

TRANSCRIPT

"PROPAGANDA REVISITED: A LOOK AT CURRENT PRACTICE IN RUSSIA AND EGYPT"

A Conversation With Rabab El Mahdi, Peter Pomerantsev, and Michael Weiss
Moderator: Leonard Benardo

ANNOUNCER:

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LEONARD BENARDO:

We thought that we would have this brown bag as-- a conversation, rather than any formal presentations. And so I thought I would begin by maybe just turning first to-- to Michael and-- and Peter, and asking them very basically what is different today about propaganda as you read and interpret it, coming from the-- the-- the Russian context? Is there anything fundamentally different between disinformation today and disinformation from yesterday?

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Should I-- should I do my little thing first, then it'll be on tape? We-- we've been around the world doing-- I'm actually going to talk about something else today, because-- I think the argument's moving on quite rapidly.

I think that there's-- (UNINTEL)-- first what I want us to do is take a step back and see it within the context of Russia's grand strategy. So since around 2004, they've been-- their military thinking has been-- obsessed with the idea of asymmetrical. I mean, it's actually something they wrote about in the *Soviet Times* (?) already. But the idea of asymmetric war is essentially Russia is weaker than the West and can't

take the West on militarily. So therefore it has to use the openness of the West, the weaknesses of the West against itself. It's sort of-- a more covert approach to war.

And then the three-- among the many things they focus on is an-- is information. They also focus on money-- they focus on sort of civil society as a way to exploit the West. So the-- this is actually imbedded in-- in a whole strategy, which is in itself imbedded in a world view, which is a sort of a vestige of-- of dialect.

It's-- it's-- they still see the military leaks and-- the hawkish side of Russia still see the world as essentially a place of great powers endlessly competing-- and-- and forever competing. So-- so it's actually-- there is a world view behind it, and that has become essentially very-- the military people have been writing about this since the mid-2000s, but now it's really become mainstream.

And now you hear journalists talking about it, you hear Putin talking about it. You hear-- you know, people who used to be quite friendly in the military foreign affairs are very Westernized talking about it. So that's kind of the first thing to understand. This is part of a much broader-- strategy.

In terms of the disinformation and what we think of as-- you know, we can talk about it as propaganda. I think there are three main topics to approach. One is they've made it incredibly entertaining, I think that's a really obvious one. So I-- I had the-- the surreal-- pleasure of working inside Russia's entertainment TV in the mid-2000s. I've just written a book about it, if you-- available at all good book stores. But--

LEONARD BENARDO:

I was gonna highlight that later.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Okay. (LAUGHTER) So-- so they made it incredibly entertaining. And in that sense-- then why is that so important? They've mixed sort of Western entertainment with Soviet's ideas of-- of-- psychological manipulation. Why is that important? Because it actually undermines the old Western narratives. If the old Western narrative in the Cold War was, "We have-- we combine sort of Levi's jeans, parliamentary democracy, Mercedes Benzes and merchant banking, it's one great story that combines sort of-- democracy and-- and hedonism."

Now, they've said, "You can have merchant banking, Mercedes, reality shows, and TV Taylor Swift, and worship Putin and hate America." So they've completely sort of sliced into little bits the Western idea-- repackaged it, and spat it back in our faces. There was one moment, which we pointed out to what extent, some people here don't grasp that. There was an op-ed in the *New York Times*, and one of their senior writers saying, "Ukraine will-- end of the day join the West, because they listen to Taylor Swift."

I mean, this completely doesn't get the way the whole-- ideological formula has been reprogrammed. The second thing they do is really something-- not so much informational war, but an attack on information. So it's spewing out conspiracy theories-- spewing out disinformation. Most obvious example, MH17-- when, you know, Russian media is-- is doing a million and one conspiracy theories, creating fake Twitter accounts to create a conspiracy onto it-- and just flooding the information space so people just go, "Oh what's the truth, anyway?"

So that's not really a war on information, that's a war in the memorable words of one of my editors at *The Guardian*, Jonathan Shannon (who I think is a friend of yours), "A terrorist attack on the infrastructure of reason." Which I thought was very beastly (?) put.

The third thing, though, is really something which is not about ideology, it's not about-- semiotics, it's not about any of these things. It's-- it's about military intelligence opportunities done through-- broadcasting arms. So in nineteen-seven-- in the Soviet Union it was called "active measures," so there was a huge department of active measures whose aim was to pollute opinion making, divide the West.

And they would do operations back then, like, you know, saying that the C.I.A.-- began-- the AIDS virus as a weapon against-- against the Afro-American population. And they'd try to put that in a Western newspaper. Now, this is sort of done massively-- openly, and the internet is their sort of ideal-- sort of place for this. So these are really kind of military intelligence operations, which are pushed through the veneer of-- of broadcasting. I expect that this is actually how they justify the massive budgets of RT to Putin, 'cause this is something Putin understands..

