

Gaslit Nation Transcript

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“Is Russia Headed Towards Collapse?”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/is-russia-headed-85225211>

[advertisement]

[intro theme up and under]

Andrea Chalupa (00:26):

Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*. I am your host, Andrea Chalupa, and we are joined today by a special guest, Olga Lautman; the wonderful Olga Lautman, one of the world's foremost experts on the Russian mafia. And when we mean the Russian mafia, we're really talking about the Russian mafia state, politely known among the appeasement set as the Russian Federation. But it's a straight up Russian mafia state of warlords, as we saw or were reminded of very dramatically this weekend with Prigozhin's attempted military coup. We'll get to all of that. I have a whole list of questions for the folks here joining us live, and I know you guys do too, so drop them in the chat. And yeah, we're just gonna go at it. But first, there's some exciting announcements I have to get through. We are having... *Gaslit Nation* has been organizing a big old summer series called [drum roll] “The Future of Dictatorship” featuring leading experts on AI, how tech is disrupting our lives, how the oligarchs are using technology to try to escape from us. And some of these experts in this big old summer series on the future of dictatorship are Douglass Rushkoff, who wrote some extraordinary must-read books like *Team Human*; Cory Doctorow, the science fiction writer who's out with a new novel; Cindy Cohn of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, all about how to protect yourselves from corporate surveillance and dictatorship surveillance; Josh Chin and Liza Lin, who wrote *Surveillance State: Inside China's Quest to Launch a New Era of Social Control*. These are big conversations with big experts running all summer long. I cannot wait to bring this to you. We've been working really, really hard on it. I learned a lot from these conversations. I thought the future would be a lot more bleak than some of our experts made it out to be. I was expecting just this dismal [laughs] dark night of the soul slumber party discussion.

Andrea Chalupa (02:28):

But some of our experts provided some interesting silver linings of hope, room for Hope in what I presume to be just a dark *Mad Max* future. So you can hear all of those provocative conversations or insights and comment and share your comments and questions as the series continues all summer long. And another final big announcement, then we're gonna get to Olga and our deep dive conversation on what the hell is going on in Russia; where is Russia headed? Is it headed for collapse? What does that mean for the rest of the world? How should the democratic alliance respond? But so my final big announcement before we get to all that is there's going to be a big night out for *Gaslit Nation* listeners and myself and maybe Olga if she can make it. There's a wonderful bar in New York City in the Lower East Side called Caveat.

Andrea Chalupa (03:14):

And Caveat has all sorts of fun events, including a regular live podcast taping with the wonderful folks at the storytelling podcast *Risk*. And I'm going to be there at Caveat in New York City doing a live podcast taping of *Gaslit Nation* and *Risk* to talk about the making of the brand new graphic novel *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think*. You can get signed copies of the book there. And this is gonna be August 5th at 4:00 PM at Caveat, and it's going to be live streamed. So wherever you are in the world, you can watch

this event. I'm going to put all the details in the show notes for this week's episode in the Patreon page for this week's episode. And my guest of honor... Actually that's not true, he's hosting me. It's his show. He's just letting me join. It's my old friend, Kevin Allison, who is the founder of the *Risk* storytelling podcast.

Andrea Chalupa (04:11):

Kevin Allison's been on MTV's *The State* Comedy Central's *Reno 911*, HBO's *High Maintenance*, Netflix's *Cobra Kai*. Kevin Allison is the host and creator of the hit podcast *Risk*, the show where people tell true stories they never thought they dared to share. *Risk* features, stories that are too raw, honest, and uncensored for other storytelling shows and fans say the show has saved their lives, helped them be more empathetic and feel more human. The *Risk* podcast has been downloaded nearly a hundred million times since its debut In 2009, was named one of *Rolling Stone's* top podcasts of the year, and has been called "jaw-dropping, hilarious and just plain touching" by *Slate*. You can join that event in person in New York City at Caveat or virtually online wherever you live. We'll have details in the show notes on Patreon for this week's episode on how to reserve your ticket to that event.

Andrea Chalupa (05:05):

Hope to see you all there. Olga, hope to see you there because, you know, you and I are trying to... L-I-V-I-N. Livin'. it's all about livin' in the pandemic wilding out phase [laughs] that we're all in. So Olga, I know everyone has questions. I have to read your bio. The last time you're on the show, my dad called me and said, "You didn't bother to tell us who she is," even though he knows who you are very well. So I have to read your bio for my father out there. Olga Lautman is a non-resident senior fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis, otherwise known as CEPA. Olga is also the creator and co-host of *Kremlin File* podcast series, which features expert discussions on the Kremlin's internal affairs, global operations and tactics used from their hybrid warfare toolkit to destabilize western democracies. Olga's research focuses on the cross-section of organized crime and intelligence operations in Russia and Ukraine, their impacts on the West, and the monitoring of active measures campaigns conducted by the Kremlin to destabilize democratic practices and influence foreign elections. And she's never been more in demand. Welcome back to *Gaslit Nation*, Olga. What the hell happened this weekend in Russia? Are we witnessing the inevitable collapse of Russia?

