

reportercast_july_2022

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Hi, this is Matei, the journalist behind reporter dot London. Welcome to the second edition of Reportercast, for July 2022. This time we have gone for audio only because my guest is a very busy man and prefer to speak from his home. But it's very much worth it. First of all, because truth be told neither of us is really a beauty queen worth of regular filming, but also because he is none other than Edward Lucas, a brilliant scholar of geopolitics, security and international affairs with a specialty in Eastern European countries. He has written endlessly about the subjects close to the heart of reporter dot London, including the confluence of economic crime and security, instability, democratic degeneration, and he's done it years before most of the other experts. He's got a regular column in the Times of London newspaper, he wrote about five books on all aspects of international affairs, crime and intelligence and is now campaigning hard to become an MP under the Lib Dem party in the Cities of London and Westminster, at the very core of big power, big money and dark arts. And although we don't take political sides, I wish you good luck, Mr. Lucas, because politics needs more people like you regardless of affiliation. Welcome to the Reportercast.

E.L: Well, thank you so much for having me.

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Before I get into the questions, I'm going to read a quick message from our advertisers at H5 Strategies in Bucharest. It's a consultancy, advising executives and political leaders on international affairs and risks and they're specialised in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Africa. We thank them for supporting us. Can we start hearing a little bit about your background, Mr. Lucas? How did you become interested in studying the world of geopolitics, dirty money and Eastern Europe in particular? Do you have any anecdotes from the Cold War, any gap year travels, any revelations that set you on this path years ago? Thank you.

E.L.: I think, first of all, thank you for having me on your on your podcast. I think that my childhood in Oxford in the 1960s and 70s, was very influential. I remember the Soviet led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. And how upset my parents were seeing the word Czechoslovakia in a slogan on the wall of Long Wall, a long street in central Oxford and trying to understand how C and Zed could be together in the same word, which I'd never seen before. I remember my mother writing letters for Amnesty International on behalf of political prisoners. Behind the Iron Curtain. My father smuggled books into communist Czechoslovakia in 1981. And gave underground seminars there for the persecuted philosophers who were working as street sweepers and stokers. I, myself, was raising money to give scholarships to people from Polish Solidarity. After the martial law crackdown, I ran at my own university, LSE, an organisation called Student Solidarity, with Solidarity, together with some other people. And so this was really my life. During the Cold War, I cared very much about it. And I wanted communism to collapse more than really anything else in the world. And then when it did collapse, and I played a bit of a role in that as a correspondent in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, I

was, unlike perhaps some of my other colleagues, I was really worried about what would happen next, I felt that Russian imperialism was not over. And that we had got two things we wanted: the end of the planned economy and the end of the one party state. But Russian imperialism, which was the sort of third leg of the problem, was still there. And so I've spent the years since then writing and worrying and campaigning and doing other things to try and alert people to the threat we face from from the Kremlin.

M.R.: Well indeed, and I suppose recent events, the invasion of Ukraine, and incipient genocide, have vindicated your view, even as many other experts have been a lot more relaxed, or even glib about, about the threat from Putin. But before we get into that, can I ask you to recall how you spent the fall of the Soviet Union? I suppose you were around the region writing articles about it. And when it all happened, how did you picture the future of of these countries and how was that different from what actually happened?

E.L.: I started off reporting on the collapse of The Soviet Empire in Central Europe. And I remember that very clearly seeing the East Germans flooding into Prague, on their way to West Germany. And the feeling that the Berlin Wall, the division of Europe, the Old Iron Curtain was just falling apart. People weren't willing to shoot to kill any more to stop people leaving their countries. And you could see the countries falling over like dominoes. I covered the free elections in Poland in the summer of 1989. And the aftermath of that. I was looking at the demonstrations and campaigns in communist Czechoslovakia. And I could see things that already changed in Hungary. It was only a matter of time before they began to change in Romania, and I spent some time in December 1989, in Romania, as Ceausescu's rule was collapsing. And then I moved on to the Baltic states, which in those days were still occupied by the Soviet Union by 1991. You had pro independence movements in power locally, but still under Soviet control in terms of the sinews of economic power, and who controlled the borders.

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And it was very dramatic and exciting and broadly hopeful times. And I was very impressed particularly by the support of the Russian Democrats for their brothers and sisters in the Baltic states. And that was a very uplifting moment to see the huge demonstrations in support of Lithuania after the Soviet massacre there in January 1991. I was also in Washington, quite a lot, then working for the Independent as a Washington correspondent. But I was already getting worried by the naivety and arrogance and complacency of the West, towards what was happening, people didn't really seem to understand the dimensions of what was going on. And there was a desire for quick fixes. And let's keep Gorbachev in power because he's our guy, in this sort of highly personalised, rather glib approach. And then living in the Baltic states in 1993-94. It was very clear to me that Russia was still a problem, they were dragging their feet on the withdrawal of the occupation forces. We could see subversion or use of dirty money, the use of propaganda, information as a weapon. And the Baltic states are worried about that. And my friend Lennart Meri, the Estonian president, gave a notable speech in 1994, about the threat of what was then called the Karaganov doctrine, the idea that Russia could, and should intervene in neighbouring countries on behalf of so-called ethnic Russians. And the West just wasn't willing to listen. And so I decided that was going to be my mission, to make them listen.

