

Gaslit Nation Transcript

Help Ukraine by Cleaning Up Western Corruption: The Maksym Eristavi Interview

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[intro theme music]

Sarah Kendzior:

I'm Sarah Kendzior, the author of the bestsellers, *The View From Flyover Country* and *Hiding in Plain Sight*, and of the upcoming book, *They Knew: How a Culture of Conspiracy Keeps America Complacent*, available for pre-order now.

Andrea Chalupa:

I am Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*, about Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine, a film the Kremlin doesn't want you to see so be sure to see it.

Sarah Kendzior:

And this is *Gaslit Nation*, a podcast covering corruption in the United States and rising autocracy around the world.

Andrea Chalupa (00:00:48):

Welcome to our special spring series, *Gaslit Nation Presents... Rising up from the Ashes: Cassandras and Other Experts on Rebuilding Democracy* [Crowd Cheers SFX]. Our bonus episodes available to Patreon subscribers at the Truth-teller level and higher feature our esteemed guests taking the *Gaslit Nation Self Care Q&A*, so for fun ideas, sign up to hear that.

Sarah Kendzior:

Joining at this level also gives you access to hundreds of bonus episodes on topics in the news today. We'll be back with our regular episodes in July. If you're signed up any time between now and then at the Democracy Defender level or higher on Patreon—

Andrea Chalupa:

You'll get special access to watch a live taping of *Gaslit Nation* over the summer. More details to come.

Sarah Kendzior (00:01:38):

This interview is recorded on December 20th, 2021.

Andrea Chalupa (00:01:43):

Today, we have a remarkable and inspiring expert with us today, Maksym Eristavi. He is an Eastern European journalist and writer. His work explores the intersection of identity politics, disinformation and Russian colonialism. A self-described bridge builder, he amplifies and explains stories from global frontline battles for equal human and civil rights. He is a trans-Atlantic leadership fellow with the Center of European Policy Analysis, a DC-based foreign policy think tank, co-founder of the Free Press for

Eastern Europe that manages the largest hub for independent journalism in Eastern Europe, a former policy advisor at the European Parliament, writer for the *Washington Post*, *Politico*, and *Foreign Policy*, among others, and sits on the managing board of Kyiv Pride, the biggest Pride event in Eastern Europe. Eristavi is a 2015 Pointer Fellow at Yale University with a focus on informational wars and pan-regional LGBTI civil rights movements. Welcome to the show, Maksym.

Maksym Eristavi (00:02:48):

Hey, I'm super excited to join and a huge fan of your work and the show in general. So, this is extra special for me, this time.

Andrea Chalupa (00:02:56):

Well, it's an honor to have you here. So, obviously Ukraine is a hot topic now, unfortunately, for all the wrong reasons; because of Trump's corruption, because of Putin's aggression that's ongoing and escalating and spreading around the globe. And also we have our own social conditions in the US that are incredibly concerning; corruption's on the rise, life expectancy is declining in America. So, corruption has become a hotbed issue. Obviously, Ukraine has had a number of inspiring popular uprisings to confront corruption. It's known for having a very strong civil society. You yourself are an independent journalist that has been on the front line of all these big movements. So we would love to hear from you today, you know, how does corruption work in Ukraine and generally in the region? Just so we could better prepare ourselves for how to confront it here in the US.

Maksym Eristavi (00:03:53):

Sure. Absolutely, I'll be happy to be of help, although as a Georgian Ukrainian, kind of explaining—for everyone in Ukraine actually—kind of explaining Ukraine became a second job for everyone in the last seven, almost eight years. I so love that the majority of Ukrainians, despite all the constant frustration of explaining, defending, validating themselves to the rest of the world, the majority of us still keep doing it like it's not a big deal, although a bit frustrating sometimes. So happy to do it. My second job, that's for sure.

Andrea Chalupa (00:04:34):

So Ukraine is obviously fighting two wars; the Kremlin's ongoing invasion and corruption. What are the biggest obstacles holding Ukraine back in its war on corruption?

Maksym Eristavi (00:04:47):

I mean, coming from Ukraine, corruption becomes so embedded within everyday life. You face it early as a kid. For example, when you're at school or kindergarten, that's where the majority of us already start facing corruption one way or another. You gotta pay your way through a lot of services that you get in the country. And of course, when I was growing up in the '90s, it was much, much worse than it is right now and the country made tremendous progress with it, especially in the last 5-7 years. But still it's something that is part of your everyday life and I think the majority of foreigners—especially Westerners—do not understand how integral it is to their life. And it's not just an inconvenience, it actually alters the way you think, oftentimes, about the state, the government, the services that you get and stuff like that.

Maksym Eristavi (00:05:48):

The most important thing that I kind of realized in the recent years, that when I was growing up corruption was definitely kind a local problem in a way that it had something to do with, of course, the legacy of Russian rule and colonialism and had something to do with cultural aspects of it—how people were, you know, considering to pay a bribe or not—but recently, we've seen that this is not a local fight anymore and as kleptocracy in general became such a prominent global issue, no matter how hard you fight it back at home on the local level, you still cannot win because the issue became such a ginormous global issue. Without addressing it everywhere—both in the West and at front lines—you won't get much done anyway, because this is just too big to call it a local or, you know, national fight anymore.

Andrea Chalupa (00:06:52):

That's exactly what we say on the show. Kleptocracy anywhere is kleptocracy everywhere.