Olga Lautman (06:23):

Oh, yes, we are. And this was a very fun weekend [laughs]. Definitely everyone, the whole world, was watching this unraveling of Russia. But the collapse actually started last year. Basically, after Russia launched its full scale invasion and genocide in Ukraine, you know, they took territory—about 13/14% of territory aside from what they had occupied in 2014—so late summer around I would say August/September when Ukraine launched its successful counteroffensive and started taking back territory, that is when everything started unraveling. And from there, we saw the Russian military blockers that have a lot of influence inside of Russia being critical of the Ministry of Defense, being critical of Putin himself. One even said, "Why did we even bother electing him in 2012? We should have found a new leader back then."

Olga Lautman (07:30):

And we also saw the fight with Prigozhin escalating with the Ministry of Defense. But now this has been going on. I mean, Russia launched its full scale invasion in Ukraine. You would think that their main objective would be fighting in Ukraine. But since probably last May, so over a year now, they are busy shooting each other on the front lines. And you have the Chechens who are shooting the Wagners (I call them Wagnerites) and you have both shooting the Russian military, anyone who's trying to surrender to Ukrainian armed forces. And I mean, it's been a shitshow basically since this started. And come

September, Prigozhin starts getting extremely critical of the Ministry of Defense. The more losses that Russia is taking inside of Ukraine, the more humiliation there is. And Russia has always been a very well oiled propaganda machine.

Olga Lautman (08:34):

And suddenly you see the propaganda on TV unraveling. No one is on the same page. You see the Russian military bloggers start fighting and being critical of the elites, of the Ministry of Defense, even the Duma members. And you just see this whole thing being created, all these divisions and the fractures kept growing, growing, growing to the point come around November where things started getting extremely worse. And Prigozhin came out and called the General Chief of Staff of [bleep] (Gerasimov) and a fucking devil, excuse my language, coming from him.

Andrea Chalupa:

These people are gross. Reminder.

Olga Lautman:

Yeah, this is something that crossed the code of conduct because you don't cross these lines, not in the past few centuries inside of Soviet Union or Russian Empire

Andrea Chalupa (09:31):

It's straight up the Real Housewives of the Kremlin.

Olga Lautman (09:34):

It is. And from there it's just the feud kept growing between the Ministry of Defense and Prigozhin. And then we basically see Friday where Prigozhin releases the video and says that, you know, Russia, since they invaded Ukraine in 2014, that basically the leads have been robbing Crimea and Donbas, that everyone's pocketing money and that it was unnecessary and there's no denazification—that's all lies. There's no demilitarization—that's a lie—and that he's going to basically march to the Kremlin. Now, by no means is Prigozhin a good guy. Prigozhin is a terrorist. Wagner is a terrorist organization. They are responsible for beheading people, for raping, for tortures across Africa, across the Middle East, Latin America and then obviously in Ukraine. Wagner was created specifically for the annexation of Crimea in 2014 by a GRU colonel who seems to always go escaped from US media. So that's who really is behind Wagner and Prigozhin is the public face of it. And that's it. And this is where it's gonna be. And basically, as I say, this is again—Andrea loves history—another example of Russia being Russia over the past few centuries. When there's pressure on the system, they become self-destructive and they start attacking each other,

Andrea Chalupa (11:13):

And then it all descends into chaos and the meanest dog in the fight tends to win. So let me ask you this. We have a question from a *Gaslit Nation* listener who submitted this question through our Patreon. I'm going to raise it to you now. It's quite broad. Take your time with it. It's an important one. She writes, "It would help to know the range of possible outcomes—best and worst case—in the succession battle to take Putin's place, particularly as it relates to Ukraine. What do you see playing out from all this, especially in regards to how it may help or hurt Ukraine?"

Olga Lautman (11:49):

Any disturbance inside of Russia is very helpful for Ukraine. The same military bloggers that, you know, have been basically spewing propaganda and lies and inciting more violence and monitoring the whole front line of Russia's military forces along the front in Ukraine, these past few days are now occupied with basically questioning what the hell they have in their office. So literally, like, just even the shift in narrative, you don't have them putting out propaganda and disinformation. They're focused on themselves. Yesterday, there's one, for instance, terrorist—his name is [inaudible]—who was very crucial to the annexation of Crimea. He basically called for Putin to step down. He was livid with the fact that Putin forgave Prigozhin and gave amnesty to Wagner. And I mean, he has a million followers.