M.R.: That was great. Well, yes, you certainly worked hard on that. And part of that was to write about intelligence services and the evolution of technology in relation to security and intelligence. But I have a

left field question for you. Because of course, I'm not really an expert in these things. Like most people, I suppose, I read John Le Carre's Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy, and there's a rather worrying line in there, saying that the security services are the only real expression of a nation's character, but it comes from the villain in the book. And I just wonder, is that some pompous line some villain would say, or is that a deeper message from the author himself? How do you read that?

E.L.: Well, I think I'm a huge fan, particularly of the early John Le Carre books, and the [George] Smiley ones. I think he obviously brings up the importance of the intelligent services because he's writing about them. And I think it's true, up to a point that intelligence service is the sort of distillation of some aspects of a country's identity. And certainly the combination of the behind the scenes old-boys-club way in which Britain used to run, the heavy influence of Oxford and Cambridge, the ideas have this sort of romantic notions of the British Empire of selfless brave men, usually, occasionally women, in far flung parts of the world doing things as a secret and very important. It brings together a lot of elements of a national myth. I'm not sure it really corresponds to that completely. I think that intelligence services are basically bureaucracies in the end, and they have the strengths and weaknesses of bureaucracies. I also think that the British intelligence services have had some pretty serious scandals over the years, not just with the politicisation of intelligence during the run up to the Iraq war, but also the Matrix Churchill scandal back in the 1990s, when an innocent British businessman was basically left on the hook for an operation that went wrong. So I wouldn't romanticise them; they, of course, Le Carre, doesn't really romanticise them as well. And in a way, I think the big point is that greed is the undoing of many Western countries, greed has been the undoing of the West's attitude to Russia and to China, in the 1990s, and the noughties, the idea that in the end, it's important to get on and make money, and nothing else really matters. And I think that to some extent, that's been a weakness in the intelligence services as well, that we, and they've become the sort of handmaidens of Britain's corporate interests. That's always been the case in France. But I worry, I worry a bit that the British government has been subordinated, its job is promoting this ridiculous phrase of Britain PLC, which I don't think is at all the right approach.

M.R.: I see. Well, that's quite interesting because MI6 and actually a host of other Western intelligence services have as part of their official mission to protect the economic interests of the country. So I suppose before the invasion, when Russia, I suppose, showed its true nature, the Russian regime showed its true nature, I suppose before that, it would have been calculated that the economic interest of the country is to accept the Kremlin's money and, and the oligarchs'.

E.L.: Well, I remember a debate with Tony Brenton, the former British ambassador to Moscow at the Frontline club a few years ago, where he stated as a matter of fact, that it was the government's job to raise the living standards of the British people. And I said, No, it isn't, it's the government's job to maintain the long term security of the country. And there's been a tension between the idea of this is going to be good for jobs and wages and GDP and exports, and so on in the short run. And the idea that we may be creating problems in the long run. And I think that we've been far too willing to go for the short term benefits of trade and investment ties with both Russia and China. And far too naive about the long term dangers of this. And we now see this with the enormous energy bills, if we had adopted the approach which I was advocating when I was energy and natural resource editor at The Economist back 12 years ago, we would have been reducing our dependence on imported fossil fuels,

particularly on Russian gas. And we'd have been building big electricity interconnectors with Iceland and Norway to take advantage of the cheap, renewable power that they have there. And I think that would have been expensive at the time it was £7 or £8 billion, but we wouldn't know. And if we combined that with moving towards electrification of domestic heating system, we wouldn't now be having the enormous crippling bills landing on households. What seemed like a cheap, good deal 15-20 years ago, I think has looked far from cheap in retrospect.

M.R.: And if you compare the bills we're paying now with the cost of investing in an independent infrastructure back then I suppose it would, it would be a lot more feasible. In hindsight.

E.L.: Well, I think we need to think strategically about economics generally. And NATO used to have an economic warfare department which worried about this all the time that was closed down during the sort of Lala-land era of the of the 1990s. But we need to think about every element of our supply chain and where we get things from and what are the alternatives. And do we have any dependencies, we need to think about every element of our critical national infrastructure of who owns what and what happens to the data that's generated by that? And does that end up in China? And we need to think about every element of our export markets and whether we have critical dependency on a particular export market, which makes us vulnerable if if that's attacked. So Germany, for example, has failed on all those counts. It has huge dependency on Russia for energy and huge dependency on China for export. But what's so frustrating is nobody made the Germans do this. You didn't have tanks crunching down onto the Lindum saying to the Germans, make these decisions. No, the Germans did this to themselves because they were greedy, arrogant, naive and complacent.

