have to make this world a little bit better than you found it.

Anna Palenchuk (12:43):

Our production happened in Kyiv. Our director of photography, Adam Sikora came from Poland. He is one of the famous Polish cinematographers and [inaudible], our art director, he came from Europe. But we've got Ukrainian customs. Our language in the film is the Ukrainian language. Oleh wrote this play in the Russian language but he agreed that we translate it to Ukrainian. For me, it's important to show to him what we have. Actually, for me, his case, **it's a really important case because it is proof that art and artists can be free even without freedom**, that he can continue his creative life even in this really bad condition where he is now. Because during his hunger strike and after it, like three months, he was in some specific medicine part of the jail. He was alone in his room and now he's with other prisoners. And Oleh's jail, it's a really awful jail, minus 60 [Celsius] there outside.

Andrea Chalupa:

Minus 60 degrees Celsius?

Anna Palenchuk:

Yes because it is out of the polar circle.

Andrea Chalupa:

In Siberia?

Anna Palenchuk:

Yeah, in Siberia, yes. But he wants to create, he wants to make films, he wants to write books and it's proof that he's not a terrorist, as Putin thinks. He is a creative person who should have freedom and not sit in jail.

[transition music]

Andrea Chalupa (14:43):

This interview was with Vlad Davidson, a longtime Ukraine and Russia analyst and author.

[clip from ["Dirty, Dirty Giuliani"](#), 22 May 2019)

Andrea Chalupa (14:50):

So, you touched on something which is still a big problem in Ukraine, which I think everyone should be aware of now that we're talking a lot in the U.S. about authoritarianism and how it works, and it's this "Soviet mindset". Razom For Ukraine, this nonprofit group in New York, asked me to moderate a panel with Ukrainian journalists just to talk about the "Soviet mindset" and to confront it because they feel like it really stands in the way of people growing Ukraine into a modern, stable democracy. Poroshenko, for everything I've been reading over the years, he suffered from that Soviet mindset. It's that top-down command, autocratic command, and not allowing the democratization of ideas and talent to rise to the surface and just letting go of controls of all sorts.

Vladislav Davidzon (15:34):

Yeah, I mean, there is this concept that political scientists, and Sovietologists and Soviet people, and Russia studies people and Ukraine studies people use called "Homo Sovieticus": Soviet man. I don't think that Poroshenko was the worst example of this but he certainly is a byproduct of his time. He was already an adult man when the Soviet Union collapsed and he was already formed. And he was formed even more in the wild '90s. He's been in politics, I think, since 1997 or 1998. He was already 30, I think, by the time he was in the Ukrainian Parliament—29 or 30—and he's already set in his ways. He wasn't able to adapt to new ways of doing things.

Andrea Chalupa (16:18):

So now you have this young, modern, western-facing president, which was able to leverage the power of social media to communicate to everyone in a very fresh and different way. What's really interesting about him—which I don't think was utilized enough on the campaign from what I read, certainly not in the Western press—is his wife is really impressive. She's a screenwriter who collaborated very closely with her husband in building their famous show where he plays the president of Ukraine. The first season's available on Netflix. It's called *The Servant of the People*. The future first lady of Ukraine, Mrs. Zelensky, she did an interview with Anna Nemtsova at *The Daily Beast* where she came out sounding like a lot of the hipster kids from Hromadske TV (an independent media network) who were backing Maidan, and sounds very modern. Can we believe that when they talk about human rights and the importance of protecting a free press and multiculturalism in Ukraine and sort of that whole spirit that is very much this new face of Ukraine that the outgoing administration shut out?

Vladislav Davidzon (17:23):

Yeah first of all, shout out to Anna, a great journalist and a friend. She's lovely and the hardest working woman in Russian-American media. She's great. The new first lady is a woman who wears cool dresses with sneakers. She is modern. They have a modern sensibility. They have a modern marriage, obviously. Is Zelensky really a modern man? I think he's half and half. He's very interesting. In this case, he's from the Ukrainian south. He's from the southeast. You have to really understand his background. He is 12 years younger than Mr. Poroshenko. He's 41 years old. He was born to a Jewish intelligentsia family in Kryvyi Rih in southeast Ukraine, which is a very, very, very gritty industrial town. He's from a Russian speaking family. His culture is much more Russian than it is Ukrainian.