Maybe we should start looking at some of the Russian broadcasting agencies, not even as propaganda as such. Not-- not about persuasion, or-- or P.R. or-- or spin. But-- but really in military terms, as-- as-- as tools to demoralize, act as decoys and so--that's certainly the way Russian military thinking writes about these things.

You know, that's what they-- when they're talking about information, well, they're not talking about s-- spin or creating a better image. They're talking about weapons, essentially. So it's weaponized information, and that's the title of our book (?). I think those are the main three things. But it's very important to understand the intellectual background, and the overall strategy. I mean, we over-focus on R.T. R.T. is a decoy, essentially.

In Britain, R.T. is a decoy they want to get bound by the regulator, I'm pretty sure of that. Or they want to definitely draw fire from the regulator to-- to make-- make themselves look good, to get more attention. The real influence is often happening through financial elites (?).

So-- so-- all these op-eds about R.T.-- I've just written one this morning for the *New York Times*. I kind of regret writing it at the same time, because-- don't look at-- don't look at R.T. That's really the shiny thing over here. The bad-- the really sort of insidious stuff is happening in-- in other places.

LEONARD BENARDO:

Okay, Peter, just for-- for those of you who are not following the--

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Sorry, is that pol--

LEONARD BENARDO:

Russian politics. No, we'll just talk about R.T. of course refers to *Russia Today*, which is a Russian state-funded television organ that has stations now in I don't know how many-- how many countries-- broadcast-- *Russia Today*. I just-- Rabab, I'd love to just immediately put Peter's-- postulates on Russian disinformation-- in the-- in the Egyptian context, in terms of the conspiracy theories, in terms of the entertainment, in terms of the militarization. The-- the Department of mor-- Moral Affairs, is it?

RABAB EL MAHDI:

Uh-huh (AFFIRM).

LEONARD BENARDO:

Within the military-- is that conjunction-- for the propagation of-- of-- of-- disinformation, any similar to what-- what-- what Peter was discussing? Does it resonate in the Egyptian context?

RABAB EL MAHDI:

Absolutely. I mean, lots of similarities. But as opposed to the idea of this being a conspiracy theory where people sit in a room and decide, "So the narrative will be-- the anti-revolution narrative will be X, Y, and Z." We see a sort of orchestrated efforts from different establishments and different interest groups.

Without this necessarily being part of a conspiracy. It's just the-- sort of the-- you know, interests-- aligned-- one way or the other. So-- and that narrative is not particularly just some kind of discourse that's-- fleeting-- out there. But it's actually a condensification and a reflection of power dynamics on the ground.

So we see that n-- narrative-- that narrative, for example, that equates-- revolution and-- uprising with chaos, that equates-- Egyptian-ness-- with the respect for the military that detaches the idea of the State from the citizens. So-- Egypt is about the State, about (FOREIGN LANGUAGE). About-- and that's what makes you a good

Egyptian.

Not that you respect yourself or respect others in society, but you respect the State, so to speak-- that detachment. The demonization of all Islamists. They're all terrorists, they're all-- a counter-threat, they're all non-Egyptians. And capitalizing on historical-- symbolism of-- Colonialism and the post-Colonial struggle, to build that narrative.

That doesn't just becomes (SIC)-- a discourse where those kinds of symbols and-- historical references are used in the media. But rather we see that the media is working-- in harmony with-- the judiciary-- the security, and the businessmen. I'll-- I'll explain in a second how this happens. But the idea-- that needs to be completely dismissed-- in Egypt, and I-- and I-- well, you guys can tell me that that's the case-- the same thing in Russia, is the whole idea of a public-private divide within the media, right?

The ideal was always that-- of course, during the Nasserite Era, or earlier-- you know, nationalist eras when everything was publicly-owned, that's how propaganda and indoctrination happened. But once you have, you know-- a free market-- media establishment kind of thing, that doesn't necessarily happen, absolutely not.

We see that the private establishments, the private media establishments which are much more hurt now than the nationalist TV, work in tandem with-- what the State and the military specifically puts forward. And this has two clear reasons. One is that those-- all those-- business-- people are part of that crony capitalism, where their interests outside of the media act-- is clearly tied to the red-taping, the regulation-- everything that the State does. And accordingly, they feed into whatever narrative the State wants without even getting direct-- orders from (FOREIGN LANGUAGE), from the-- the-- the Department of Moral Affairs.

So of course, they give them the grand guidelines. You know, about who they should have on TV, what kind of music they should put on. But they don't-- it's not that kind of 1984-- construct, where they're following day to day. But rather tho-- those private establishments have every interest to feed into-- into this--

LEONARD BENARDO:

And Rabab--

RABAB EL MAHDI:

--propaganda.

LEONARD BENARDO:

--how-- how much of what you describe right now is-- is post-Morsi?

RABAB EL MAHDI:

Oh it's not just post-Morsi. I think a huge part of the mobilized-- so the mobilization against Morsi was very real. Morsi had tremendous mistakes, absolutely. But actually the narrative that was created for the anti-Morsi mobilization wasn't for what in my mind are Morsi's and the brotherhood (SIC) mistakes.