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M.R.: Right, right. Well, that's that. That was a great answer. I hope some politicians listen to this podcast in the end, but on a slightly lighter note, you have a connection to Romania and you are pretty well known actually among Romanian intellectuals and although I'm Romanian I'm not much of an intellectual but could you say for the benefit of our audience, what is your connection to Romania and when you travel there, what are the things that you enjoy and the things that you enjoy less, or even dislike?

E.L.: Well, I've been lucky enough to get to Romania many times starting in the Ceausescu era, and I also had connections with the Romanian diaspora. I was very pleased I met King Michael once and had a long discussion with him. And I've followed the twists and turns of Romanian politics at home and abroad. I remember during the Cold War in the late 1980s, being particularly interested in Silviu Brucan and the sort of dissent within the Communist Party, then, and talking many times to Professor Dennis Deletant, I'm glad he's still with us, a great British expert on on Romania.

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I am a huge fan of the Romanian culture, Romanian countryside, the huge sweep of different kinds of landscape and architecture you have, always absolutely throw me. The multilingual, multi ethnic, multicultural aspects of Romanian, modern Romania are a great source of stimulation and interest.

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I think that Romania has also become a serious military power, it is a big country, and people often forget that Romania is so much bigger than its neighbours. And I'm pleased to see it playing a positive role in the Black Sea region and being an important NATO ally in southeastern Europe. So that's good. And I'm glad that the economy is gradually improving, although it's far from reaching the potential of the country. I think that my criticism and well my disappointment will come as no surprise to most Romanians, which is about capacity and Public Administration, and the continuing, pervasive corruption, the difficulties of getting the criminal justice system really to bite hard on, on corruption, the low level of morality among some, some parts of the political system. And I feel that the country is sort of cursed with a political class that so often lets down the hard work and ingenuity of the people. I hope eventually that's changing. And I think, remembering what Romania was like in the 1990s today is incomparably better. But 30 years have gone past and it could be so much, so much better if Romania had adopted some of the approaches of neighbouring countries. So I'm impatient for Romania's future, but I'm very honoured to be associated with the country.

M.R.: Great, thank you. I tend to agree with you on on all the points, especially on development and how it could happen a lot faster if we had a less fearful and I suppose to a degree incompetent political class. But anyway, you mentioned NATO and Romania's role in NATO. And you recently wrote a story saying the next chief of NATO should be Estonian, but in Romania, there's a great deal of speculation that our president Klaus Iohannis might be considered for the job. I wonder what you think about that? Would he be a good fit? Should he get it? What are your other comments about this? Thank you.

E.L.: Well, I think it's high time that NATO had a woman secretary general. And I think that's very important. I also think it's high time that there was a secretary general from the countries that have experienced the misfortune of communism and are aware of the threats to the that Russia poses. I think, that narrows it down quite a lot if one's looking from and I think that Kaja Kallas would be a very good fit to that. I also think actually Chrystia Freeland from Canada would be very good. She's the Deputy Prime Minister of Canada, and has played a formidable role in sharpening Canada's foreign policy when she was foreign minister. And also she's from a Ukrainian family, Ukrainian Canadian family, so she would be also a very strong choice. I have met President Iohannis on several occasions, and I am impressed with his personal qualities of gravitas, he has he's a serious and educated man with I think, good, good instincts. My worry would be about his ability to implement change. I don't feel that the way Romania has been run over his years as president has exactly showcased his ability to implement change in a difficult environment. So I would worry a bit about the effectiveness from that point of view. And so I, I would certainly welcome any any NATO actor into office and want to give them a fair hearing. But he wouldn't be my number one or number two choice.

M.R.: Okay, understood. Well, that's absolutely fair enough. And also on NATO, the alliance is about to include Sweden and Finland, which I think is great news. And I suppose you agree. But the question is after this what next for NATO? Is it time to consolidate? Or is it possible to expand the vision of NATO, even including Ukraine at some point in the future?