Vladislav Davidzon (18:12):

And he made a lot of crude ethnic jokes and gay jokes of a kind that wouldn't pass muster in New York in 2019, or anywhere in America in 2019. The humor is a very '80s/early '90s kind of vaudeville borscht belt kind of rough humor. I don't think it's badly intentioned, but it's not the kind of thing that would pass muster here, right? So he is from a Jewish intelligentsia family. He is very post-Soviet, post-Soviet like early '90s, as opposed to the '80s and late '70s when Poroshenko grew up. His culture is modern Ukrainian in a different way than with some of these other reformers in that he's not really an ethno-nationalist. He doesn't speak Ukrainian all that well. He's learning it now. He spoke to me in English more than Ukrainian. I spoke to him in English and Russian—mostly in English and a bit of Russian—and he doesn't like to speak Ukrainian for very long. He drops back into Russian.

Vladislav Davidzon:

He's very, very Russian culture oriented. His election represents the victory of the cohabitation of two visions of Ukrainian culture, as opposed to Ukraine-ization. So that's very obvious. The 2014 to 2019 process of Ukraine-ization as it was being shepherded along by half the country is over. That's what this represents, for better or for worse, right? That process has been halted. Maybe it'll start again. Maybe things will go differently after the next president comes to power from another part of the country. But he really represents a kind of Russian speaking, Ukrainian patriot intelligentsia that is cool with speaking Ukrainian a little bit, and will send their kids to Ukrainian speaking schools and is OK with their grandkids being totally Ukrainian speaking, and is a patriot of the country and has done business and lived in Moscow.

Vladislav Davidzon (20:02):

But he's not the same guy, certainly, as Poroshenko, with his Vinnytsia power base of people from western Ukraine. It's a different thing. So, is he modern? Yes. Is he modern in the same kind of way that we think of modern here? Maybe not so much. It's very interesting. He's a hybrid case.

Andrea Chalupa:

Okay, so what does that mean for the country?

Vlad Davidzon:

He has a buy-in from the Russian speaking part of the population which certainly doesn't want to live in Russia, certainly doesn't want war, certainly doesn't want to be dominated or occupied by Russian business or Russian political elites, but is uncomfortable with change taking place very quickly. In the first round, he won 19 out of 24 regions with 2 regions going to the ultra-Russian candidate—Lugansk and Donetsk, obviously—and then 2 regions going to President Poroshenko in the far west and 1 region going to Ms. Tymoshenko, former Prime Minister Tymoshenko. He won 19 out of 24 regions in the first round and he won 23 out of 24 regions in the second round with only Lviv going to sitting-President Poroshenko by a very small margin of 57 to 43, 57% only for a sitting president. Some regions, including my own, Odesa... 85% for President-elect Zelensky. Next to the war zone, Donetsk/Lugansk, almost 90%. 9 voters out of 10 went for Zelensky. This is a rebuttal to the sitting president. You could read it in different ways. You could also read it as a refrain, a repost against Ukraine-ization as it was taking place.

Andrea Chalupa (21:35):

What does that mean? There was also a lot of patriotism that came out of the revolution itself. I heard a lot more Ukrainian in the streets of Kyiv. You had kids painting bridges and fences and things in the colors of the Ukrainian flag. So why would there be a backlash against that?

Vlad Davidzon (21:51):

It's a very interesting thing. Anyone who says that Ukraine was being put upon regions south and east, that's not true. The effect of the Maidan was to change Ukrainian nationalism of the flag and the blue colors in the Ukrainian language from being an ethno-nationalism to being a civic nationalism. Anyone who ran around with the Ukrainian flag before 2014 was an ethno-nationalist as opposed to a civic nationalist. So the Maidan Revolution of Dignity was very good in that it made Ukrainian and the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian aesthetics and the Ukrainian semiotics and symbols and history and culture into something that Greeks and Bulgarians and Russian speakers from Odesa and people on the Belarusian border could accept as a national identity outside of its traditional ethnic components. I'm certainly not against this and I'm talking about this as an outside observer, right?