But it was-- it would-- it was a twist. So certain legendary things that couldn't-- that are completely irrational, like Morsi is gonna-- is gonna sell Sinai for \$20 billion to the Palestinians. That became sort of, you know, like, an urban legend-- that everyone believes, including people with Ph.D.'s. So university professors are talking about this, and you're like, "No, that could not have been the case. There are other problems."

The t-- before the mobilize-- before the June-- 30th, we know that there were certain TV presenters and commentators, including someone like (UNINTEL) for example, who actually-- rescheduled their holidays so that they're there, you know, mobili-- I went down on the 30th, and everything that I heard from the hundreds of thousands-- or millions who were there was actually things that they'd not experienced first hand, but things that they heard through the media.

My final point, though, is that those things they hear in the media do-- are not just created lies or stories. They become substantiated by sentences from the judiciary, and hence it becomes, you know-- yes, of course, they-- they are-- they are all terrorists. And that's why we see more than 600 being convicted and, you know, on death sentence.

And they're also-- substantiated by-- the security establishment. Not just through-- leads that-- that are given, but through creating that threat. Sort of the Michael Moore kind of thing, where every time you're-- there's-- a bomb going off somewhere-- which you see on the media all the time, or the policemen-- being killed either-- in Cairo or in Sinai. So all this create-- stops people from questioning to what extent-- this is just, you know, lip service or talk, as opposed to, you know, that is the quote unquote "real story."

LEONARD BENARDO:

So-- so-- so taken, Rabab, what you just-- noted, maybe I turn now to-- to Michael to see how much of this resonates back in the Russian sphere. This sort of inter-sectorality that Rabab talks about where justice, interior business are all part of a kind of broader-- dissemination of strategy. And the way in which lies are sort of instantiated into re-- reality.

MICHAEL WEISS:

Well, I think the-- the disconnect is that in Russia, there really is no private-public

separation anymore. I mean, one of Putin's first acts as president was to sort of nationalize the main source of media, which was television. So, you know, you have this giant, this vast State media apparatus, which is where most Russians get their news.

You know, as Peter I think mentioned, it's not necessarily about propounding one narrative, or one theory or thesis about an-- you know, whatever event. It's about sort of throwing sand in the air, discombobulation, confusion, sewing skepticisms to sewing doubt.

I think the-- the trick is, you know, Russia is-- is much more fundamentally interested in the West's notion of itself, and the West notion of Russia. So they like to use our strengths as weaknesses. They actually turn our strengths into weaknesses. So you know, quite rightly Peter said, "R.T. is not really the issue, that's the decoy." But the issue to me is how Russia manages to massage or manipulate the American and the European news cycles. To give you some very concrete examples-- obviously Putin has a relationship with Bashar Al-Assad in Syria and has been doing a lot of the diplomatic water carrying for the Syrian regime.

So when the chemical weapons attacks in Guta in August of 2013 were perpetrated, Russia's immediate was-- response was to say either, "This didn't happen, it was staged," or, "It did happen, but the rebels did it. They gassed themselves." And one of the earliest-- sort of-- more absurd and-- and imaginative conspiracy theories that was-- propagated-- Alexander Lukashevich, who's the-- the spokesman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs came out and said, "Aha, we can prove that this whole thing was a frame-up."

"Because the YouTube video showing the first purported victims of the attack had been uploaded to YouTube before the alleged attack took place." Now, the thing there was that YouTube runs on California time, not on Damascus time. So the Russian Foreign Ministry didn't know the earth goes around the sun, and was trying to kind of (LAUGHTER) pull a fast one.

But honestly, this made it into I think the BBC and several other media outlets. And-- and of course they-- they tried to dress it up as, "Oh well, you know, we can't quite be sure as to what Mr. Lukashevich means or is saying here." But it doesn't matter. When-- when-- when all you do is look at headlines, and what in the U.K. I call the stanfirst (PH) which is the sub-head, and they read like, you know, "Russia colon," or, "Putin colon-- the West does this."

Or, you know, "Russia-- rebels gas selves in Syria." Eventually this has-- this takes a sort of psychological toll. Now, we can sit around the room and say, "Well, no this is all just kind of farcical. Nobody believes this stuff." But actually, no. Quite a few people do believe this stuff.

You know, in the United States I-- there was a poll conducted several years ago that found that actually (LAUGH)-- a larger percentage of people think that 9/11 was an inside job than we would be probably comfortable admitting to ourselves. Russia exploits this, they use that. Conspiracy theories occur spontaneously in nature--

crankdom (PH)-- sort of, you know, deranged people sitting in their parent's basement, coming up with manifestos about, you know, how the Illuminati and Free Masons rule the world.

These people occur freely in nature. The trick is Russia finds them, very easily and very cheaply, and weaponizes them-- turns them into kind of agents of-- of a vast media campaign. So you know, Peter mentioned active measures, I think. Or you--

PETER POMERANTSEV:

No, (INAUDIBLE).