Maksym Eristavi (00:06:58):

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I'm still kind of a solutions guy and I always want to look into how we can fix it instead of just being upset and frustrated and angry about it. But one of the most frustrating things about talking about Ukrainian corruption with the rest of the world, especially with Westerners, is that the discussion always starts with, “Well, you need to fix your corruption problem. And for that, you need to do A,B, C and...” you know, basically kind of lecturing. What I've always fired back saying is that this corruption and this problem with corruption that we are dealing with first and foremost starts in the West these days, because no matter what kind of laws you have in place, no matter how terrific your civil society anti-corruption fighters are (and Ukrainians are amazing at this), we always face the problem that the majority of stolen funds, of stolen money, of stolen resources that have been channeled from out of our country end up in Western bank accounts, in Western real estate, all across the Western world. Unless we close that opportunity for, you know, oligarchs or officials to steal and then transfer to the West, we won't fix anything. It's just impossible.

Andrea Chalupa (00:08:22):

So you are stuck with the West lecturing you on how to clean up your corruption and at the same time, empowering and profiting off of your corruption.

Maksym Eristavi (00:08:33):

Well, of course, because, you know, it's not only how oligarchs store their money in the West. It's also the whole industry around it. They hire the best people to whitewash their reputations. They hire the best lawyers to kind of bypass any legal troubles that they might have with their money in the West. I mean, you know better than anyone that there is a well-oiled industry in the West that helps all sorts of kleptocrats coming from places like Ukraine or elsewhere, and a lot of people profit handsomely from that. And unfortunately, we don't see a lot of action happening on that front from our Western partners. They always come and say something like, “You gotta fix this and this in your parliament...” But what do we get in terms of your homework done in the West? I think that's where the action is dramatically lacking.

Andrea Chalupa (00:09:30):

Oh, without question. And what are some ways that Ukrainians suffer because the West refuses to clean up and confront its own extraordinarily powerful and global corruption industry

Maksym Eristavi (00:09:46):

You know, there's a running joke among a lot of Ukrainians about the corruption in Ukraine because since Ukraine gained independence 30 years ago from Russian rule, this constant graft keeps happening. And even back in Ukraine, people are really surprised that there's still so much stuff to steal and stealing keeps happening. I mean, my life was dramatically impacted by this kind of graft of corruption because when Ukraine became independent, I wouldn't say that it was a poor country, definitely not, but the amount of wealth that has been stolen in the recent 30 years from us, it counts in tens of billions. And most of those monies were channeled and kept being channeled abroad to private bank accounts, to real estate, and so on and so on. So this not only has an impact on how much people receive in salaries here, but also on the quality of infrastructure because wealthy kleptocrats do not pay any taxes.

Maksym Eristavi (00:10:55):

They all channel it back abroad. You enjoy just a lower quality of life, a much lower quality of life than you deserve, based on how much you work and how much education you have. So I'm a migrant and I had to leave Ukraine at some point, as millions of other Ukrainians exactly for the same thing. Because no matter how smart you are, how much of an education you have, how hardworking you are—and the majority are extremely hardworking—you still get less in everything, in quality of life, just because so much has been stolen or is being stolen as we speak.

Andrea Chalupa (00:11:33):

Obviously, the West likes to see itself as sacred, the lecturer, or what have you. They're the donors. They're the ones who Ukraine is getting a lot of support from; the EU and the US and Canada. One can argue not enough, certainly, given its challenges. But what's hiding behind that is the profit, the private industry, the well-oiled machine of corruption. But what about Russia specifically? How is Russia profiting from corruption in Ukraine and how is Russia leveraging corruption in Ukraine as a weapon in its multi-front war against Ukraine?

Maksym Eristavi (00:12:12):

I think that's very often absent from the talks about the corruption in Eastern Europe when it comes to our friends from the West because they usually come and say, "Well, you have this problem with your corruption." But what is often not mentioned is that corruption is not a new phenomenon that started from the day one after Russian neighbors gained independence after the Soviet Union collapsed. The corruption festered and was part of everyday life of many people living under Soviet rule for many, many years before the Soviet Union collapsed. And it partially was the reason why it collapsed because economically it wasn't viable and corruption was existing at the top levels for many decades. And this culture now is, on the ground, oftentimes associated with that legacy. So the majority of people, especially those people who are engaged in corruption on both sides—those who extort bribes from you and those who are willing to pay—you can clearly see that there is a generation divide.

Maksym Eristavi (00:13:18):

So for younger people like myself, paying a bribe is very uncomfortable. You kind of, you know... I was part of many situations when I had to pay a bribe. I'm very honest about it. But every time for me, it wasn't a natural thing to do and I felt bad about it and coerced and definitely, with time, as I became more prominent and I had the opportunity to speak out and help to fix this problem, I started doing something. And a lot of Ukrainians of my age are doing the same. But for people of older generations who are used to paying or have faced corruption for many years before independence, it's kind of a more natural way of living. And I think this is something that's missing from the conversation, that the

corruption that we're dealing with in Ukraine and elsewhere in Eastern Europe is part of the Russian rule legacy. And modern Russia, of course, as one of the most corrupt places on earth, keeps using this as a part of the foreign policy extortion geopolitical tool, for sure, because corruption offers them a lot of opportunities to influence former colonies in one way or another. Also not probably a very unique story for this post-colonial dynamic, anyway.

Andrea Chalupa (00:14:45):

This takes us to the point that the Soviet Union is a gaslighting term [laughs].

Maksym Eristavi:

[laughs] Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

It was never a union. It was just straight up brutal Russian imperialism.