Vlad Davidzon (22:46):

That said, the process of Ukraine-ization, which was changing the language that people outside of Ukrainian-speaking regions were teaching their kids in, which was making a minimum percentage of Ukrainian language that had to be heard on television, on radio which, by the way, is totally normative because the French do it. Lots of other people do it. There's no problem with that. Ukrainians passed the law saying that 40% of television content and radio content had to be in the Ukrainian language. That is OK. Ukrainian is the one government language and that is normative for liberal democracy in Europe. However, some parts of Ukraine in the southeast and in the east were not comfortable at the pace of change. So whether President Poroshenko was voted out of office because of the language politics or because of the poverty, or because of corruption or because of the fact that he was a bad communicator, or because Ukrainians historically don't give presidents a second chance—(Out of six presidents of Ukraine, only one has ever been re-elected to a second term. No one else has ever been re-elected other than President Kuchma.)—you could look at the results in many different ways.

Vlad Davidzon:

But certainly, his view of the way that Ukraine will deal with competing visions of the culture for the future is going to be more like Belgium than like France, which is to say two nations cohabiting easily, uneasily, with arrangements, with understandings. But certainly the 2014-2019 period of the Ukrainian language and Ukraine-ization spreading in educational and institutional and cultural positions, that is not going to be rolled back probably but that's coming to a halt. And I make no normative judgments about this as an outsider, right? I certainly don't believe that the country should have two languages. Ukrainian should be the language of policy and administration and of the legal system and of the educational system. Obviously, there's a lot of minorities in Ukraine who need to be allowed to educate their children also in the local level. That's a question of federalization. I'm not against Ukrainization but certain people in the southeast are.

Andrea Chalupa (25:03):

Right, and just to provide some context for our audience wondering why we keep going on and on about language, why's that such a hot button issue for Ukraine? Well, it's a number of things. Number one, the history there of eastern Ukraine, it was before Stalin came in with a deliberate policy of colonization which included banning the Ukrainian language, forcing everyone to speak Russian and—

Vlad Davidzon (25:28):

Importation of Russian speakers from other parts of the Soviet Union, yeah. It's an incredibly important and interesting history. **People in the West who say that the language issue is a huge issue typically don't know what they're talking about or they're spouting Kremlin talking points.**

Andrea Chalupa (25:44):

That's exactly right. I was in Civic Hall—a wonderful, forward thinking, progressive organization that focuses on tech freedom and a lot of important democracy issues—and a very bright young woman from a very democratic, pro-Western, progressive organization was talking to me about Ukraine (and she's not Ukrainian) and she's saying, “Oh, how are the Russian speakers in Kyiv? Are they safe?”

Vlad Davidzon (26:04):

Yes, they are safe. I speak Russian in Kyiv all the time and no one's ever been anything but very, very, very polite to me. I've never in my entire life asked anyone to speak Russian to me without them offering. I'm not a native speaker of Ukrainian. My Ukrainian is okay now. You know, I'm from the Russian-American diaspora and my wife is Ukrainian. We speak Russian and French to each other but no one's ever said to me, “Don't speak Russian” in any part of Ukraine and I've never asked anyone not to speak Ukrainian to me. I've always made an effort to demonstrate respect for the language and everyone does. It's a country where no one demands that anyone speak the language that they're not comfortable in. Language politics is not very important. It is something that was mobilized historically by politicians once every five years before elections. For the most part, not to say entirely, but for the most part, it's not important whatsoever.

Andrea Chalupa (27:05):

The reason why we're getting into the weeds on this is because **Russian propaganda has exploited this to the point where they've tricked Westerners into thinking that there's an oppressive thing going on against Russian speakers inside Ukraine when it's simply not.** That's why we're kind of beating this dead horse quite a bit. But I do want to say also, you know, my grandfather is from eastern Ukraine, from Donbas, which is now Russian-speaking. But when he was born and grew up there, it was Ukrainian-speaking and then Stalin came in and just shut down Ukrainian national identity and imprisoned the intelligentsia, killed the intelligentsia, shut down all their organizations and churches and so forth—or whatever was left of any sort of churches at that point—and forced everyone to speak Russian. So it is very painful. **It is a symbol of Kremlin imperialism and genocide also, because all those conditions of attacking Ukrainian national identity were followed by Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine, which deliberately mass murdered millions.** 90% of the victims were Ukrainian there. So with that, it is a very loaded issue for Ukrainians but, as Vlad said, people should carry on with their day and speak whatever they want. I've run errands with a friend in Kyiv who's from Donbas and he spoke



Russian when he was picking up his prescription pills and the woman behind the counter spoke Ukrainian and they got along fine and everything. Nobody batted an eye.