E.L.: I think that the continued the open-door policy is very important for NATO, and that European countries that meet NATO standards should be able to apply to NATO and NATO has the right to accept new members. I think that the first priority of NATO is the defence of its existing members. And

there's a great deal of work to do on that. And although Sweden and Finland's membership creates conditions in which the problems on the eastern flank can be solved, it doesn't actually solve them. So I would like to see a lot more attention in NATO to optimising defence spending, we spend a lot of money and spend it very badly. We spent far too little on modern weapons and on stocks and stockpiles of equipment. Our military mobility is bad, moving stuff around is difficult. We don't have command structure for Eastern, the northeastern flank, we don't have the intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance assets that we need, we don't have the Air and Missile Defence that we need. We don't have the military infrastructure in the Baltic states that we need to put the outside forces, we're moving towards not just deterrence but denial, meaning not an inch, not a soul comes under Russian occupation will require a major investment of time and effort to protect the Baltic states. All that's got to happen, I think it can happen, I'm reasonably confident it will happen. And it's not going to happen just by being wishful. So I think that's the first task. The second is the Black Sea, which we don't have a strategy for, relations with Turkey are difficult, and we need to rethink a lot of what we do in that in the Black Sea. Romania obviously will play a big part in that.

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Then there's the question of military aid to Ukraine, which is very important, and we're running out of stocks, we don't have the production lines to keep on producing weapons at the rate the Ukrainians are consuming them than that which we are deleting them. So we need a fundamental rethink of how we're going to sustain military aid to Ukraine in the long run. I would like to see much more pressure on Russia and shorten the war that way. I'd rather that we win the war for Ukraine by putting pressure on Russia, rather than Ukrainians having to die for our freedom and security. And so there's a lot more we can do to make life difficult for Russia, including impeding Russian exports of oil, gas, coal, and other things, and also going after Russian dirty money abroad.

M.R.: Right. Well, that brings me very neatly to the next question about the money and its role in national security. Do you think, now, that the Russians have shown us what atrocities they are capable of committing, do you think the flow of Kremlin-connected money in the West is coming to an end? And if not, what is there to do to stop it? What policies should the governments adopt, especially the British government, that they haven't adopted yet?

E.L.: But it's an enormous to do list. And I am delighted that we have started on this, but I'm very frustrated, it's very little and very late. So we need a thoroughgoing reform of the financial and legal system in, in Britain to make it difficult for not only Russians but other sources of foreign dirty money to get in in the first place. So we need to have tougher rules on the registration of beneficial ownership. For example, if you don't know who owns a company, that company shouldn't be really able to do business. And I would deny all these shell companies with murky offshore or mythical owners access to the legal system. I say, fine, you can do business with each other. But you can't sue and you can't be sued in the British courts, and that would immediately push them out of the sort of mainstream of British business life. I would also say that if you can't prove your beneficial ownership, you can't own assets here and when you file your tax return on real estate, for example, you have the state of beneficial ownership that has to be validated by a solicitor. And if you can't do that, the asset will be confiscated and auctioned off. And the money spent on good causes. So I'm in favour of a really revolutionary

tough approach to this. And the government is nowhere near doing it. And that's one of the reasons I am going into politics.

M.R.: Well, that's interesting. And in that case, I'm going to ask about your campaigning, you're campaigning in probably the wealthiest area of the UK? If not, if not, it's certainly one of one of the top five, I suppose. And a lot of your constituents and prospective constituents would be naturalised Russian elites and ex Soviet elites. Some of them have repudiated the Kremlin and some haven't. Could you recall some of your conversations on the doorstep? What are you saying to these people? What are they saying back to you?

E.L.: Well, I think there's a very wide range of reactions. And first of all, most people on the doorstep I talked to about this are not Russians, but they are fed up with these types of dirty money, which inflates house prices, and makes it very difficult to build a community if you don't know who owns the flat above you or the house next to is digging a basement and you have some difficulties with that. And you ask who are these people, it's just a company in the British Virgin Islands, you've no idea who the real owner is. So this is a scourge in central London. And we've been very naive in thinking that all this lovely foreign money's coming into our property market. We haven't thought through at all, what the negative effects are. When I talk to Russians, there is a range of opinions and there are, there's a slice of Russians and living abroad who are what you might call liberal imperialist. And although they're they're fed up with Putin, and they hate the fact that nice middle class lifestyle in Russia, or in Moscow, usually, which they've enjoyed for the last 10 or 15 years has come to an abrupt end. They don't feel any responsibility for the war. And they blame Western sanctions almost as much as they blame Putin. And I've had people with a sort of extraordinary sense of entitlement and in aggrieved tone of voice saying, this is so unfair, why is this happening to me? And I'm afraid that my answer to them is really you have tolerated the Putin regime, and benefited actually from some aspects of it over the last 15 years. And it's payback time. And it's a bit like Germans in 1939, who fled Hitler, having had a very good time in the previous 10 years, or whatever it was on Hitler's rule and didn't feel they had any responsibility for it. So I have limited sympathy for these Russians. There are others who are extraordinarily committed to the anti-Putin cause and feel deep solidarity with Ukraine and go to Ukrainian demonstrations. And you're busily trying to build the opposition as sort of anti imperialist opposition to preach and abroad. I think they're in the minority. And, and then there are others who are just taking a very sort of passive approach and just think, Oh, well, life goes on. I just got to get on with my life and educate my kids and try and find a job.