Maksym Eristavi (00:14:58):

In my own worldview that I've kind of constructed over the years, I see it as just one of the stages of Russian colonialism in general. I grew up in Ukraine and Russia was part of our lives despite the independence for a long time, but it's always been kind of a plainly destructive role. Of course, it wasn't as bad as after the 2014 invasion, but even before, it wasn't kind of a secret that Russia meddles, influences things, you know, supports some of the destructive forces in the country, finances some political parties, even before the 2014 revolution and 2004 revolutions and democratic revolutions, Russia would openly have a say who the government should appoint to key government positions. It wasn't like a big secret. And I was trying to make a sense of it. Why would Russia do that? Right?

Maksym Eristavi (00:15:59):

Why, you know, why do all the crises we have always have something to do with Russia? And then I started digging and making sense of it myself and looking back at history and looking back at other similar situations around the world and for me it became obvious that this is just classical colonial relations between a colonial power and the colonial subject. And then things kind of clicked for me and started making more sense of why this is happening, why this toxic dynamic is there and why Russia wouldn't let go of this issue or the countries it previously ruled.

Andrea Chalupa (00:16:41):

Yeah, we had that same issue in the US. We discovered with Trump, especially when he picked Rex Tillerson as secretary of state. There's a lot of reporting about how Rex Tillerson as the former CEO of Exxon was gonna make a ton of money and lift sanctions and Exxon stood to gain. So, there was a whole complication there which made Americans feel like under Trump, given the well-documented support and meddling and whatever you wanna call it that the Kremlin gave Trump to help bring him to power, that there were benefits that Putin was getting in return. It was this feeling of, Oh, great, he's our Yanukovich. He's that guy.

Maksym Eristavi:

[laughs]

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, that's what it is. It's Russian colonialism. When you have a foreign power with imperialist ambitions and a long imperialist history as a brutal colonizer influencing your government to the point of tipping the scales of government and elections and so forth, your're a proxy state essentially.

Maksym Eristavi (00:17:52):

Yeah. Toxic relations between Ukraine and Russia go back way before the Soviet Union. So Ukraine was a Russian colony four hundreds of years before that and Ukraine had statehood and attempts to create statehood and different insurgencies for hundreds of years. Also, a lot of that history has been erased with clear intent by the Kremlin, so the majority of people outside don't even realize that Ukraine has a history of statehood that dates back much earlier than the Soviet Union and then even before that, because all that history was purposefully erased. And still, the Kremlin pays a lot of attention so that it does not resurface, not only for Ukraine but other former Russian colonies. And I think this is an important thing that people should just educate themselves if they're interested in Russia, about what Russia is as a state. The history of that state doesn't necessarily start in 1991 after the Soviet Union collapse, but you can see a clear pattern of actions in the treatment of the countries around Russia for many centuries. It looks a lot like, for example, the situation with Ireland or Scotland where people are not necessarily divided by a racial dynamic in the colonial relations, but it's still very much pure colonialism in its pure form.

Andrea Chalupa (00:19:32):

Yeah, absolutely. And what really must be so frustrating for you—and it is absolutely for me—is how you have these Westerners who go through the education systems in the West, they go to university, graduate school, and they're learning from all of these lionized professors who had some, you know, read Dostoevsky and had some romantic notion about what Russia is. And so a lot of these kids, these college students, would go on to hold jobs as analysts in newsrooms, researchers and so forth as a lot of the Western understanding of Ukraine has been through a Russian lens because that's how the Western audience has been trained to think of that part of the world coming in through Russian political power, through the cold war, Russian literature, and so forth. And Ukraine has always been ghettoized, just sort of this backwards heathen tribe that needs to be just brought to heel.

Andrea Chalupa (00:20:35):

That's sort of been the understanding even though Ukraine...And I just wanna tell people, whether this may be a revelation for some folks...Ukraine's own culture and history is many centuries older than the existence of Russia in the first place. Kyiv is considered the Jerusalem of the Slavs. There was a kingdom there, the Byzantium Kingdom, that used to marry off their princesses all across Europe. And Anne of Kyiv, who married into the Franks, she ruled France! Her husband died. Henri died, leaving Anne of Kyiv to be the queen of France, ruling that country. Her descendants transformed France completely, including building the Louvre. So I read this extraordinary book on the history of Paris. It talked about how backwards Paris was.

Maksym Eristavi:

Oh, yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

And then here comes Anne of Kyiv, and Anne of Kyiv just whips it into shape because the kingdom, Kyiv Rus, that she left in Kyiv, that was a literate kingdom. That was a kingdom that was very formal. They'd have like 12 meals at dinner. And she gets to France and her husband like, can't read. [laughs]. Like signs his name with an X.

Maksym Eristavi (00:21:50):

[laughs] Not only can't read. I remember from school, we would read through her letters that she would send from Paris after she arrived, and she was so distressed. She was like, "God, these people smell and they don't wash and it's just unbearable. I cannot stand being inside the building some of the time because it's so unhygienic" and stuff. She had the most massive cultural shock because her life would be like, just felt like it was centuries away from that.

Andrea Chalupa (00:22:21):

If you're wondering where Ukraine's stubborn, tenacious, fearless, national pride and identity comes from, it's because it's an extraordinarily old and proud and impactful culture that is centuries older than Russia. In Ukrainian eyes, Russia looks like a belligerent teenager that can't keep it shit together.