Vlad Davidzon (28:28):

That happens every day: people speaking to each other and one speaks Ukrainian, the other speaks Russian. Also, a lot of people speak a Slavic patois called Surzhyk which is just a very, very odd and illiterate rural mix of Ukrainian and Russian. Lots of people just mix up Russian and Ukrainian in the same sentence. They conjugate words incorrectly, they make up Russian-Ukrainian conjugations on the go.

Andrea Chalupa (28:51):

**And the big cherry on the Sunday of this topic is that Putin invaded Ukraine claiming that he needed to protect Russian speakers.**

Vlad Davidzon (29:02):

And Russian-speaking minorities. That's a good transition back to Ukraine's new Jewish Russian-speaking Ukrainian nationalist president-elect.

Andrea Chalupa (29:11):

So what is Putin going to do now? The other favorite line that Kremlin propaganda likes to use not only in their whole propaganda machine domestically but also in the social media box, they like to drive this fake narrative that Ukraine is a fascist far-right state and there was all these neo-Nazis and the Euromaidan Revolution was neo-Nazi. And even though there is a far-right problem, of course, in Ukraine—like there is in every single country in Europe, like there is in the U.S., like there is in Canada—it gets blown out of proportion because **the Kremlin makes sure it gets blown out of proportion and really tries to label anything Ukrainian with a neo-Nazi, far-right framing.** And so, the big joke is, “Okay, well what's the Kremlin going to do now that the president is Jewish?”

Vlad Davidzon (29:58):

And the Prime Minister's Jewish also, by the way. Ukraine is now the only country other than Israel whose prime minister, both head of state and head of government are Jewish gentlemen who were both born in the same exact week in 1978 in the first month, or I think it was the second month of 1978, one in Vinnytsia, the other one in Dnipro. Yeah, it's totally bizarre. Yeah. It shows how accepting Ukrainians are. They didn't really care whatsoever that Mr. Zelensky is halachically Jewish and of Jewish descent and has a Jewish identity. Although I do think he baptized his kids in the Orthodox faith. But it doesn't matter. He's as Jewish as the day is long when you look at him and you talk to him, and the entire Ukrainian electorate knew this and they voted against Mr. Poroshenko anyway.

Andrea Chalupa (30:47):

They didn't really care. That's the thing.

Vlad Davidzon (30:48):

No, and he was open about it in the election interviews. He didn't hide it. He never played it up nor played it down. He said, “Yeah, I'm Jewish. You know, I also speak Russian and I'm a Ukrainian. Who

cares?" The entire population who was watching television and saw those interviews knew and didn't care.

Andrea Chalupa (31:03):

You're Jewish yourself and you focus on a lot of those issues in your writing. You write for *Tablet* and a lot of other Jewish interest outlets, so you've been covering Jewish issues in Ukraine for a very long time and you have a very long lens on the very rich history between Ukrainians and Jews going back many, many centuries. And could you speak a little bit about that?

Vlad Davidzon (31:24):

Yes. So, obviously, the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian jurors becoming more Ukrainian and obviously most of them spoke Russian at home, but now the Ukrainian Jewish population is more Ukrainian-speaking. Jews live a normal life in Ukraine and in Kyiv and in Kharkiv, in Odesa, there are large Jewish communities of Ukrainians who are of Jewish descent and go to synagogue. They've transitioned from being Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine citizens of Jewish descent to being Ukrainian Jews. It's a very important and interesting process. Again, both the president and the prime minister of Ukraine now are of Jewish patrimony. And it just shows that the country is safe. And, you know, the relationship between Ukraine and Israel is very strong and very important. In fact, the last thing that President Poroshenko did in foreign policy that no one really noticed even after the tomos—

Andrea Chalupa (32:23):

The independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from Moscow.

Vlad Davidzon (32:28):

The last thing that President Poroshenko did symbolically in January/February of this year was he signed a long-expected and long-negotiated Israeli-Ukrainian trade accord which had been under negotiation for seven years and he fast tracked that so he could have it done before the elections.