MICHAEL WEISS:

--didn't mention that. Active measures in the 1970s was a sort of K.G.B. construct. Essentially the idea was to plant pieces of disinformation, completely cooked up stories-- in-- in-- in the Western news cycle, in the hopes that this would divide particularly the alliance between the United States and its NATO allies in Europe, but also just weaken and again try to create a kind of intellectual fifth column, if you like, within the West.

The difficulty was in the '70s, I mean, we're talking the Dead Tree Press Era, right? So active measures-- the most famous example of an active measure, the K.G.B. planted a story in an Italian newspaper after J.F.K. was killed. So actually it didn't begin in the '70s, it began a bit earlier than that-- suggesting that-- the C.I.A. offed the American president.

This story wind (?) it's way into I think it was the New Orleans-- prosecutor's office-- and was actually taken up by American investigators. If you've seen the Oliver Stone film *J.F.K.*, it's discussed at length in there. Oliver Stone I-- I-- I'm pretty sure doesn't realize that this was a whole K.G.B. fabrication, or if he does he doesn't care.

But the point is, it took-- a great deal of effort to get that, you know, accomplished, to get that mission to be successful. Today, what is an active measure? Well, as I say, an active measure is a guy sitting in his parent's basement saying, "Right, so the pope is a space alien." True story, by the way, that's an R.T. story. The C.I.A. invented the-- the Ebola virus as a form of biological warfare.

Also a true story, which was actually first published in R.T.'s Spanish language edition, catering to a Latin American conceptions (SIC) about, you know, U.S. intelligence and nefarious operations that had been conducted in South and Central America. And they just get these people to-- to write this stuff. And within the space of five-- 15 minutes, you have an active measure, you know, from top to bottom which can then go viral, as we say on the internet.

You know, everyone can read it, it can get a lot of clicks. It can generate a lot of attention. And again, the goal isn't necessarily to persuade people this is the truth.

You know-- Russia's inside in-- into sort of-- Western intellectual or moral conceit of the last, I would say, the post-war period is that there is no such thing as truth. It's all relative, right?

What is fact? There is no such thing as objectivity. All media or-- organizations lie. Look at the *New York Times* and *WMB* in Iraq, you know, it's-- that's just what we do. You know, everything is subjective, so why can't we have our say? So they like to inject this sort of-- the-- the alternative explanation, or the alternative viewpoint. And-- in doing so, it-- well, all you have to do is create doubt, or second guessing.

So people start to-- to wonder about their own government's policies. The-- the kind of-- Rosetta Stone of this, I would say-- again, coming back to the Syrian chemical weapons affair. Right after that, or several weeks after that, Vladimir Putin published a piece in the *New York Times*. You all remember that, right?

So consider this sort of context. That piece was actually placed by a Western public relations firm itself, just as a bit of kind of meta-analysis. You know, the-- the-- that the Kremlin could hire a Western company to publish a piece of propaganda in the major American broadsheet, it speaks volumes about, you know, Western cynicism and how everybody can be bought, everyone can be co-opted. Alright, so that's part one. Part two, the piece was published on September 11, 2013. So incredibly redolent of America's foreign policy adventurism, and it's f-- f-- follies abroad in the wake of the-- the-- attack on the World Trade Center.

And then three, the piece was, "America, don't get involved in Syria. Listen to me, I had it right on Iraq, I had it right on Libya. You didn't listen to me, and this is why you're in quagmires throughout the region. Oh and by the way, the rebels gassed themselves." So a kind of trifecta of active measure. And again, using not some conspiratorial, you know, news agency or, you know-- kind of crankish conduit to-- to-- but using the Grey Lady, using the *New York Times* to do it. So I--

LEONARD BENARDO:

So Pe-- Peter, let-- so let-- let-- let me ask this-- because it-- I think it would be useful before we open it up to talk a little bit-- about what might be done-- in any form-- to counteract what's transpiring. I see in Europe today what some people might submit are very respectable politic parties, say Podemos in Spain, that might become in 2015 in the Parliamentary elections the-- the largest party that's been-- that exists as of January of this year, run by university intellectuals who are saying that the Ukrainian government is a neo-fascist, thuggish, junta, whatever fascist-- fascist government.

How do you-- how do you contend with the sort of profound-- misconceptions of a party-- led by university intellectuals, about a country on their continent for which they can get readily accessible information, what's actually transpiring? It can't be, as I think Peter, you're rightly point-- it can't just be the fact that, you know, the head of Podemos is watching RT before he goes to sleep, right? I would assume that there are other factors at play, that you thoughtfully-- delineate. But what does one do? We

actually had this conversation at the global board meeting in Budapest last week-- the O.S.F. global board meeting.

One suggestion that I had, and I'd be curious if you think this is fanciful, is to say-- to bring people from Podemos to Kiev, to introduce them to their 28 new parliamentarians who come from the world of journalism, think tanks and the like. I would say not one of them has a fascist bone in their body, as far as I could tell. Very respectable people-- and to sit down with these new parliamentarians in Kiev and to talk about politics.