Maksym Eristavi (00:22:43):

I think, yeah. The majority of Ukrainians do not... Of course they're proud of long ancestry and stuff like that, but they don't see other nations around them as like, it's not at someone's expense, right? Even when it comes to Russia, of course, we all understand that when Ukraine already had—it wouldn't be called Ukraine—but Ukraine already had hundreds of years of statehood, history and stuff like that. Moscow wasn't even existing. But what is frustrating is that it's not the first time in history where a colonial empire just appropriates the history of subjugated nations and countries and lands, and then tried to reshape it and take the best part and assigned it to its own history and stuff like that. You can see the same kind of dynamic and here, for example, you hear the conversations that are happening in some Western countries when it comes to colonialism, which again, also not ideally address the issue for many Western countries at the moment..

Maksym Eristavi (00:23:44):

But then at least you see some conversations about like, Okay, so we have these best museums in Paris and Berlin, even in the States, and they're filled with stuff stolen from other lands and appropriated as part of the cultural legacy of these countries. And now people try to untangle it and, you know, maybe talk about returning some of that stolen stuff back to where it belongs and stuff like that, but it's not happening when it comes to Russia because a lot of foreigners go to Hermitage and they're like, "Wow! This is one of the most fantastic museums in the world!" But the majority of stuff there is from other countries that Russia ruled before that and nobody even questions it or tries to address it in any ways.

Andrea Chalupa (00:24:37):

Where do you think that comes from? Is it because Russian disinformation is so effective and Putin always beats on and on about russophobia any time anyone tries to call the Kremlin out for its aggression? Why do you think the west tends to give so much.... sympathy? Or generosity towards excusing Russia's colonialism and aggression?

Maksym Eristavi (00:25:07):

You answered this question yourself a bit earlier when you pointed out to absolute lack of diversity when it comes to people who are in charge of Russia policy or in charge of Russia coverage in the West. And, you know, people who are in think tanks, in universities, in media who cover this region as their job. And you're absolutely right. The majority of those people are white. They're male coming from specific-

Andrea Chalupa (00:25:37):

Mediocre.

Maksym Eristavi:

[laughs]

Andrea Chalupa:

[laughs] White, male and mediocre. Checking all the boxes. Sorry, go on.

Maksym Eristavi (00:25:40):

[laugh] Well, yeah, and this lack of diversity, I was... You know, because I spent years just thinking, Why is this happening? Why you spend so much time and you try to explain, you try to educate people. Although again, this is not what we're supposed to do. That's kind of very intense labor. We're not paid for this.

Andrea Chalupa:

Mmmhmm <affirmative>

Maksym Eristavi:

But as Ukrainians and as Eastern Europeans, you try to educate them and it's kind of you hitting the wall all the time. Then I realized through help of other friends from the West who do not come from the same socio racial economic background, who are like, "Just to look at it. How does it look like for you? What kind of gender/race those people are, how wealthy they are, what kind of universities they finished, graduated from and stuff like that. Then for me, it was an eye opener. Once I looked at this problem through the problem of diversity and racism and economic background, it made total sense. It all clicked. Even the way they talk to us because the majority of Ukrainians and people in Eastern Europe are also white, but the same Western white supremacy dynamic also works with us because they keep telling us that we're not white enough. We're not educated enough. We're not civilized enough to check all the boxes for agency so they can assign us that agency, right? So why we have to convince and provide evidence every time to a lot of those Westerners, why we, for example, have the right for sovereignty or why we have the right for agency and not just like a domain for another colonial power. And then it just hit me: Yeah, they are complacent with Russian colonialism because in their view, it's nothing... I mean, it's not as bad because in their worldview, it just does not click with them as much to sympathize in general.

Andrea Chalupa (00:27:48):

Yeah. That's the issue is a lot of these white mediocre males that make up the newsrooms and the think tanks and the analysts at financial institutions and so forth covering Eastern Europe, it's the Russian

romanticism they come through. That's their lens. And it reminds me so much of Americans who refuse to let go of the romanticism of their "heritage", The Confederacy, refuse to acknowledge that Thanksgiving is whitewashing genocide, a genocide so great of the native Americans that it literally changed the global climate.

Maksym Eristavi:

Mmmhmm <affirmative>

Andrea Chalupa:

And of course Santa Claus can't be Black. They may see themselves, these so-called... We'll just say for this Western lens of Ukraine and so forth, they may see themselves in their home countries of America, Canada, the UK, Germany, and so forth as liberal, progressive, open-minded, feminist, whatever they may identify as. But when it comes to understanding Ukraine, all they see, they just sum it up to poor white people.

Andrea Chalupa (00:28:57):

And historically, even today, poor white people, whether they come from Ukraine, Poland or elsewhere, are seen as less privileged, less deserving, less human and tools on a chess board.

Maksym Eristavi:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, they're tools on a chess board. It's really frustrating because a lot of, I would think... I'll be generous and say a lot of well meaning people, including on the Left, see Ukraine as just a chess piece in the big war between Russia and the US, not a state with its own sovereignty, its own national identity, its own rich history. I mean, when you had Euromaidan, the Revolution of Dignity—which was a popular uprising, not a CIA coup that a lot of leftists who listen to RT (Russia Today) want it framed as—what you had there on Maidan Square in Kyiv were posters or murals of some of Ukraine's greatest poets, the Walt Whitmans of Ukraine, the Emily Dickinsons of Ukraine. You had, of course, Lesya Ukrainka and Taras Shevchenko and these were poets that used the resistance of art to the coded language of poetry to fight for all sorts of human rights on the front lines and push universal freedom.

Maksym Eristavi (00:30:21):

And against Russian colonialism as well back in 19, 18th century.