Andrea Chalupa (32:47):

In your writing, I think it was in your article for *Tablet*, you wrote that Poroshenko, the outgoing president, created a "golden age" for Jews in Ukraine.

Vlad Davidzon (32:54):

Yeah, well, what I said was a golden age of Jewish Ukrainian relations in Ukraine on the state level, on the intergovernmental level, on the level of Jewish elites' relationship to the government in terms of the government listening to their interests and inviting them to speak at things is as good as it's ever been. I mean, you know, President Poroshenko was a vital Semite. He put a lot of effort into the Jewish relationship. And the 75th anniversary of Babi Yar in 2016, he really put a lot of effort into making that into a world class thing. And he should be remembered (even though he's going to be a one-term president) as a president who's done a lot for that very important relationship, for a minority that has lived in Ukraine for hundreds and hundreds of years and has done so much to build the country.

Andrea Chalupa (33:42):

Do you think Zelensky will continue that?

Vlad Davidzon (33:45):

Well, Zelensky is himself a member of the Jewish minority so obviously there's not gonna be any government anti-Semitism under a Jewish president, clearly, nor would we expect that. The relationship between Ukraine and Israel is extremely interesting and complicated because—

Andrea Chalupa (34:00):

Well, it's not just about Israel as well, right?

Vlad Davidzon (34:02):

No, no, no, it's not. It's not just about Israel, it's about relationships to the Jewish diaspora and relationships between Ukrainian Jews and the Ukrainian government.

Andrea Chalupa (34:10):

But you're right that Israel does play an important role for Ukraine for a number of reasons, including a lot of Ukrainian soldiers who get sent abroad to Israel for all types of medical treatment.

Vlad Davidzon (34:19):

Yeah, the Israelis have been very helpful. That, and lots of Ukrainian Jews who have serviced in Israeli Defense Force came back to Ukraine to fight in the east, including friends of mine. I know tons of guys from Kyiv and Odesa who were young guys and went off to study in Israel or live in a kibbutz and then serve in the army and find themselves, who in their late 20s or early 30s came back to do business in Ukraine. A lot of these guys picked up rifles and went off to fight with their IDF training against separatists and Russian invaders. There are tons of cases like that. I know a lot of them, a lot of IDF guys, Ukrainian Jewish guys helped on the Maidan to train the Maidan revolutionaries. So that's a healthy relationship. What you have to understand is that Russia is now... With the American withdrawal from the Middle East, Russia is now very much a Middle East power in the way that it has not been since the 1970s. So Ukraine, Israel and Russia are in a triangular position which most people do not understand, which is incredibly rich, incredibly complex and incredibly interesting. So, the Israelis have a very complex relationship. They have hundreds of thousands of citizens from both countries, Russia and Ukraine, and a lot of these people—Ukrainian Jews and Russian Jews and Israeli Jews—they're literally relatives. So it's the first time since the First World War where European Jews are on two sides of a war. This has not happened in 100 years, with the very quirky exception of Finland fighting on the side of the axis and not purging its army of Jewish officers. There were like 500 Jews during World War fighting in black S.S. uniforms in Finland. But nobody knows that and that's a quirky historical fact that no one knows about this. To really see European Jews on two sides of a war, of a conflict, this has not happened in 100 years. And this is an extremely interesting thing to me.

Andrea Chalupa (36:14):

Israel's sort of caught in the middle of Ukraine and Russia.

Vlad Davidzon (36:16):

Absolutely. Israel has Russian officers fighting shoulder to shoulder with al-Quds guys, with Iranian expeditionary forces on the Golan Heights, on the border. Netanyahu has literally flown several, I think four times by now, to Moscow to negotiate a buffer zone with the Russians. How closely will Iranian troops get to the Israeli border? That is to a large extent decided in Moscow.

Andrea Chalupa (36:43):

Right, and Russia being a close ally of Iran.

Vlad Davidzon (36:47):

A very close ally indeed, yes. Certainly in Syria it is. Again, some of the same troops who fought Ukrainians in the Donbas, in eastern Ukraine, were several months or a year later fighting alongside Iranian guys and Shiite forces, expeditionary forces against Syria and Sunnis on behalf of the Syrian government. So it's all incredibly interwoven. This is the new Middle East and it's intimately connected to what's going on in Ukraine between the Russians and Ukrainians.