Olga Lautman (12:57):

Another one with a few million followers, same thing: he was like, "What is this? Is this our leader?" So right now they're too busy attacking themselves and in itself, that is useful. Also, with any shift of power inside—if Putin were to get overthrown and just even with what is happening, the turmoil surrounding Putin—this distracts from the frontline. And as it is, the Russians don't have high morale on the frontline. I mean, they enter the full scale invasion basically cycling gas out of the tanks, you know? So there wasn't morale to begin with. But now, not knowing which direction their country is going, what they're fighting for, who they're fighting for, it's only gonna continue helping Ukraine. And if Putin should be overthrown, which I honestly don't see Putin... Since last year, I've been saying that Putin's pretty much done, that we should focus on post Putin and post Russian; proper foreign policy to address that.

Olga Lautman (13:58):

But should Putin get overthrown, they are going to be busy shooting each other, setting off car bombs and trying to steal the state resources, get control of, you know, the various state enterprises. So they'll be too occupied temporarily with themselves and trying to solidify the grip on power to focus on Ukraine. So everything that happened from the minimum that, you know, right now, Ukrainians are happy. They actually reclaimed several cities along the front, a few that were under Russian capture since 2014 while everyone's watching Prigozhin. So everything from what we are seeing immediately to going forward, I mean, it's only a good scenario for Ukraine.

Andrea Chalupa (14:47):

It's only a good scenario. But what if the meanest dog in the fight takes over and he wants to keep the war going because he wants the looting.

Olga Lautman (14:57):

Again, if the meanest dog takes over, frankly, I would be okay with it just because the West would be under no illusion that there's a democracy again like they were in '91.

Andrea Chalupa (15:08):

And 2008 with the reset.

Olga Lautman (15:10):

Yeah, the reset in 2008 and even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West made a very big mistake of running with suitcases of cash, trying to, you know, start a democracy there, bringing people here to train them on how to act in a democracy. And instead, we got infiltrated, or all our institutions. And the money went to basically the security service at the mafia and then Yeltsin's regime. But if we even have the worst dog, they are going to be so occupied with trying to have that grip on power inside

because we are talking about trillions of dollars. We're talking about minerals and energy and various resources.

Andrea Chalupa (15:59):

The Africa operation. China, as much as Russia's a huge pain in the ass for China in Africa, even Wagner forces killing Chinese nationals, China needs Russia in Africa to be its terror police, to be its security essentially in its operations there. So yeah, there's a whole... Like you said, it's a big giant pool of money that the meanest dog in the fight—

Olga Lautman (16:21):

Exactly. And there'll be too busy because you see, they're right now self-destructing and this is over a power grab. I mean, it will only get worse because, you know, each faction is gonna be like, "Why do they have power? We don't want them to have power. We wanna have power." And then on a global implication it will be excellent because then immediately all the proxies, like Assad and Lukashenko and even [inaudible], potentially Orbán, they would be in disarray and they would lose their protection and their cover for being in power. So I think even on a geopolitical scale it would be amazing for that to happen.

Andrea Chalupa (17:04):

Is there any chance that this is a false flag?

Olga Lautman:

No.

Andrea Chalupa:

None at all. That was a question that was raised and I just wanna say in the chat, none at all.

Olga Lautman (17:14):

I wrestled with that last November when there were certain things being said that normally you would get executed on the spot for saying this. I mean, they wouldn't even bother fabricating a vacation. You would just get executed. I wrestled with it last year in November and I watched the influence that Prigozhin was gaining. This was reaching way too many people for it to be a false flag. I mean this... If it was a false flag, it's basically the most stupid operation because they're disrupting their own country. So no, there's no way. And with Prigozhin, look, Prigozhin is an expert with trolls/bots. He deployed the disinformation operation during our 2016 election. He was behind a lot of the disinformation surrounding MH17. He's been involved very heavily with influencing far-right candidates and parties in Europe and our far right, cultivating them and getting them angrier to the point that they are out in the streets committing violence.

Olga Lautman (18:28):

And he is using this via the populist tactic, which he has deployed. And last year I had said, literally, what he deployed on us—the populism, appealing to the people, going after the elite—is exactly what he was doing inside Russia. Hence we see Trump who came out as a populist candidate. Another, you know... We don't know if he's a billionaire, but he claims to be a billionaire. But Prigozhin, same thing. I mean, the guy is a multi-billionaire acting as if he's with the people. "I'm with you." But even his reach to the

people, he has been on the front line. So you have Zelensky, for instance, after Russia launched their full scale invasion, he came out in front of the presidential palace: "I don't need a ride. I need ammo." He stayed there.