Andrea Chalupa (00:30:26):

Yeah, and paid a price for it. So it's just so maddening to be up against that horrible lens.

Maksym Eristavi:

[long sigh] [laughs]

Andrea Chalupa:

In the years of 2013-2014 with the revolution in Ukraine followed by Putin's invasion, those years when people like you and I and so many others were screaming about how dangerous Putin was, how these bots were seen, these Kamikaze Kremlin bots that were in full force, all the disinformation, how effective the disinformation was, we were getting drowned out by the mediocre white men in the media who were trying to label us as hysterical. And they were vicious.

Maksym Eristavi (00:31:13):

That's their synonymous word for people who are not white enough or not Western enough. They just like being hysterical because that's what they do.

Andrea Chalupa (00:31:23):

You don't have any credibility unless you're a white straight man who went to the University of Chicago and has some cloistered media or think tank job in some major city. Yeah, that's when you get credibility. But they were so vicious to deal with in all those years people like you and I and my co-host, Sarah, were trying to warn people about Kremlin aggression and getting drowned out and dismissed and harassed. And then Trump comes to power using all the mechanisms we had warned about how Kremlin aggression works, how this Kremlin disinformation works. And suddenly they were, like, shocked. They were shocked. They were like, "What?!" And then they switched gears and became the, "Oh, this won't be so bad. Stop being hysterical." Right? And now they sound like us. Now they finally sound like us.

Maksym Eristavi (00:32:17):

I remember that some years ago I also wrote an op ed for, I think it was *Foreign Affairs*, where I kind of, you know... I said that I never thought I'm gonna be in position where I feel like my experience of living in a very corrupt, captured by oligarchs state and region will be of help to Americans, but now I think this is like exactly what you can benefit from, that experience, and to know what to expect, because this is exactly what is happening to you. [laughs] And it was even shocking for me as well to realize, but also it helped me to realize a lot about what is happening in the states from this particular lens because I think that all the things that you're mentioned, they take roots in some of the blind spots about how Americans see themselves in general.

Maksym Eristavi (00:33:15):

And of course, some reckoning is happening somewhere in many aspects of American life, in entertainment, in politics, a reckoning when it comes to racism and misogyny and income inequality, but one of the biggest blind spots that still is there and unaddressed when it comes to these issues is foreign policy, in foreign policy and media coverage of the outside world. That's where that reckoning hasn't happened at all. And that's why we see when it comes to specifically Russia, not because Russia is so *important* that it's not the number one issue for that sphere for sure. There are many other pressing crises. But because in that intersection, you clearly see what's the problem of American foreign policy and the view of Americans of the outside world. It still hasn't been decolonized. Not a bit. It still kind of over-protects the view that lacks and is devoid of any diversity whatsoever.

Maksym Eristavi (00:34:29):

I think once Americans start addressing that, it will be easier to navigate through foreign policy crises that the country is dealing with because one of the running jokes now back into the region, that people thought that Trump is like, you know, horrible and messed up with the region and blackmailed us and,

you know, did a lot of damage. But I wouldn't say that people are very satisfied with the way Biden is handling the region either. I mean, of course it's marginally better, but still we have the same problems that we had with Trump and the same problems we had with Obama and administrations before that just do not get the region, cannot get through this wall of misconception that, again, you need to go through it by looking with self awareness before trying to fix those problems elsewhere.

Andrea Chalupa (00:35:30):

What would you like Biden and his foreign policy team to do to meaningfully support and help Ukraine right now?

Maksym Eristavi (00:35:40):

Well, first, again, there's of course long-term remedy, but I would also bring in more diversity to those foreign policy teams, not only in Russia but elsewhere. I don't think it's okay the way we deal with the majority of people who are from specific socioeconomic and racial background all the time, majority of the men and stuff. So once you bring diversity... And it's not only just a feel fact, there is actual evidence—academic evidence—showing that more diversity in teams brings better results, especially addressing crisis problem situations. So I think for the long term, that would be of the most help, to see more diverse people and those teams. But in the short term, I think kleptocracy should be a priority Number One, not so much, you know, geopolitics in general, but once you crack down on the ways Eastern European and other foreign kleptocrats use Western countries, Western world (including the United States) to whitewash their money but also whitewash their reputations and store their stolen goods, that's when I think a lot of other problems will start to untangle, even with Russia. Because a lot of people say, "Oh, that's such a big headache. How do you deal with a nuclear power that is so aggressive?" But for years, everyone—including from Russia—keeps saying just be effective on closing loopholes that allow them to store their wealth in the West and that's gonna be the most effective policy they can probably have in this kind of situation with these kinds of regimes.

Andrea Chalupa (00:37:32):

And I don't know if they'll ever do it because, you know, someone's gonna lose profit if you close all those loopholes.

Maksym Eristavi (00:37:40):

Well, I'm kind of a no bullshit guy so, for me, at least if you admit this problem, that would be already good enough for me, at least as a start, because now I don't think there is much honesty happening. At least when the public is gonna be aware of that. I'm not sure the majority of the public even understands how much money is there in all this industry of whitewashing and supporting foreign kleptocrats. It's there in the West. Once we at least start being honest about it and the local public will be more aware of this issue, I think it would be at least as a start. I think.

Andrea Chalupa (00:38:23):

So obviously we've touched throughout this conversation on kleptocracy as a means for state capture. So what warning do you have there about, like, if we don't clean up our corruption, Russia will just have a field day with us and so forth?