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But I, I think that this is a huge challenge, not just for central London for Britain going forward is we need to wean ourselves off this tight this tide of dirty money, which is enriching so many people in London, but at such great cost to our the integrity of our political economic system.

M.R.: Right. Well, I've noticed actually, not just in the UK, but in the Baltics as well, that there is a bit of self recrimination about the way that we filled our boots with Kremlin money over the years. And coincidentally, the Baltics and the UK are also among the most dedicated supporters of Ukraine. And I just wondered, do you think there's a link with that? Do you think there's a bit of guilt and some sort of notions of compensation and repentance? Because the UK and the Baltics through the banking

systems have enabled Putin to rise and gain complete power in Russia. And there might be a bit of regret now, don't you think?

E.L.: Yes, I think that is not most people in the Baltic states, and [they] do not feel particularly responsible for the money laundering that was carried out by their banks. And they would feel that what really happened it was they were the vehicle for the money laundering. But the brains behind it, were in Scandinavia. And of course, it had a very important London connection as well. I think London was the money laundering capital of the world, is it in a position really to lecture anybody else? I think that Boris Johnson's support for Ukraine was essentially opportunistic. He saw that there was a chance to look statesman like and take a tough, tough approach that would go well with American foreign policy, and also that, to some extent, pressure on the Labour Party to match. And I'm delighted that we did what we did. I think it's actually the headlines rather overestimate its importance. And what really matters in Ukraine is the amount of military equipment that the United States is providing and all other countries combined do less than what America is doing. Actually, the most important thing Britain's done, I think, is on the training front. And I'm very pleased about that, that isn't quite as glamorous as the, as the sort of here's a bright, shiny thing that we're giving to Ukraine.

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I think that that it's also distracted attention from the very important question of dirty Russian money going into the Conservative Party. And one has to be very careful about this, because these people are litigious and you have to be, they always say no, no wrongdoing has been proved in their British systems, and their donations have been cleared by the relevant authorities. But I think there's a stench hanging over the Conservative Party of offshore money. And you would only have to look at the way in which some of the senior people in the Conservative Party have made have had such extraordinary good fortune in their business dealings in strange parts of the world. And draw connection between that with that, and the Conservative Party's reluctance to investigate the relationship between offshore and onshore finance in this country. And without mentioning any names. That I think is a serious national security threat for this country.

M.R.: Right. Well, that's interesting. I think this conclusion is permeating even the Conservative Party, and I know they're rivals of yours now. But we have a business audience for this podcast as well. So could you explain for the sceptics out there, and there's still a few sceptics of the link between security and money laundering? And could you say exactly why corruption and economic crime are so pernicious, and they degrade democracy and the national security and what bankers and business professionals in the UK, US, Switzerland, Luxembourg, UAE, Singapore, and so forth, why should they care about protecting the integrity of the democratic system? What is the enlightened self interest view of this?

E.L.: Well, first of all, I think enlightened self interest is a nice phrase, but one needs to always stress the Enlightened bit, that it may well be in people's self interest to do the wrong thing. And individually, have benefit from it. But we have, we have collective action problems. And I think we need to be more focused always on the outcome as well as the individual. I think the fundamental point about

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economic crime and dirty money is that it degrades the institutional infrastructure, which is what we need for democracy to work. So it partly makes people feel there's one law for the rich and one for everybody else, it degrades trust and confidence in the rule of law. Because you see that other people are getting away paying, basically no tax and, and without, without strong, democratic institutions to hold everyone accountable.

M.R.: Eventually, all businesses have to lose because they can't rely on an uneven playing field.

E.L.: That was my going to be my second point. So that then creates an uneven playing field, which is, and it's hard for law abiding individuals and law abiding businesses to compete if someone else has got some advantage, because they're crooked. I think it also creates concentrations of economic and political power that distort decision making. And so you see this, particularly when it comes to political donations, I'm running a political campaign and I raise my money and 50, 25 and 50 pound, sometimes 100. And if I'm incredibly lucky, someone may give me a few thousand pounds. But this is a tiny amounts compared with what I call the dodgy donors, will give to the Conservative Party and they write checks for hundreds of thousands or half a million pounds. And this this, this does destroy you, it means that the Conservatives have a kind of firepower. When it comes whether it's buying ads on social media, or just pumping out leaflets or billboards or whatever, that their rivals don't. And so this is a kind of political speech, which benefits the, the rich, and obviously rich people because their rich can do things that poor people can't and that's a fact of life. But I think we can't we have to apply more scrutiny to the way in which money gets into the political system, and particularly who the sort of inner circles of donors are. And I'm particularly troubled by Boris Johnson's personal connections with some of these people who again, we can't talk about because they're so litigious.