Olga Lautman (19:23):

You have Prigozhin on the front lines with his men under shelling. You hear the shelling. You see the dead bodies. He's constantly showing the dead Wagnerites. And then you have Putin who's hiding and commuting between this train car that, you know, they created specifically as they were preparing to enter Ukraine and that's it. And Putin's in a bunker or hiding. And even on Friday, I mean, can you imagine the visual that you have columns of tanks from multiple directions heading to Moscow—the crown jewel of Russia. The so-called president is missing in action. He can't be found. And then he finally crawled out for a five minute speech, disappeared until Monday, and now the whole country's left questioning. And then what he did say, condemning Prigozhin without mentioning his name, but condemning him and the Wagner organization and anyone who's trying to cause a rebellion; "We will crush him, we will punish him. This is treason," blah. And then within a few hours when Prigozhin decides to turn around and he's, "Oh, nevermind, we're not gonna do anything. They're all fine." I mean, there's no way this is a false flag and if there is please conduct more of these [laughs].

Andrea Chalupa (20:40):

[laughs] Yeah, I mean Putin has looked genuinely scared in the video addresses that he's given.

Olga Lautman (20:47):

His video address on Friday, like, I have no clue how the anger broke through the Botox because I literally I've never seen his face shift and he was red and his face was moving and I was like, Whoa.

Andrea Chalupa (20:59):

There was definitely some quivering. And then his spokesman, Peskov, hyped up his latest address saying it's the most important speech on the future of Russia. And it was a big nothing. It was just Putin being angry again and trying to tempt over the Wagner fighters to join/be absorbed by the Russian Ministry of Defense, which is like the Jets and the Sharks in *West Side Story*. They're not going to come together. You know, you're not gonna make that happen, Putin. And so Prigozhin, in a sense, really has Putin by the balls. Putin has a body shortage. He needs bodies for his meat grinder. Prigozhin has the bodies. He has the fighters. And there's a cult of personality of loyalty to him. He dared to do what he did. He fell short, he let a lot of them down.

Andrea Chalupa (21:46):

There were angry Telegram outbursts from some of his supporters, but he really did pierce the armor. And in his 11 minute Telegram rant that Prigozhin just came out with, he was doing some really expert trolling of the Russian Ministry of Defense. I think he said something along the lines of, "Now, if it was the Russian military headed for Moscow, it certainly would've been a successful coup," when everyone knows he obviously does not feel that way. So I wanna ask you, did Prigozhin do what he did because he became a man of the people, as you pointed out? He used social media, he used, you know, being the in-house coup guy of the Kremlin, being the in-house PSYOPs guy of the Kremlin. He used his dark arts on the Kremlin. Is this a showcase of arrogance of him sniffing weakness and going for the crown? Or was he also encouraged to do it by some insiders in the Kremlin establishment who are tired of Putin's nonsense? Do you think he was getting some green lights from those around Putin?

Olga Lautman (22:47):

2 million percent because first of all, when he attacked the Ministry of Defense the first time last September, like really critically, before he made, you know, offhanded comments, and then the attacks crazier and crazier, you don't do that without the protection of someone. So someone around Putin or a group of people around Putin are already planning for Putin's replacement and basically covering for him, providing him the protection. Even more so, this operation he pulled off was months in planning. This didn't just happen. You don't just, you know, wake up drunk or and say, "I'm gonna go attack the Kremlin" and then start rolling tanks through Russia into Rostov, go knock on the southern military district which is their most important headquarters, without getting shot. I mean, you don't go with a bunch of armed men like, "Hi, we need a sit-down right now" and then continue moving through and that's it, you know, keep going pretty much up to 200 kilometers for Moscow.

Olga Lautman (23:56):

So not only is there a group of people around Putin who are backing Prigozhin, or a person or a group of people who are vying for power or potentially will hand it to Prigozhin and sit in the background, but this shows that there are sections of the military intelligence and the FSB (which is their security services) that basically have been working with Prigozhin and allowed this. Because in Russia, if you organize a protest, a spontaneous protest, and it comes down in five minutes, you will have—and we've all seen this line of these uniformed with shield people crushing the protests. The fact that he went on this far shows that Putin doesn't even know who to trust inside his military, inside FSB and GRU (which is their military intelligence) and even more so we don't even know where SVR is on this—that's their foreign intelligence service—because they've been awfully quiet. So I mean, two million percent, this is not just him with an armed militia who decided, "Let me just roll through."