Maksym Eristavi (00:38:39):

Gosh, I think I could be a bit biased about the focus but for me it's important to pay attention to media outlets and the health of the media industry in general because as you see not only from the places that suffered from kleptocracy and corruption, but also places that recently had unfortunate rollbacks in democracy like Hungary and Poland that are now, you know, in many respects doing worse off compared to Ukraine, say, in terms of democracy. One of the warning signs that we always saw there first would come through the dramatic degrees in press freedoms and health of journalism in general. And I think for many autocratic regimes, this is part of the effective toolbox that, you know, not only you have the opportunity to be financially effective at hiding your wealth, or hiring blood armies and creating all kinds of... You know, extorting and exploiting the weaknesses of Western social media platforms. But also you attack newsrooms, independent journalism first, and that's where erosion starts.

Maksym Eristavi (00:40:04):

I don't wanna be too corny about it, but I like the tagline for the *Washington Post*, that "democracy dies in darkness." This is just life-proven fact. This is what we've seen in recent years in Hungary, where the autocratic government started cracking down on journalism first to cut off the public from reliable sources of information, to cut out the ability of journalists to investigate to bring light to the problems, and then it's just easier for them to go from there. And I think, unfortunately—I mean, you can probably agree with me—these are tendencies that are very on display in the United States, especially regarding the decimation of the field of local journalism, which just lays and ruins across the states.

Andrea Chalupa (00:41:01):

Oh, absolutely. And the consolidation of far right media. We had Fox News for many years and suddenly we have One America Network and then Sinclair buying up local TV networks. So you're saying that you're seeing a danger. I'm seeing it too, but just to continue this thread: So you're seeing a dangerous corruption of our media industry here in the US that looks very similar to other patterns you've seen in countries like Hungary and Poland that have declined in terms of democracy?

Maksym Eristavi (00:41:32):

Yeah, definitely. The effect of all of it is to marginalize journalism in general and this marginalization starts with the destruction of local journalism because that's where the most important link between the public and journalism is happening. Because the national media do not have the capacity, or it's not even the format to kind of pay attention to small local communities, but also, you know, with my two decades experience of working in journalism and supporting independent newsrooms on the press freedom front lines, I learned that the most impactful journalistic investigations are also happening on the local level. They don't necessarily have millions of views, but they deliver the most impact. And that's where the audience pays the most attention as well. The majority of people, regardless of the country, they don't consume news regularly. Maybe like around 30% depending on the country would tune to news regularly to check on something.

Maksym Eristavi (00:42:36):

But the majority of this percentage is rising dramatically higher when it comes to local news, not only, you know, could be linked to the trivial, like, you know, checking weather updates or weather emergencies and stuff like that. But it also kind of trickles down to more serious topics, like, say, corruption and stuff like that. And we've seen a similar situation where a lot of local newsrooms are being bought out, closed down, starved of resources and then, just like 10 years from that, the collapse of democracy starting because the majority of coverage is happening by national media, being divided

and accumulated by oligarchs or subjugated by the state. And that's where this situation becomes really, really irreversible.

Andrea Chalupa (00:43:27):

Yeah, exactly right. That's exactly right. And you're basically left with a media landscape that is decentralized, it's commercialized, and it's owned by oligarchs essentially. And you're basically at the mercy of whether those are "good oligarchs" or "bad oligarchs". There is no good oligarch in my opinion because even the existence of an oligarch is a policy failure.

Maksym Eristavi :

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

So this is essentially the media landscape in Ukraine and the US is already well on its way headed there.

Maksym Eristavi (00:44:03):

Well, I would even say that when it comes to regional media, Ukraine is even doing a bit better than the States, but yeah, this is... I would even look for more warning signs in places like Hungary than even Ukraine. But for Ukraine or, for example, for other Eastern European states like Georgia, it was also part of the problem when you see the rollback in democracy, especially as we're seeing now in Georgia, for example, where a lot of media outlets—the major top media outlets—are divided up between pro government/anti-government oligarchs. It just contributes to extreme, toxic polarization when in fact media outlets are engaged in political polarization and political fights rather than serving the public. That's what they're seeing, for example, in Georgia where, you know, there is no one government/one media policy kind of situation, but where media outlets—the most popular—are divided by oligarchs and political powers in conflict. And they're just gaslighting the public so much that it's impossible to imagine any dialogue or any conversation even happening between the opposing sides and that's where, again, democracy dies. So I think for the States, I wouldn't also imagine 1984 kind of situation but you're already part of the reality where the industry that is falling apart at the local level will bring even more polarization to the public which, again, is detrimental to democracy. If you don't talk, you cannot possibly count that democracy will survive.

Andrea Chalupa (00:45:49):

It's definitely a crisis that's just getting worse and social media giants like Facebook feed off of this for profit.

Maksym Eristavi (00:45:57):

Ugh. [laughs] Yeah. That's part of my everyday frustration in work because the lack of accountability, I mean, I understand the situation in the States but there is also kind of the problem that many in the States do not really pay attention, how American social media or American tech becomes crucial communication infrastructure for so many countries outside of United States that face zero accountability and basically holds a key to healthy democratic debate inside the country, but refuses to accept any responsibility for it. Our constant frustration is that we cannot get to the point where at least we're forcing them to listen to us about these concerns.

Andrea Chalupa (00:46:52):

So you are on the front lines of the disinformation war with trying to promote independent journalism and fact checking. What advice do you have for people, the public, for staying grounded in media literacy and understanding the dark arts of disinformation deception out there?