[transition music]

Sarah Kendzior (37:24):

This interview is with leading Ukrainian journalist, Olga Tokariuk.

[clip from [“Russian Propaganda as Judge and Jury”](#), 05 February 202)

Andrea Chalupa (37:30):

Sarah and I today are speaking with Ukrainian journalist Olga Tokariuk of Hromadske Television. Olga, your story that you're gonna talk with us about today shows how Russian disinformation—and disinformation generally—can tip the scales of justice in a court. This is a very troubling story which you're going to unpack for us today. A man was convicted to 24 years in prison based on hearsay and part of his conviction included Kremlin-funded propaganda being put on the record in court. So what is the climate currently, the political climate, like in Italy that might be contributing to this?

Olga Tokariuk (38:13):

Well, when I talk about it with my Italian colleagues, they actually say that it's not much about politics or propaganda. They believe that it might have been some human mistake that this verdict was like this. What they tried to tell me is that they don't think there was some huge role of propaganda or disinformation behind it, but what I noticed, even reading the motivation of this sentence, well, the Italian court used some phrases which are basically taken from Russian propaganda or the way Russian media talk about the situation in Ukraine. For example, the Ukrainian Army and Ukrainian National Guard are called “irregular forces”, as if they were almost on the same level as separatists, you know? So there is no direct distinction even in the materials of the case in those phrases framed by judges that there is a regular army and regular forces who defend their country and their territory and then there is Russian-funded and Russian-backed and unrest separatists and some Russian intelligence officers who were directing the separatists at the time, like Igor Strelkov. The role of the separatists was never investigated in court, like at trial. There was no assumption that separatists might have been responsible. Also, it wasn't taken into account the situation on the ground that two factories, two ceramics factories

are nearby this railway crossing where these tragic deaths occurred. These factories were taken over by the separatists. There were separatist positioned 400 meters from the place where journalists died. This was not taken into account by the court. Instead, they were insistent that the Ukrainian army was targeting journalists, that it was persecuting journalists, again, using some OEC report.

Olga Tokariuk (40:25):

If you look at that report, you'll see that the biggest part of that report talks about violations of journalists' rights and attacks on journalists on the separatists territories. There were some incidents also in Ukrainian-controlled territory. We are talking about Spring 2014. But most of that report says that all the violations and attacks on journalists that occurred were made by separatists. This document, again, in court was presented as proof that the Ukrainian army and Ukrainian authorities and Ukrainian soldiers attack journalists. It is clear manipulation. I don't know if there was some orchestrated disinformation propaganda campaign behind this case. Maybe not. Maybe it's really as my Italian colleagues say, just some human mistakes, some incompetence or Russian narratives that were so present in the Italian media. But even if there was no orchestrated campaign, still, this little Russian narrative here, little Russian narrative there, no direct witnesses from the Ukrainian side, no investigation at the scene, no understanding of the context and inclusion of the context, of the real context in the court files, it all might have contributed to this outrageous sentence.

Olga Tokariuk:

The most worrying sign for me is that it might set a dangerous precedent because it's the first time that a Ukrainian soldier was convicted abroad for his actions, or alleged actions, during the war, for targeting civilians, for deliberately targeting and killing journalists. And more disturbingly, that he was accused of doing so in the absence of any direct proof, in the absence of proper investigation on the scene, in the absence of collaboration with the Ukrainian authorities that were dismissed immediately by the Italian side as not credible. This is not how justice is done, in my opinion, and this sets a really dangerous precedent.

Olga Tokariuk:

Another thing which is disturbing is that it's not just one Ukrainian soldier. The case was also against the State of Ukraine. So, basically the whole state of Ukraine, the Ukrainian regular Army, was accused of committing crimes against civilians, against journalists, and doing it *deliberately*, again, based on no direct proof, based on indirect witnesses, without any proper investigation. So these are really warning signs. Also, of course, the role of this information and propaganda... I don't know how coordinated it was. Maybe there were really some accidental, small things that in the end contributed to this bigger picture. But I think we should be aware of how every message that is being pushed through by Russian disinformation and propaganda can be interpreted and how can it stick to the minds not just of politicians but ordinary people, but people in tribunals, by jurors, because the jury was giving the sentence. It's again a warning sign that the hybrid war is being conducted on so many levels and that disinformation and propaganda is one of them.