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M.R.: Well that's interesting and now that he's he's going out of office, I suppose we're going to have to see what he does next. I'm quite intrigued because I don't see him as a business professional going to work as I suppose, non executive director at some corporation, so I'm just very interested in finding out how he's going to earn his living after leaving office, but we'll just have to see about that.

E.L.: I couldn't, I couldn't care less. I never want to hear his name again. I never want to see him again. I want him to go off to the American lecture circuit and just live on a diet of rubber chicken and Family. Applause rest of his life.

M.R.: Oh, okay. Okay. All right, we'll have to see. I think he would quite enjoy the chicken, I think he campaigned to have chlorinated chicken here as well. But that's beside the scope of this podcast. Now. I'll bring up our advertiser again, H5 Strategies in Bucharest, specialising in political and Executive Advisory around the regions of Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Africa. We thank them. And just to make it clear, the journalism is completely independent, there is no interference now, and there will never be an interference from advertisers in the content of our journalism. That said, back to the questions: the war in Ukraine, you've been warning in the newspapers about the dangers of Russia's destruction of food supply chains in Ukraine, which has a global effect. And we've seen Russian officials admitting publicly that this is part of the strategy that we're using. And I just wonder, what do

you think might be the solutions? Are we just accepting that we're hostages to Vladimir Putin when it comes to food security?

E.L.: Absolutely not. No. I mean, I, I've been arguing very strongly that we need decisive intervention on behalf of the millions of people who are facing famine. It's already very late, maybe too late. But I mean, we had the Berlin Airlift in 1948. I'd be in favour of the Odesa sealift right now. Now I'd like to see Western taskforce of NATO and other countries, probably including the Egyptians and others, sailing into the Black Sea with the consent of the Turks. I'd like to see Western military assistance to Ukraine to protect the [ships] with Patriot missiles and everything, in coastal batteries and everything else they need. So the Ukrainians feel confident they can de-mine the sea lanes to Odesa. And I'd like to see bulk freighters going in and collecting the grain from the port with [guns] if necessary.

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We need repairs to the port facilities to enable that to happen. And there's freighters insured by the consortium of Western governments backing the insurance, and selling out again, and a very clear message to the Russians that if you interfere in any way with this, we will shoot back and shoot back hard and anyone on any ships that attack us will join the Moskva at the bottom the Black Sea. That's what we should be doing. And we can do it. We are 10 times, more than 10 times or 20 times bigger and richer than Russia. There's no reason why we should be intimidated by a country that's got a GDP the size of Italy. And we should also say this, if you waive your nuclear weapons of sorts, we will waive our cyber weapons at you and bring your economy to a complete halt. So there's an enormous amount we could do. This is not a problem. That means it's a problem of political willpower. That's what we lack.

M.R.: I see. And could you speculate constructively a little bit about why you think there is no political willpower for the moment anyway.

E.L.: I think it's partly a function of the personalities involved. We have a number of political leaders in the West who are not terribly experienced, or have governments that are finding it hard to muster a head of steam behind a decisive foreign policy. And in particularly thinking of Germany here. I think the Biden administration is distracted by Asia and sort of it's sort of half in Europe and half, half supporting Ukraine, half not wanting it to escalate. So we're very unfortunate with our American President, at the moment, I'm disappointed with the Biden administration, generally.

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Generosity, too, towards Ukraine is no substitute for decisiveness. And I think that obviously Britain has been distracted by all the shenanigans going on in Downing Street. And we've had the French president, he has been distracted by his reelection campaign and because he's partial for ineffective grandstanding rather than building effective international coalition and understanding, so so we've got a lot of problems, but in the end, you know, we have to cook with what we've got in the kitchen. There isn't some alternative planet out there where we have a chance to do it again, we're missing the chance right now. And millions of people are going to starve and that will send waves of migration which will be very destabilising and the human misery is just colossal.

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In many parts of the world, whether it's the Yemen Civil War or what's happening in Ethiopia, in the Sahel and elsewhere, and we tend to turn our eyes away from that, and pretend it's not happening, but it doesn't mean it's not happening. It just means we're not looking at it.

M.R.: Yes, yes, it is. It's a terrible, terrible tragedy. On top of the tragedy going on in Ukraine, I'm amazed at how much devastation Putin could unleash. And this is the big world question I have for you. Because I know you think about the tides of history and stuff like that. And we've seen a fascist turn of political discourse in Russia lately. And to me, as an observer, as a reporter, it feels like something a little bit bigger than the regional war and you know, just war between neighbours and local, sort of regional imperialism. It feels like the end of an era, feels like the end of the relative comfort we had after the fall of the USSR and the return of genocide to Europe, frankly, although the Russians haven't managed at least to carry out the genocide the way they probably intended. And it could be the start of an all consuming global struggle, if not a proper war, in the sense that you have a bunch of alliances between autocracies and you've got the American President Biden talking about a fundamental conflict between democracies and dictatorships. I wonder how you see this, this theory? Is it right to have a sort of an all encompassing view of what's going on?