Maksym Eristavi (00:47:14):

Look, I always give much more credit to those who do consumption of media or news than usually people do. So I don't get very patronized saying, "Well, people just need to be more educated and spend more time checking sources" and stuff like that. I mean, at some point, at some level, it is important, but I also think that the real problem, again, starts with a healthy media environment in general. If we have a healthy environment where especially local media outlets are strong, we can get to the point where people are getting just better quality information in general and they don't go to social media networks to find information they really need. So there's the problem that we see on the front lines, that the majority of people go to social media and consume information from unverified sources or sources that spread false information.

Maksym Eristavi (00:48:11):

It's just because they don't trust media outlets in general. It's kind of Catch 22 situation. Media outlets cannot get more high quality journalists because they're starved of the resources, but they also cannot get more resources if the public does not trust them and is not ready to pay or support them in some way. You know? And I think once we try to address this problem, it will get gradually better in terms of resistance to propaganda. And organized propaganda is something that is, of course, a massive problem but again, it starts there and it starts in global accountability of social media platforms, primarily American social media platforms but it comes to space outside the United States as well.

Andrea Chalupa (00:49:00):

I love how I asked you about kleptocracy as a method for state capture and countries like Russia spreading their imperialism and expanding their network of proxy states and you went immediately to the media because that was one of Putin's first weapons against the Russian people. It wasn't just the Chechnya War and all the disinformation that the Kremlin pushed for that, and obviously the murder and harassment of notable journalists covering that war, but also a clamping down of the media, including a popular comedy show in Russia. But that was sort of the beginning of Putinism, wasn't it? It was his attack on any independent media inside Russia.

Maksym Eristavi (00:49:46):

It wasn't even a full frontal attack. And again, that kind of a toolbox since then has been copied all over the place outside of Europe as well by other autocrats. You don't go frontal on journalism at first. You don't say like, you know, "This is censorship" or "You have no right to exist." You deploy the help of your friends who are oligarchs and you help them to accumulate enough power over media outlets, and then when that power is accumulated, you finally can have enough say in who's going out of business and who stays, and those who stay, how they cover what you do with that country. I think it's fairly simple. And it's always shocking to me that the majority of people do not understand that. And they again think in terms of these absolutely surrealist scenarios of total government control over truth, which is not how democracy dies these days. That's where I would love to people to get that and understand that better these days,

Andrea Chalupa (00:50:56):

Right. Dictatorship doesn't arrive in a bunch of tanks saying, "Okay, you're now a dictatorship." It's this gradual chipping away of services, of rights, of press freedom, of civil rights.

Maksym Eristavi (00:51:08):

Well, yeah, for example, during the COVID pandemic illustrates even better this situation where you see how, for example, recently uncovered campaign by Russian propaganda and Russian proxy media outlets in Ukraine showed—there were a number of investigations—showed how this network kind of spreads anti covid anti-vax sentiments and basically undermine public health, create kind of public health emergency and crisis within the country. But as a consequence, they destroyed even more trust towards media outlets and the government and state institutions and ended up dividing and polarizing the public even more. So you can be really smart about it. On paper, this is just, you know, a pro movement supporting anti-vax sentiments in the country when in fact the ultimate goal still remains the same to undermine democratic institutions within the country through this healthcare crisis. I think the US is dealing with very much similar situations these days.

Andrea Chalupa (00:52:19):

I wanted to ask you about human rights, civil rights, namely LGBTQ rights in the region.

Maksym Eristavi:

Mmhmm <affirmative>

Andrea Chalupa:

What is the current state of LGBTQ rights? I know Ukraine and Kyiv Pride, as we mentioned in your bio, is a model relative success story, given what Eastern European people are up against. But what is the current state of those civil rights across the region and what are some success stories that give you hope?

Maksym Eristavi (00:52:53):

Of course, I, I love telling the story of the queer equality fight in Ukraine not only because it's very dear to me as a queer man coming from Ukraine—and I've been part of the story for many years—but also because it's so illustrative of the same dynamic that I try to explain to people in a larger perspective of colonialism. I never separate those issues. I never separate the issues of human rights, equality, and democracy. And I never separate the issues of Russian colonialism and the dynamic with human rights equality in the Russian neighborhood, which is basically still in many ways a legacy of colonial rule over our country. The homophobic laws that still exist in some of the countries, including those criminalizing homosexuality like Uzbekistan, are direct legacy of Russian colonial laws. The same was with Ukraine. And even to the day, despite Ukraine having such enormous progress with queer rights—although of course it's still far away from optimal—despite Ukraine having such a great progress in the last 8/7 years, a lot of issues are still embedded within the legacy that colonialism left in the country, including homophobic laws from the Soviet union.

Maksym Eristavi (00:53:56):

The first homophobic laws that have been ever introduced in Ukraine were laws introduced by Russian Imperial rule over Ukraine in the early 20th century. And it's still there unaddressed, although, you know, some people are trying to point out to that as well, but it's also a good illustrational story of how it's not a local fight anymore, at least across Eastern Europe. But as I talk to other equality activists elsewhere, they also point out that it's a truly global fight because of the power of international conservative groups that have over our regions that pour so many resources to empower homophobes on local levels, including American organizations such as World Family Congress, which just kind of links to our conversation about global kleptocracy and basically has the same base there: that once we cannot address those agents that are based in the West and they have toxic influence, including through money on freedom, democracy or equality across the world, we won't be able to fix it on the front line, so we'll need solidarity and help there—and awareness, better awareness as well—to try to fix it here on local level.