Andrea Chalupa (43:43):

The larger lesson here also includes the reminder that culture is powerful. If you have a culture in Italy that exists that largely accepts Kremlin propaganda, that is going to seep into all sorts of areas of society.

It reminds me of what brings me and my co host Sarah together. That is, on the left—because we consider ourselves progressives in America—on the left, it's always been fashionable for a lot of progressive activists to appear on Kremlin-funded outlets, like Russia Today, and to amplify articles and videos and TV hosts from Russia Today (RT) and other Kremlin-funded outlets. As a result, hanging out among other American progressives, I would hear some depressing Kremlin talking points against Ukraine from a lot of progressives that I shared a lot of views with. They would say things to me like, "Oh, it was a violent coup in Ukraine. It was a far-right coup in Ukraine." They would repeat Kremlin talking points to me because on the left in America, for a very long time, for many years, we had this culture where it was acceptable for people on the left to appear on Russia Today (RT) and other blood money-funded propaganda outlets.

Andrea Chalupa:

The warning is to us on the left in America that you have to take a universal stance against totalitarianism everywhere in all its forms and not accept to appear on any blood money networks like RT (Russia Today). What you're doing is you're furthering a destructive culture that can seep into your thinking. Maybe you agree with some points that they make, but you'll find yourself agreeing with totally inaccurate information, like furthering the Kremlin talking points, furthering the Kremlin propaganda that it was a far-right Ukrainian coup and not a popular uprising that toppled Putin's puppet in Ukraine, Yanukovich, brought to power with Manafort's help.

[transition music]

Andrea Chalupa:

This interview was with Oleh Sentsov, a Ukrainian filmmaker, shortly after he was released from a Russian prison after being kidnapped from Crimea for his activism to support Euromaidan, the 2014 Revolution of Dignity. Oleh Sentsov was taken from Crimea and sent to Russia, put on a Soviet show trial and sent out to a Siberian prison where he was supposed to die. Instead, he fought for his freedom and eventually his resilience won him his freedom.

[clip from [“Dictators Die, Art is Forever: The Oleg Sentsov Interview”](#), 11 April 2020]

Andrea Chalupa (46:18):

What advice do you have for us here in the West to understand about Putin's regime and to ... I think there's a tendency to forget Crimea, or for Americans not to know why Crimea matters, so what would you say to an American that says, "Who cares about Crimea? Let Putin have Crimea. Why should we care about Crimea?"

Oleh Sentsov via Translator (46:42):

It is important to remember about Crimea, particularly because after the Second World War in 1945, the borders were divided and everyone agreed on these borders. Russia agreed that it's going to have these borders and not going to invade anything else. And it broke this promise. It also broke the Budapest Memorandum where the US basically protected Ukraine on the borders. We gave up nuclear weapons to protect the world and we remember the US promised that they're going to protect us from danger if it

arises. And the US did not. This is one thing. Another thing is that there is an international law which Russia basically broke by going into this war, and there are many more territories that are in this very dangerous situation, very vulnerable situation, and Russia can continue if it wishes to do that. Many of these countries are also allies of the United States, so the United States should remember about that.

Andrea Chalupa (47:57):

Absolutely. Why do you think under Putin, Stalin has been treated as a hero under Putin? Why do you think there's been such a renaissance around Stalin under Putin?

Oleh Sentsov via Translator (48:15):

Russian people are used to that. They allow this to happen. Putin, by legalizing Stalin, he basically makes Russian people forget about all the atrocities of Stalin. It's all related to the war. It's related to the victory in war and he plays with this victory and takes this victory basically as his own victory, not Stalin's victory. That's why many Russian people actually follow him, because they don't question this. They follow the big powerful leader.

Andrea Chalupa (48:55):

I read an interview with you where you talked about being in the Russian prison and seeing Russian people up close and losing a sense of hope that the Russian mind can awaken to a different sort of Russia. Do you have hope that Russia can find its way forward into a real democracy, and also with having a real democracy confront the truth of its history?

Oleh Sentsov via Translator (49:29):

Did they change their behavior? Did they go on the streets to protest for me to change my mind and think that there is hope? No.