Andrea Chalupa (25:12):

I'm reminded of Congresswoman Maxine Waters when she was on MSNBC during the Trump years. She was saying that Rex Tillerson, the former Exxon CEO, became Secretary of State with an eye for making a ton of money dropping sanctions against Russia and drilling together in the Arctic, but he couldn't stick around long enough to put up with Trump's nonsense [laughs]. And so I'm reminded of a lot of the Republicans that jumped into bed with Trump into the White House thinking that they were going to roll back taxes, get big old tax breaks, make money hand over fists under Trump, and they jumped ship because they just don't wanna deal with him anymore. That's what it seems like; a bit of that dynamic playing out with Putin. It's like they've had a good run, Putin's toxic, he's personally calling commanders on the front line saying, "Don't surrender." He's personally taking control of this disastrous war that he's been driving. And so he needs to go. He and his alternative reality are making everybody miserable and crazy. Would you say that that's a dynamic that's clearly playing out here?

Olga Lautman (26:17):

Well, yeah, it's a dynamic definitely that's playing out. They had decided last year that it was time for Putin to go. And it's not as much as the elites around Putin who decided this, even though they're fed up with him too and the old guards are trapped inside of Russia as their yachts and villas get seized in the West. It's more the security services because at the end of the day, the security have a job to do; domestically, steal everything and abroad, infiltrate everything and conduct operations across Europe, across the United States to move money to fund terrorist operations and organizations. And since last February when it became evident to everyone that Russia will never have Ukraine, they're gonna walk out losing Crimea, they're gonna walk out losing Donbas, Ukraine is gonna reclaim every inch of their territory. And this became evident to the people around and the security services around Putin last year.

Olga Lautman (27:18):

And then in the process of this, the Russians themselves are being, you know, exposed, kicked out of countries across Europe. The money's being followed, the companies are being looked into and all the shell companies are being unraveled. And for the first time in a long time, we actually have the FBI and Treasury and CIA and every agency in the US, every agency in Europe collaborating and working to stop the illegal money flow and to stop the Russian cells, to expose them, to get rid of them and whatnot. So this became clear. And I mean for them, the best way to go forward is without Putin. And this over the past century is a Chekist system. The intelligence services are the ones who placed someone into power. Granted, Putin is seen as the most important person in Russia, which... That's again, an illusion created for the West because we saw the most important person in power on Friday basically sitting there in a bunker hiding and no one stopping columns of tanks heading towards Moscow besides a few bulldozers and a few, you know, helicopters that shot down. So the security services ultimately control the country. They are trying to preserve their system. They're not going to be able to reopen their operations. And with that, with their operations comes a lot of theft because everything out of Africa, FSB and SVR and GRU, they all get a cut of it. Every contract to go, you know, attack with elections, you'll have a percentage that goes in the pockets of these people while the rest is used for operational purposes. So right now it's hard for them to operate. So yeah, Putin is finished and that's why last year I said we need to start focusing on a post Putin Russia because the West is making a very big mistake putting this war as Putin's war.

Olga Lautman (29:27):

And meanwhile, Prigozhin taped the perfect campaign video for himself that as he was leaving Rostov, you had people coming and running in the town and taking selfies with him and treating Wagner and Prigozhin as rockstars. Meanwhile, these are terrorists. There's no difference between Prigozhin and ISIS. They use the same recruitment tactics. Prigozhin has been trying to recruit our former military members to join Wagner. They use the same propaganda, same disinformation, same pro hostage-taking video tactics. Even last month—I don't think our media really covered it, but last month—as this fight was heating up, the Ministry of the Defense sent an order for the Russian military to eliminate the Wagner fighters leaving Bakhmut. So they shoot on the Wagner fighters and what does Prigozhin and his crew do? They capture the colonel, his brigade, and then they torture them.

Olga Lautman (30:32):

They make the colonel come out in a hostage video. Then afterwards, when he finally got released, he said that they threw acid in one of his, you know, the people working in his brigade, into his eyes; that they were using sleep deprivation, shock, torture. And I mean the 48 hours that they were there, it was pretty much painful for them, which is fine, but these are the tactics. This whole episode shows that this is unfortunately what we're going to be dealing with post Putin, that imperialist urge that Russia deserves to have territory that is sovereign, whether it's Ukraine, Moldova, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, or anywhere else that they choose.

Andrea Chalupa (31:22):

It's looting. Stalin did it when he took over many of these countries. It's straight up looting. And that's what Russian imperialism is. It's vicious looting.

Olga Lautman (31:34):

And it's also a betrayal. I mean, Stalin took some of his best generals and sent them off to the Gulag for execution.



Andrea Chalupa:

Right.

Olga Lautman:

I mean, he sent a lot of them surrounding him, from paranoia, he sent them off for execution.