Andrea Chalupa (00:55:34):

So you mentioned a few things, but what specifically more can the west do to support LGBTQ movements in the region? I know these rights are under attack still in the US, but I've always wanted to see more of a global movement, global organizing, a lot of resources in countries like the US and Canada and the UK and Germany and so forth going towards countries like Ukraine to support the communities there that are on the front lines of pioneering these issues, which have a very powerful ripple effect for democracy generally. So what more do you think the West could do to support LGBTQ movements in the region, especially in Ukraine?

Maksym Eristavi (00:56:20):

I have this Kyiv story from some years ago when we were having Kyiv Pride in the Ukrainian capital. It's a large event by now, attended by thousands of people, but it still has very rigorous security so there are lines of, you know, access points managed by police where people are getting like checked if they have anything dangerous and stuff like that. So I was trying to access the security line and I was prevented by a group of protestors that were like around 20 people and they were screaming at me in English, you know, perfect English saying like, “Well, you shouldn't join. This is funded by the West. This is like...” all this homophobic propaganda and stuff. And I, you know, I decided to engage with them because like, why would they chant in English at Ukraine Pride? And turns out it was a group of Christian activists from Pittsburgh.

Maksym Eristavi (00:57:19):

I was so perplexed by this situation. Why would you come here and prevent Ukrainians from joining something they wanna join to exercise their freedom of speech and congregation, stuff like that. And then I kind of understood that we have a big problem with transparency, how much those, say, American groups spend money on shipping those people to prides on freedom front lines or sending direct money to homophobic groups, how they operate. I think this transparency lacks and I think the awareness of people in our ally state, in America, the Congress and the new political spectrum, civil society also lacks, that this is a big issue and that's where I want the help to arrive because I don't have resources and time to spend investigating those groups. But I would love to have more information, more transparency in how it operates because you have better access to that kind of information. So I always engage and ask for help first there, I think to kind of bring more light to that transportive dynamic that is happening with homophobic groups and American homophobic groups in particular.

Andrea Chalupa (00:58:40):

Do you get any support from Western allies? Are the Western allies doing essentially the same groundwork where they show up for you guys and send money?

Maksym Eristavi (00:58:51):

No, I would say we've got so much help, like real good help, not in terms of, you know, this weird propaganda narrative that you just basically finance everything and force people to attend Prides by distributing Western grants.

Maksym Eristavi (00:59:10):

[laughs] Right. There's no big gay Illuminati agenda that's driving this, no.

Maksym Eristavi (00:59:14):

Of course there's gay, you know, gay conspiracy as well as homophobic conspiracy, you know, and we all know each other and are connected through the world. But I think the simplest way how I can illustrate that, when it was still a challenge for us to organize a secure Pride event, not because we didn't have people willing to come but because the security situation was real bad. We couldn't get any support from police to protect us from homophobic, violent groups. First Prides in Kyiv and elsewhere across the region were met with violence. In Tbilisi, for example, in other smaller cities in Ukraine, but then what happened is that we recruit our foreign allies who are based in the country just to help us to get meetings with our own bureaucrats and our own officials that would deny us those meetings before.

Maksym Eristavi (01:00:15):

So for example, you know, a Swedish ambassador would just go to the police and schedule a meeting. You know, a meeting of ambassador/police chief would definitely happen, right? But then during the meeting, he would just bring us along and sit at the table and say, "You gotta talk." And that's where the breakthrough happened, just because they use their platform and their influence and the power to empower our ability to get through the bureaucratic wall, get through inability or homophobic misconceptions of our own officials and start talking, starting cooperating, making sure that our officials do their job as they're supposed to do. So in this simple example, I could, you know, explain what kind of support and allyship we got in recent years here.

Andrea Chalupa (01:01:11):

The final question for you: Where do you see the region going in terms of civil rights, press freedom? Do you see a hopeful landscape, as long as Russia Kremlin aggression can be contained? Where do you see the region going in the coming years and what gives you hope?

Maksym Eristavi (01:01:32):

Hmm. How would I end on, you know, not depressing though. [laugh] Let me think about it. Yeah, to be honest, I do feel still optimistic, not so optimistic, but I see signs of hope that I can cling to. And first and foremost, I still think that the biggest problem is not so much in technical issues in the region, like how effective are your corruption laws, or how much nukes Russia has and stuff like that, but rather at the perspective that is lacking, what is the power dynamic in the region and where the problems fundamentally originate. And they originate in this messed up power imbalance between colonial power and former/current subjects. It helped me to understand this problem, this dynamic, it helped me to kind of figure out what to do and how to deal with it and I think once other people get on board, it will be easier for them to make sense of it as well, rather than just a constant source of frustration and

annoyance, because it keeps happening and nobody understands why Russia's so stubborn or why anti-corruption reforms are not happening as they're supposed to happen.

Maksym Eristavi:

Because we don't see a larger picture. We don't see a colonial dynamic in the region. We don't see a global kleptocracy dynamic in the region and this just becomes a distraction, all those little things become a distraction from the larger picture. But I see people kind of starting to slowly move into that direction. You guys are amazing at global kleptocracy awareness and the awareness about building bridges between different situations with democratic rollbacks and stuff like that. That work is so important and it's actually helping people to make sense of it. And I think once we're better at making sense of it, we will be able to recruit more allies for it because, for the majority of people, it is just either a news cycle or this constant frustrating annoyance that they cannot make sense of so it's just becomes something that they get really tired of really quickly and just, you know, shrug it off.

[outro theme music]

Andrea Chalupa:

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