[transition music]

Sarah Kendzior (49:43):

This interview is with an old friend, the Ukrainian civic leader, Olya Yarychivsk, a co-founder of Razom, a non-profit organization with an impressive international network of volunteers who develop civic engagement and anti-corruption efforts for Ukraine.

Andrea Chalupa:

Donate if you can to help Ukraine through [razomforukraine.org](https://razomforukraine.org). That's [razomforukraine.org](https://razomforukraine.org).

[clip from ["Save Baby Dima: A Story of Hope from Ukraine"](#) 07 May 2021),

Olya Yarychivsk (50:07):

When I was growing up in Ukraine, I actually didn't have such a strong feeling of the civic society. I got very much inspired when I moved to the US for college. I could see how volunteering is prized here, how people do so many projects on the side, even small kids, like in kindergarten and in school, and I thought it was really incredible. But I think it has been catching up really fast in Ukraine, especially with the

generation that was born in independent Ukraine, or like me. I was born at the very end of the Soviet Union. My birth certificate says I was born in the Soviet Union but I have no idea what the Soviet Union mentality is because I really grew up, you know, my conscious time was during independent Ukraine. So, I think it's this really new generation that can see the possibilities and I think, of course, Euromaidan (the Revolution of Dignity) inspired all of us and showed us the power of the civic grassroots movement, the power of people that you can have, and essentially how you can dictate where you want your country to go and how you see your country. I think this is a huge inspiration and that's why it continues.

Olya Yarychkivsk:

All of us—all of the civic leaders—see that there still has to be a lot of work and everybody understood at the end of the Revolution that this is not the end. Actually, now starts a time where all of us either have to enter government or form non-profits to keep the government accountable and essentially work in all kinds of different directions to change the country, little by little, project by project. This is what keeps us going because there are a lot of successful projects, a lot of successful changes that happened, and there is still a lot to do. And we know that we can do it.

Andrea Chalupa (52:19):

What advice do you have for civic leaders facing their own massive challenges, like corruption?

Olya Yarychkivsk (52:25):

Stick to your values and don't give them up. I know that a lot of young people in Ukraine are facing this. For example, I spoke to Dima's father, Vitaliy, and he told me a lot about his government job and he said initially, when he entered government right after the Revolution, it was really tough to be in government because the salaries were not so big. So then, of course, it's no wonder that then you get these government officials who are taking money on the side, who are corrupt, because how can they really feed their family? But he had very strong convictions and for a few years they endured somehow. Before that, he had his own tourism business that he gave up. Then there was the reform to raise the payment of the salaries for government officials and once he entered and he was like the deputy/head of the Odesa local government, he already had a pretty decent salary. He said that if anybody approached him—and he was approached a lot with offers to take money on the side—he just was very firm in his conviction that, "I am against corruption. I don't take it," and these are just his values.

Olya Yarychkivsk (53:21):

I think all of the activists just have to stay strong, stick to your values, whatever it is, whatever happens. It can be really tough at times but if you really stand for something, you have to stand for that. Just always believe that you are doing the right thing. It can be hard but if you have a team and you have others who think like you, you can really persevere and make a change.

[outro Ukrainian National Anthem music]

[outro theme music]



Andrea Chalupa:

Our discussion continues and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth Teller level or higher.

Sarah Kendzior:

We want to encourage you to donate to your local food bank, which is experiencing a spike in demand. We also encourage you to donate to Oil Change International, an advocacy group supported with the generous donation from the Greta Thunberg Foundation that exposes the true costs of fossil fuels and facilitates the ongoing transition to clean energy.

Andrea Chalupa:

We encourage you to help support Ukraine by donating to Razom for Ukraine at [razomforukraine.org](http://razomforukraine.org). We also encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Ukraine, Syria and Afghanistan. Donate at [rescue.org](http://rescue.org). And if you want to help critically endangered orangutans already under pressure from the Palm oil industry, donate to the Orangutan Project at [theorangutangproject.org](http://theorangutangproject.org). Gaslit Nation is produced by Sarah Kendzior and Andrea Chalupa. If you like what we do, leave us a review on iTunes. It helps us reach more listeners. And check out our Patreon, it keeps us going.

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Sarah Kendzior:

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