Andrea Chalupa (31:49):

Yeah, he got rid of a lot of the elite doctors [laughs]and that may have hastened his death. So we're gonna go to the chat now from our listeners because this is a live taping of *Gaslit Nation*. And so Francis asks, "Am I correct to be expecting Prigozhin to fall from a window or be poisoned?" Maybe not necessarily by Putin, but somebody in the FSB who fears him and maybe has somebody to replace him with.

Olga Lautman (32:14):

Well, no, a hundred percent. But the thing is that if I had an assassination order—he does have one right now—I'd rather be him than me because he's an assassin who's committed these assassinations on behalf of the security services of Putin. So it's basically an assassin going against an assassin and it's, you know, whoever outwits the other. But yes, he will and so will with the Wagnerites. They're not gonna go unpunished from this. One by one, they'll be picked off.

Andrea Chalupa (32:44):

So Riley writes, "I am used to regulated arenas of work that involve outside oversight, and we no longer seem to have uncorrupted regulators/investigators here. I wonder if there is a non-USO group—maybe the United Nations—that could be created or already exists that could step in and help us with our corruption problem?" The other question Riley has is, "What would be the best case and worst case scenarios for the end of the current chaos of Russian power struggles?"

Olga Lautman (33:12):

You're better on the domestic policy, Andrea. I would just say I think we need to, as voters, actually vote. And I think as we continue to vote, we can clean our state houses and and whatnot. And too many people, you know, until it touches them personally, they don't take their activism in democracy seriously. We've seen a lot since 2016, but we still don't see everyone on board. So I think we can clean the corruption out by just being active and having a very healthy civil society that goes after the corruption issues and whatnot. Because in Ukraine, that's how they've been cleaning up corruption; through the civil society, because the civil society is tired of having a handful of people stealing. But Andrea, I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Andrea Chalupa (34:06):

Yeah, I wanna say that with Ukraine's superstar civil society group that keeps going and going, and as tough as their fight is... And they've lost wonderful superstars. You know, there's a journalist who was killed by a car bomb in Kyiv. There's another journalist who died from a horrible attack. Others have been beaten up, beheaded, Ukrainians keep going. They keep going. They keep building. They're relentless. So I think having that spirit of Ukrainian self-reliance and determination is key and just going, no matter how dark the days get, is number one. It's having that commitment. The second thing is watchdog groups. Activist watchdog groups are everything. For instance, *ProPublica*, which is doing wonderful

investigations, naming and shaming the corruption of the Supreme Court. They revealed that big Harlan Crow/Clarence Thomas symbiotic relationship where Clarence Thomas is essentially on Harlan Crow's payroll in a very big way.

Andrea Chalupa (35:04):

And Justice Alito has his own sugar daddies in the far right. That's *ProPublica* exposing all that. Where did *ProPublica* first get turned on to these issues? I heard from one *ProPublica* editor directly who said it was a local activist who was... He called him like a quirky activist type that was relentlessly hounding the Supreme Court for being a cesspool of corruption. And a couple of *ProPublica* investigative journalists picked up this thread and built on it and produced these big bombshell stories. And I do believe that a lot of this shame/embarrassment, that it's very much getting to the nerve center of the Supreme Court. You had Justice Alito, for instance, dodge questions directly sent to him by *ProPublica* and instead wrote an op-ed in Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal* to try to get ahead of it. It just drew attention to his corruption.

Andrea Chalupa (36:00):

And lately, the Supreme Court has been shockingly moderate in some of their opinions. And you have to wonder if it's because the swing voters on the court, like Justice John Roberts, it's getting to them. What I'm saying is I believe that some of these big bombshells are getting to the swing voters on the Supreme Court and they're being a bit more moderate in their rulings. And that is because of a quirky activist, an activist watchdog who did the heavy lifting that *ProPublica* then brilliantly built on to reach a wider audience and build on those crucial stories. So grassroots power. Be a quirky activist, be a quirky watchdog wherever you live on the issues you care about, and also invest in independent journalism like *ProPublica*.

Olga Lautman (36:48):

I'll add to that with the journalism because we as a nation basically allow the local journalists and the local media outlets to get taken up by Sinclair and big companies.

Andrea Chalupa:

Hedge funds.

Olga Lautman:

Yeah, we need local journalists. We need local investigations and let them investigate everything from the sheriffs stealing to something bigger because if we hit on everything in corruption, regardless if it's big, small, Washington, DC or small town in, you know, middle America, if corruption is being dealt at with whoever's doing it, then it will start rebuilding the trust of the institutions. And, you know, the whole thing is that we, on a bigger scale, lost trust of Western institutions because it has gotten this outta control. So support local journalists and local journalists and newspapers. And I've seen so many amazing investigations in local, like what's his name? What is that liar? The one we don't even know his name. Santos.