They're all new political party members, activists. Is that-- I mean, the-- the ques-- the thing I'm really getting at is that we at the Open Society Foundations come into contact with those who want to fund huge, enormous-- very expensive counter-propaganda projects. So the U.S.A.I.D's, the Khodorkovskys who want us to go in and spend hundred-- millions of dollars to have a counter-narrative, whatever that actually means. What is-- what is to be done, Pe-- Peter, in this instance?

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Well, I-- I-- I do think we have to-- we have to break down the pr-- the problem into-- into its various sort of theatres and audiences. I mean, the biggest what is to be done is what is to be done inside of Russia. The second biggest what is to be done is the Russian speakers in the near abroad.

I mean, there-- you know, today we talk about R.T. a lot and stuff in the West. But listen-- we're-- we're really the side show here. The real crisis-- the existential crisis is there. That's where our look has to be. So that's sort of Russian speakers in the Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia, the 4.5 million in Germany. For those three things that I talked about, you kind of need slightly-- slightly different-- different responses.

For the entertainment stuff, I mean-- it's-- it's the case of getting their attention back-- 'cause they-- they are actually watching Russian TV. So to get their attention back and to get them believing in a slightly different sort of code of values, we do actually need-- I wouldn't call it counter propaganda, I'd just call it good television and good media for them. And the moment they're just watching Kremlin stuff.

I was in Riga the other week, and-- which is the capitol of Latvia. I'm sure you know that. And-- and I flipped through the TV, and terrible Latvian channels. They're really bad, like, 1970s German TV, like, bad. (LAUGHTER) And then-- and then you get to the Russian channels. Bright, entertaining, Americers-- in America the Masons are-- are at war with us. But they're-- in a really great way. And-- and so that's actually about making this sort of TV that-- would get them back.

I'm a T.V. producer. I could go into some of the details of what sort of programming would need to be done. And yes, we would need to spend hundreds of millions, and until we have, we're gonna lose them and it'll mean a lot of trouble. The shocking thing for me is when you go to Latvia and Estonia, they're like, "Where's the money?" Like, this is your existential crisis-- where's the money. That was off the record.

The Estonians less. The Latvians particularly bad. But-- the same thing in the Ukraine. So yes, we will have to spend hundreds of millions of dollars, and that is very, very cheap compared to having to spend money on tanks in a real war. So at the moment while it's still an information sort of contest, we can get it back. But-- but in the West where-- where it's much-- where it is a much more nuanced game, I think the Krem-- the clever thing that's Kremlin done is that it-- it's-- it looks at every place very, very, kind of, like, concretely.

So in Serbia, they'll have one tactic, in Croatia it could be the other information tactic. In Britain they'll have a third one. So we almost have to get as sort of micro-- micro level back (?). So I just don't know what the exact-- context is-- in-- in Greece and why Podemos is saying this. But I think it's all about--

LEONARD BENARDO:

Spain. S--

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Sorry.

LEONARD BENARDO:

--has said the same thing in Greece, though.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Yeah, sorry-- sorry.

LEONARD BENARDO:

That's alright.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

In Spain-- I-- is it-- is it just financial ties, usually it is. I mean-- Anton Chekhovsov (?) who is the best researcher about the connections between Russia and the Far Right say, "It looks like an ideological thing. It's actually a corruption thing usually."

So you know, the French Far Right's-- getting great business deals in Russia, they're getting-- they're getting \$40 million worth of funding from a Russian bank. So the-- the hit back would be corruption, you know. It wouldn't be too onto them

ideologically. It'd be a, "Hold on, where's this money coming from?"

LEONARD BENARDO:

But the le-- the leverage, if we're just talkin' about the United States for a second. The leverage that the U.S. has-- over Russia is-- is minimal. But in the Egypt case, of course-- the leverage is potentially great at whatever it is, \$2.5-- \$3 billion a year. Is there anything that the U.S.-- assuming that the U.S. had a value-based foreign policy. Let's just-- (LAUGHTER) so if-- if we had that as-- as--

RABAB EL MAHDI:

I'm sorry.

LEONARD BENARDO:

--as an assumption-- would-- would there be any opportunities for the U.S. to do something to-- to-- to-- to counteract-- what's happening-- in Egypt on any front that would contend with disinformation? Let alone the broader political environment.

RABAB EL MAHDI:

I'll talk about the O.S.F., not the-- not the Americans, because I don't think--

LEONARD BENARDO:

Okay.

RABAB EL MAHDI:

--that-- no, Lenny, I-- I-- I disagree, actually-- with both you and Peter-- to an extent. I don't think that a counter-narrative can just happen or be productive. I think narratives are reflections of forms of domination, and power structures, and things on the ground.

It's not-- it's not just creating the right messages and branding-- I think this was one of the key problems of-- of our uprising. We thought that saying-- you know, making the moral argument-- saying the right story, you know, showing people that this works, and it doesn't.