E.L.: Well, I'm always sceptical about all encompassing views. The Germans have this idea that there must be a good sound concept behind everything that you need to have. And I think the world is actually very messy. But I do think that, as I said, at the beginning of this podcast, there's a fundamental problem with Russian imperialism. And this is the Russian dreams of empire, both fuel the repression at home and the aggression abroad. And I think one of the most important books written about Russia in recent years is Alexander Etkind's book on Internal Colonisation, where he says that Russia is the, I think, he argues, the only country in the world where the rulers treat their own people the way other empires treat their,

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their colonies. And so Russia is sort of colonised by its own rulers. And this leads to all sorts of... the predatory state is both predatory at home in terms of its extraction of natural resource rents, and bureaucratic rents, but also its hostility towards neighbouring countries. I think that's a very useful fundamental sort of shaping concept, that we want. Until Russia becomes a nation state, rather than empire, it's always going to be very difficult labour. And I think that the idea of a global confrontation with Russia is different, more difficult, because Russia is actually so weak, I think we can, we may be in an era of a kind of polarising conflict with China, which is a serious economic contender, very large economy, by some measures the world's largest economy, and has a well thought out political system that it tries to export, it has real soft power, and real allies, and a real plan. And Russia doesn't really have any of that. Russia is not a serious global power, it doesn't have a plan, its soft power is a sort of complete mess. And it's taking advantage of the weakness of the West really, rather than making a bid for global leadership. So I put them in slightly different categories. And I also think that we have, it's the local problem, or the regional problem we have with Russia, in the sort of area between the Black Sea and the Baltics, is of a different magnitude to the kind of to the, to the looming competition we have with China. Where you can link them together, is you can say that if we get this confrontation with Russia, right, then we're in a much better position to deal with China. So if we show unity and decisiveness, it

will make it much less likely that the Chinese tried to test the West, in some kind of conflict of willpower in the Indo Pacific, they'll see the West does at the end, get its act together. And if there is a confrontation, the fact that we've shown our unity and decisiveness will make it easier for us to withstand Chinese pressure. And conversely, if we get this wrong with Russia, it sends a big green light to China, you can do what you want, the West isn't serious. And if we try and resist trying to win, it does whatever it wants to do, there'll be a greater chance that we fail.

M.R.: Right. Well, that's, that's interesting. That's a great answer. Again, I hope some politicians are going to be listening to this. Now, between this dichotomy of democracy and dictatorship there are huge nuances beginning with Turkey and the UAE and India, which are allies of the west, especially Turkey. Turkey is a cornerstone of NATO. Though I suppose, so are other authoritarian countries, Turkey is probably, can be qualified as a dictatorship, also the UAE, and at the same time they're working with Western democracies just as much as they're working with Russia and China. And I just wonder, do you think these countries are winning the geopolitical game at the moment? And is this alliance with them a necessary moral compromise that the West has to do? And we just have to live with it? What is the answer to this?

E.L.: Well, Turkey is a very difficult issue. There's no doubt about it. One just has to be frank about this, that we don't have the Turkish leadership that we'd like we have the Turkish leadership that we've got. And so we, and there's no point in pretending anything else, we can't. I think that looking back historically, NATO had Portugal, remember when Portugal was under the Salazar dictatorship, we had Greece onto the colonels, we had Turkey when Turkey was under military rule. So in the end, fundamentally, NATO as a military alliance, with some sort of political infrastructure, but it's not actually an alliance or hasn't historically always been an alliance of democracies. And so there's, we have to be realistic about this. And I think Turkey is not actually a dictatorship, you know, Erdogan does lose every now and again, the last mayor's race in Istanbul, for example. And he's under still under the constraints of public opinion. And so I think you can be quite wrong to put Turkey in the same category as Azerbaijan or one of the central Asia countries where they guarantee that the people in charge always win. And there still are bits of an independent judicial system and other institutional constraints. So I remain optimistic about Turkey in the long run. The other point I make is a lot of this is our fault. In Europe, we have mocked Turkey, we offered it for decades, the prospect of joining the EU and always been too scared, actually to do it. And I think if we'd seize that, that opportunity, it's 22 years, 20 years ago, and said, Right, okay, you're on the right track, let's get going. And we'd offer visa free access and all the other things they wanted. I'm sure there would have been some bumps in the road. But we would have established our good faith and it would have been much easier for the people who have bruises in Turkey to win elections. We also, I think, behaved shamefully over Cyprus. Turkey did what it was asked to in Northern Cyprus, but we then bowed to Greek pressure, and didn't follow up on our part of the deal. So I think the Turks, it's quite reasonable for the Turks to feel resentful. We need to get back and start repairing this relationship and do it sooner rather than later.