Andrea Chalupa (38:02):

Oh yeah, George Santos.

Olga Lautman (38:03):

Yeah. That was done by a Long Island newspaper that eventually the *New York Times* noticed and they built it up and then before you know it, he's under federal indictment. That came from local journalists in Long Island who were monitoring their own neighborhoods, saw something off, started writing about it, then it got picked up by national media and now it's, you know, got picked up by FBI and everyone else along the way.

Andrea Chalupa (38:28):

So Riley also asked, "What would be the best and worst case scenarios for the end of the current chaos of Russia power struggles?"

Olga Lautman (38:37):

The worst case scenario is... I honestly don't see, I'm not with the crowd that is, you know, "Oh my God, Russia's instability is gonna be a problem for the West." Frankly, I think they need to unravel and collapse and then we just need to have a normal foreign policy, which is for me personally, containment and isolation until they figure their shit out.

Andrea Chalupa:

Agreed.

Olga Lautman:

They need to go through whatever they need to go through, put whoever they want in. They want to put another strongman in who's gonna, you know, assassinate people and silence everyone, so be it as long as we get very clear boundaries, like, "Here's your border, you cannot exit your border, you cannot do this, you cannot do that." And that's it. I'm not with the people who are sitting here sweating and worrying so much: "Oh no, what if Russia collapses? What do we do?" We'll be fine. It won't be the first time.

Andrea Chalupa (39:31):

Exactly. Glenn writes, "Wonderful to see you all here. I'd like to ask Olga, what actions do you foresee Putin's sycophants in the US Congress taking in response to all this? I mean, is their dark money gonna dry up?"

Olga Lautman (39:44):

Their dark money is definitely gonna dry up. And you actually even see the Kremlin propagandists—the American ones—on Twitter, for instance, like David Sacks and the other... You know, that whole crew. And they clearly didn't get their talking points because they keep rehashing talking points, so they really don't know what to say. So as Russia collapses, at least for a few years, we'll have a bit of a reprieve to catch our breath and actually catch up with everything because we neglected this for almost three decades, and as a result we had the head of the FBI counterintelligence on Russia's payroll. We had the president of the United States on Russia's payroll. We had a whole slew of Congressional people on Russia's payroll. And it's literally, they infiltrated every single thing from universities to government agencies, to civil society to, you know, even I hate to call it political... Not political groups, activist groups on both sides.

Olga Lautman (40:50):

So we need to let them collapse, let whatever's going on, let them go through their things and we'll see definitely it's gonna get better. I am however concerned right now that their last push... Since April, I've already been seeing signs of Russia's influence in US elections, and they are just, you know, in the process of causing so much noise and so much confusion and so much disinformation (same with the Republicans) that I do worry that that will be their last pushes. Because regardless, whether Putin is there or not, if the security services can put one of their people again in, or at least someone who is less focused on Ukraine, into the White House in 2024 then they can start working on reversing policy and that's it. And that's like their only hope left. So I do worry about that. I think we need to be very vigilant and monitor everything, but I'm also very proud because Americans really, since 2016, have come a long way from spotting a bot, a troll, disinformation.

Andrea Chalupa (42:10):

[laughs] They're more Ukrainian than I am.

Olga Lautman (42:12):

[laughs] Yeah. The past several years, I just look at my Twitter feed and as I'm getting attacked by trolls and bots, they're like, "Oh, you have four followers, you're a bot." And I'm like, "Quick job."

Andrea Chalupa (42:24):

Yeah, it really is amazing how far it's come. All Americans are like, "Let me tell you about the Holodomor." It brings tears to my eyes. It really does. Paul Manafort got away with what he did for so long because he flew under the radar, but now, not anymore thanks to all of us and all of you listening. Americans are vigilant now, and that's... You know what I've always said? Americans got initiated into the club of being victims of Russian aggression. They understand now, like the Baltic states, like the Scandinavian states, like Ukrainians and so on, it's no joke, it's ruthless and they only go further when you're weak. Okay, so, question from Deborah: "How much loyalty to Wagner can we expect from the conscripts considering how they were recruited? What effect might they have on the fallout?" Because, you know, it's not like Wagner's boy scouts. It's a ruthless culture there. So how much loyalty is there really to Wagner and Prigozhin?