Quick story-- right after the uprising and for a year-- to follow-- a number of independent media people and activists-- tried to put together (BACKGROUND

VOICE) one independent channel that would not be funded in particular by one business-- firm. But that-- that channel that wouldn't be under the-- the hegemony or control of one-- one particular firm, person, or the State. Even though it was supported by people who had big names, and some that had the money, did not see the light. And why didn't it see the light?

Not just because security at that time-- security seemed to have ceased to exist. They didn't stop us through-- not giving the right permissions, or whatnot. But through so many dynamics that I don't have to get into-- I was just talking to a friend about it, you know-- from having people attend the meetings, and you know, being very-- destructive of the whole idea to making it very difficult to go through the bureaucracy. And so many things.

So the idea-- plus, I mean-- one of the things that happened during-- the lead-up to the-- mobilization-- against Morsi, is that they didn't get the (FOREIGN LANGUAGE) They didn't get old faces-- from the establishment, from the ancien regime, to talk against Morsi. They actually brought us on TV, and they asked the questions that-- because we were critical of Morsi. But then this discourse was tailored within a bigger narrative, whereby-- you know, people were being held up in the street.

You know, p-- power dynamics. You're using institutions that we have no-- control on. So no matter how much, you know-- establishments (whether it's O.S.F. or U.S.A.I.D. or--) spend in terms of creating the right image. About, you know, dictatorship of the-- that doesn't work in a vacuum.

That need-- need to have-- political groups who are establishing a different-- narrative, procedure, and political practice. You need to de-militarize the public space so that people can question and talk, instead of the (NOISE) continuous-- hammering happening in schools, in the media. So it's-- it's just--

LEONARD BENARDO:

So just--

RABAB EL MAHDI:

--a bigger--

LEONARD BENARDO:

--on-- on-- on that point, just to bring it back to-- to-- to Peter and Michael, because I-- I actually, Rabab, very much ag-- agree with you. The idea of some, you know, set of ideas in the abstract-- being able to push forward-- a new narrative, not sort of grounded in the material and the political. I-- I-- I agree, it's-- it's quite potentially a recipe for disaster.

But then in the Russian context, does that mean-- our focus-- must be for all the difficulties-- that-- that-- that-- that-- that-- that-- ex-- ex-- exist with the so-called opposition? Does it have to be-- on the ground realities, working as we do for years with civil society actors, the kind of meat and potatoes of Open Society work? And to stay away from this kind of... more Marx, less Hagel." Stay away from the big idea, and really continue to focus on what we've been doing for years, and building institutions and the like. And-- and-- and having a much more long-term strategy.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Why are these things mutually contradictory? I don't understand. (MAKES NOISE) we're just talking about disinformation today. No, again, we-- listen, it's different with the Russians, 'cause it's several-- there's the problem inside of Russia where we maybe need to be preparing for a disaster very soon, and hoping '91 doesn't happen again. That can be the strategy for Russia.

And we're talking in the other audiences, Russians in Ukraine, Moldova, that's what's at stake really. I completely agree. I mean, the Latvians don't just have to make TV for the Russians in Latvia, they have to have NGO's and a better-- a more inclusive-- school system. You know, they've done everything wrong, I think often on purpose-- and now they're bearing the fruits of their-- I think very stupid, or lack of any integration policy. I completely agree it has too many layers. I was a TV producer, I make shows. We certainly don't think on-- of narratives quite so naively, though.

We are actually talking about the semiotic building blocks of getting people to think and sl-- not getting them to think, but encouraging critical thinking. At the end of the day what the Russians are doing (it sounds very similar in Egypt) is destroying critical thought quite on purpose, in their television. It works, like a set.

Conspiracies to confuse you, traumas-- 1990s Stalin period, is to get you emotionally conflicted, Putin at the end to raise you up. It's stretched exactly like a set. You have to work and write people into sets (?), and try to get them to start thinking critically again. That's actually quite cunning and clever television. Is it-- is it a reflection of hegemonic narrative? Well, God bless the hegemonic narrative (INAUDIBLE).

MICHAEL WEISS:

And-- and you know, it-- it should surprise no one that a party led by university professors or intellectuals is sort of succumbing to this idea that, you know, Ukraine is run by anti-Semitic Nazis, right? I mean, look, the-- the-- the-- the-- the Kremlin's real trick-- and I think their genius in-- in the way that they-- they perpetrate this, is what can the U.S. say? "We stand for democracy, and human rights, and Open Society."

And all they'd have to do is point to Occupy Wall Street, or some, you know, huge corruption scandal that's rocking the American or the European establishment.

(BACKGROUND VOICE) There was-- there was a great essay in London Review of Books, by actually-- you talking of coming back to Marx, instead of Hegel, by Perry Anderson (PH). Not somebody I necessarily agree with all the time, but-- you know, it had nothing to do with Russia. It was all to do with the European Union.

And he went country by country showing just the-- the-- the-- the-- kind of giving the context and the nature of each scandal, and the-- the enormity of each scandal, and-- and-- and how, kind of, this grand idea of the United States of Europe, and this was gonna put an end to warfare. And kind of liberalize the economy throughout the continent.