M.R.: Okay, that's interesting. Now back to Ukraine, some Eastern European analysts, some of them Russians, and in general ex ex Soviet citizens, I suppose, they say and they warn that Russia has entered a long term cycle of state sponsored warmongering and conflict. And they warn that Russia would very much welcome a conflict with with NATO, direct war with NATO, which is what our leaders, I

think, tried to avoid at the moment, and if they win the war in Ukraine, or if they conquer a big chunk of Ukraine, these analysts are warning Russia is very likely to go after NATO countries such as I suppose, Lithuania, Latvia. How do you see that, do you think there's really no other way? And what is your analysis of that?

M.R.: Well, I think that first of all, the Russian military is in no state to start anything new right now. There's a real constraint on Russia, for the just in terms of keeping the offensive going in eastern Ukraine, and they're having some difficulties in southern Ukraine. And we see that from open source and other intelligence reports that the Russian forces near the Baltic and Finnish border being reduced very sharply in order to keep things going. So I think we don't face an immediate threat. But we have seen that the Russian leadership has a capacity for reckless, illegal, aggressive behaviour. And my worry is that we get some sort of ceasefire in Ukraine at some point, and then Russia will then rebuild its forces and will either decide to attack Ukraine again, or try something else. So, now that Baltic states are difficult to defend, we do a lot of work to make them thoroughly defensible. And if we don't do that there'll be a tempting target. I think that Russia would be unwise to pick a fight with the united NATO, because NATO is noticeably bigger and richer than Russia. But there are circumstances in which one might think that NATO was divided or ineffective. So if we have, for example, of different American president or even just a long period of political chaos, in Washington following the next presidential election, or if the United States is very heavily distracted with a conflict in the western Pacific, any of these things might lead the Russians to think, nobody knows, it's time to try something in NATO. So I think that the European countries in NATO need to do a great deal more work in pooling their resources, making themselves much more effective focusing on the deterrence by denial in, in the Baltic states, and then we should be okay. Because in the end, Russia is not that big. Russia is a much smaller economy than we sometimes think that that's one thing for me that should happen. It's going, actually to happen.

M.R.: Right. So I get the sense now that you're quite optimistic about Ukraine's prospects in the war, I suppose this puts you in a similar group as one of the top Romanian scholars, Armand Gosu, who said recently that this war will forge Ukraine into the most important US ally in Europe and one of history's great nations because of its heroism and self sacrifice against Russia. And personally, I think this could be a bit premature, but I wouldn't mind accepting that it's correct. Actually, I would be very happy if it turned out this way. I just wonder what you think about it?

E.L.: Well, I'm very cautious about being optimistic on this front. I'm a.) because Ukraine has suffered so much already. That nothing will restore to life, the people tens of thousands of people have been killed, nothing will restore the physical and mental injuries of people who've suffered, the destruction has been so huge. That is not something we can ever want. There's no silver lining to that cloud. So that's the first thing. I think that even if Russia withdrew right now to its pre February 24 territories, which I think would be unlikely, but even if they did, postwar, Ukraine is going to be traumatised. And it will be a bit like France after 1945, that you'll have a lot of tensions between people who stayed and people who left, people who collaborated and people who didn't. People who get compensation, people who don't. So there's going to be, this is going to be a decade needed or more of healing, from the trauma, the trauma, the trauma of the war, I think that there will be a lot of Western effort going into rebuilding post war Ukraine, and that will be good, and a lot of political energy and patriotism, to try and

do that. But also, there will also be the polarisation and divisions. Countries tend to stick together during a war. But afterwards, you have to deal with the underlying political conflicts that are still there. So I'm afraid I feel this was the worst thing to happen in my lifetime, probably in the lifetime of almost everyone listening to this podcast, and we've just got to be realistic about it. And also quite angry that if the West had done 1/100 of what it's doing now, to support Ukraine before February 24th, the war probably wouldn't have happened. It's a bit like the pandemic, it's a clear sign of how enormous the cost is of short sighted complacency. I do think that the long term effect for the Putin regime is very bad. In the end, this is probably going to lead to the fall of the Putin regime and possibly even very fundamental and disruptive changes within Russia. But one, as I said before, one shouldn't count that as a silver lining to what's already a very big black cloud.

M.R.: Right, well, a very sober conclusion to our podcast. Thanks again for joining us and for making the time. Best wishes to you and everyone listening and one final shout out to H5 Strategies in Bucharest - executive and political advisory group specialised in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Africa. See you next month and all the best.

E.L.: Well, thank you so much for your excellent questions.