Olga Lautman (43:25):

I mean, from them to Prigozhin? There is loyalty among the people who have worked with him for a long time. And don't forget, I mean, we have heard of them recruiting prisoners. Obviously the prisoners don't have as much loyalty, but the main part of the organization is special forces; various special intelligence forces, special ops forces, various forces from the intelligence services. Those are going to have loyalty because also they understand that they're on a hit list. And if you're gonna sink in a boat, it might as well be together because they're not, you know, they crossed the line. They can't go back to the Kremlin or Ministry of Defense as Putin would, you know, as he was running his campaign ad yesterday, advertising ad: "Come join the Ministry of the Defense!" They can't do that. Maybe the prisoners can, maybe a small percentage, but the majority can't do that. And they also make too much money that they're not gonna make from the Kremlin.

Andrea Chalupa (44:27):

Do you think that part of the benefit of this move of Prigozhin to Belarus is to put him and Wagner in a better position to make another attempt on Kyiv?

Olga Lautman (44:39):

I don't believe first of all that he is in Belarus. It's very unclear because after actually a Russian media outlet that has excellent sources said that after he left Rostov, he actually got on his private jet and flew to St. Petersburg and only yesterday they saw his private jet come to Minsk. And then there was another jet that came like 18 minutes later, I believe, from Russia. I don't believe he's there. He is not stupid. I mean, if you are trying to avoid an assassination attempt, for instance, and know that there is even a part of the structure trying to take you out, you're not gonna go to Minsk. I mean, that's the same as being in Moscow. So I don't think he's that stupid and as far as the military bases that they want to build there, I highly doubt that will happen.

Olga Lautman (45:32):

I think this was a cooling off period, I guess just to, you know, calm things down people to whatever. And as far as Ukraine, Ukrainians aren't worried about it. I deal with Ukrainian military and intelligence, you know, as a daily matter. They've been monitoring the Belarusian border and there's really no difference between Wagner being in Belarus or being in Ukraine. I mean, if anything it's more dangerous when they were in Ukraine and with the Belarusian border, the reason it's not, you know, that Lukashenko can't send his military there, the reason that he has pushed back on Putin and kind of stalled and hasn't done it over the past year and a half is because he understands that there will be a part of his military the minute they cross into Ukraine that will start shooting at the Russians and join Ukrainians. And Ukrainians have these assurances as well. So they're worried, they're always keeping an eye on all the borders, but they are not going to, you know, this is noise, the whole Belarus/Wagner thing.

Andrea Chalupa (46:38):

Okay, so we have a comment here. This is from Jonathan. Jonathan writes, "I'm depressed by Julia Ioffe's observation there are no to-the-left alternatives to Putin right now and then even more depressed by Navalny having a history of indulging anti Ukraine rhetoric in the past. If Navalny and or Kara-Murza are not sympathetic to Ukraine, is there any kind of potential regime change in Russia possible that would withdraw for a lasting peace instead of waiting to try again later?" There was and they gunned him down and the shadow of the Kremlin, and that was Boris Nemtsov, who was an honorary Ukrainian.

Olga Lautman (47:19):

Again, I disagree with her completely, and she is following the exact same sentiment that I'm trying to change in DC. We cannot worry about what happens in Russia. First of all, there's no withdrawal from peace. Russia's not gonna withdraw from Ukraine right now. Russia needs to be defeated in Ukraine and that's it. The war must be won. That's it. And Ukraine needs to get into NATO. As soon as Ukraine gets into NATO, we will never have this problem again. But I mean, you are gonna have Estonia and Lithuania and other, you know, neighbors that are unfortunate being next to Russia with influence operations, pretty much what we see here. But you will never have a military threat once Ukraine is in NATO. And as far as what happens in Russia, I don't think it's for us to decide. We cannot sit and put a leader in and babysit him and, you know, put our forces—

Andrea Chalupa (48:19):

We tried that and this is what it led to.

Olga Lautman (48:22):

[laugh] Yeah. I mean, we can't do that. We need a normal foreign policy where we isolate and contain them, keep the sanctions on, and let them figure it out. If we see a positive sign, we can take whatever...

even 1% of the sanctions and say, "You know what? You're moving in the right direction. We'll take this out." If it reverses, put it right back. That's the only way. We cannot sit and wait like, "Oh, good Russia left. Let's all sit down at the table and figure out how we're gonna work together," because it is never gonna work. I mean, this is how Russia has behaved for centuries. Everything they're doing domestically to themselves, everything they're doing abroad is nothing new and it's not Putin and it's not the Putinist system, this is the Chekist system, where they want to have world power and be a superpower and influence across all regions. They want America to collapse and be destroyed. And at the same time, domestically, they wanna have control over everything—the state institutions and everything—so they could continue shoving their pockets. This is the same. The Communists did this. Putin has done this. Yeltsin and his family, as they called, who were pillaging the whole country, did this. And Brezhnev did this. I mean, it's a continuation of the same thing.

[outro, theme music - roll credits]