The whole thing was bullshit, and it kind of all came crumbling down. People living in these countries see for themselves. They don't need to be told by Russia that their own house is in disarray. They see for themselves that, you know, their cor-- pol-- politicians are corrupt-- the economy is crap, their-- rampant unemployment. This is why you're seeing now the-- the proliferation of Far Right (and indeed Far Left) political parties in Greece, in Spain, in Hungary. You know, I mean in-- ironically in the Ukraine it was the one country where I think these-- these party's fringe elements were mostly repudiated by the last parliamentary election.

But I don't-- I don't necessarily think-- I mean, a counter-narrative to me just sounds like propaganda from the other side, right? I mean, what's the point. My-- my sort of modus operandi or-- or-- or the way I-- I see waging a sort of-- you know, defense campaign, if you like, or even an offense campaign, is to say, "What-- what actually is the-- the-- the Putinist system's sh-- main vulnerability? What's its Achilles Heel?"

And the one thing I noticed in the last few years is, you know, they assume that everyone knows they're corrupt, and that they're-- they-- they steal from their own people. But they like to kind of modulate the perception of just how corrupt they are, you know, within certain limits, right? So when it reaches a saturation point, and you know, the main political party in Russia is known universally as the party of crooks and thieves, that becomes a problem. Because then 100,000 people turn out on the streets of Moscow.

And then Putin says, "Uh oh, this looks a lot to me like 2004 in Kiev," right? Or indeed 2014 in Kiev. So you know, I also noticed-- you know, unlike, say, Egypt maybe-- and maybe I'm wrong about this, where there tends to be more of a kind of monolithic-- I mean, the military is the most kind of-- in Russia, you have these various factions. Rivalrous, competitive factions-- (FOREIGN LANGUAGE)

They hate each other. There's no broad agreement. I mean, Putin is sort of-- you know, he-- he-- he's like-- you know, somebody-- you know, moderating a play pen or a nursery, you know. And when you-- when you focus on the internal corruption, just how much money has been stolen, the hypocrisy-- they hate Europe, they hate the-- or they don't hate Europe, but they-- they kind of go on about the cynicism and the-- the ill-liberalism and the non-democratic nature of Europe, and yet they put all their money there, right?

They want to live la-- "La dolce vita." They want to shop on Madison Avenue, or they

want to shop at Harrod's in London and buy up, you know, palatial real estate in Surrey, or whatever. When you focus on that, what's interesting is even within the system-- the Russian media pays attention to this stuff.

Because there's one faction that's now being exposed and vitiated-- to the benefit of another faction. So you sort of set the cat amou-- among the pigeons. You-- there's a s-- self-cannibalization process that takes effect. And let's be honest, to me, I mean, you know-- Russia's-- Transparency International ranks Russia's on-par with Nigeria in term-- terms of, you know-- its-- its economic transparency.

At one-third of its GDP is frittered away through bribery, according to an independent-- monitoring-- organization. When you make the story about just how much money has been stolen, where does it go, what are the conduits and the channels it-- it travels through-- in terms of money laundering, where does it wind up (NOISE) in Europe? What European politicians, as people eluded to, are in the Kremlin's pocket as a result of it?

All of a sudden, people stop paying attention to nonsense and they start paying attention to the big story. *New York Times* had a huge, full-bore investigative piece on Bank Russia several weeks ago-- several months ago at this rate. It was great. *Reuters* has been doing-- you know-- a three, or four, or five part series called *Comrade Capitalism* on where all the money is going.

And-- and every single story involves-- you know-- the sort of leitmotif of it is, "We have to get our own house in order, because you-- you have the European companies, you have American companies that are essentially on the take." You know, I-- I-- I-- I noticed that the push-back to our report, the most ferocious push-back is coming from people who have, you know, former-- in their C.V. they used to work for J.P. Morgan, or they're investment bankers, or they're anti-sanctions. Not because they think sanctions are ineffective, but because it means they're gonna lose money, right? If--

LEONARD BENARDO:

Can we just talk about-- just quickly. On the-- on the push-back question, you guys, along with several others—like Anne Appelbaum who you may know as-- a columnist for the *Washington Post*. She actually does a review of Karen Dawisha's book on Putin in the recent New York review of each other's books. You guys with Anne, with-- with Ben Judah-- have been-- branded as C.I.A. flunkies, you know, right wing toadies of the U.S. establishment, friends of John McCain. (FOREIGN LANGUAGE)

PETER POMERANTSEV:

I haven't got any of that yet. He gets that.

MICHAEL WEISS:

I get it all.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

I don't get that.

LEONARD BENARDO:

Well-- okay. But that's maybe for your more-- your larger corpus of work, Michael. But in any case, I-- I-- (BACKGROUND VOICE) I--

PETER POMERANTSEV:

I don't-- I don't even get Jewish. (LAUGHTER)

MICHAEL WEISS:

Pomerantsev doesn't necessarily--

LEONARD BENARDO:

Right. But-- but-- but-- but-- but Peter, you were included in tweets directed at me, that said specifically, "Why are you funding, Lenny, the Carnegie Corporation-- Carnegie Moscow Center? Why are you funding Johnson's List?" Right? So I got caught up in the meshugass that you guys-- helped inspire. So my question-- so I-- I'm curious to hear from-- from you about that-- that level of the-- the-- the-- the sort of political debate. Where would-- is it-- is it-- is it coming from the corporate sector? Where-- where is it coming from?

MICHAEL WEISS:

Well, in that case I think you-- I'm the one who stirred the pot a bit on that I'm afraid, Lenny. But no, look-- you know, it depends. I think for a while, you know-- up-- up until about 2005-ish-- the-- the-- the-- the-- the first apogee of this was of course the Georgian War in 2008.

But the-- the idea was, "Yeah, you know, Putin, he's sort of-- you know-- a cold-hearted K.B.G. man. But, you know, the economy's doing okay, he's sort of kind of pretending to work with us on the war on terror (even though he leveled Grazni (PH) that's his form of counter-insurgency)."

"So yeah, let's just leave him alone, and everything is sort of-- kind of-- tranquil waters sort of thing." Ukraine has now demolished that myth, right? I mean, that-- you-- you-- and you can see it in the-- in the kind of-- the high anxiety, the paranoia, the-- the sort of febrile reaction of people (such as our friend Mr. Johnson and what he chooses to syndicate).

People are going nuts about this, because they think, "Oh you know, it's-- once again it's this descent into sort of Western Russophobia (PH). And it's this-- this sort of Manichean narrative of good versus evil, and blah blah blah blah." Look the bottom line is Russia has invaded and annexed European territory, Russia is waging a dirty, nasty war which has resulted in acts of international terrorism against civilians on a commercial airliner in the Eastern part of our country, undeclared.

Russia is losing its own soldiers who are being buried in secret because, again, it's an undeclared war. I mean, this is the sort of basic thing that the average man on the street can say, "Right, that's-- that's-- naughty boy. That's bad behavior, they shouldn't be doing that." And the war in Iraq doesn't justify it, and you know, what America did in Latin America in the '80s doesn't justify it, and all that. It's-- let's take this case as is.

Instead, it's this-- this attempt to sort of distract us from what Russia's up to. It's all about, you know, what about-ism. It's all about moral equivalence. It's all about, "Well, you know, you-- you do this, and-- and-- and blah blah blah." No, keep the focus on Ukraine. I think the-- the greatest-- the-- the greatest rebuttal to Putin, and the greatest sort of, if you like-- counter-disinformation or counter-narrative (although I'm-- I'm loath to use that term) is to make Ukraine a success story, right?

Empower the people of Ukraine. I-- I-- again, you know, Open Society is looking for people who are doing this (UNINTEL). They exist in Ukraine, (FOREIGN LANGUAGE). "Stop Fake." All of these organization-- a civil society in Ukraine, again, I mean, has it well over the Poroshenko government in terms of competence, in terms of intellectual and moral clarity, and in terms of passion.

And the work that they're doing, they are the heartbeat of the revolution. If the-- if-- if Ukraine is allowed to have a free and independent media that criticizes its own government, or calls its own government out for war crimes, or-- you know, exposes rampant corruption, which is being abetted by the State. That is the ultimate, you know, F-you to Mr. Putin, because that's exactly what he wants to stop. Ukraine is the-- the kind of cockpit, or the-- the-- the test case of what would happen in Russia in future.

LEONARD BENARDO:

And in fact that is, in a nutshell, George Soros' argument.

MICHAEL WEISS:

Well, he's got it right then.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

C-- c-- c-- can I ask something (INAUDIBLE)? (BACKGROUND VOICE) Now-- now that we're on the subjects of-- of witch hunting. So I met with Stop Fake the other day, and I said--

LEONARD BENARDO:

Could you just explain the Stop Fake--

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Stop Fake are a very dogged-- and myth-bust organization based in Kiev who--

LEONARD BENARDO:

And a gran-- a grantee of the Open Society Foundations.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

They are?

RABAB EL MAHDI:

Would you stop the promotion of-- (UNINTEL PHRASE). The guy said one thing about his book, and you--

PETER POMERANTSEV:

They are-- they are? 'Cause they told me that you refused to fund them because it would be seen as taking sides.

LEONARD BENARDO:

No, I-- I.R.F. is now funding them.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Oh you've got-- you've got over that problem. Well, I'm glad. 'Cause I was about to sort of, like, you know, collar you about that. Listen, I think it's something perverse with-- when-- people who work for-- huge—Russian oligarchs embedded with Putin-- start accusing activists or self-starting journalists like Ben Judah and Michael of being the kind of-- the dangerous hegemonic force.

And I'm sorry, I just found that ridiculous. You have people working for Alpha Bank (?) and Morgan Stanley being funded by them, attacking Ben Judah who lives at his parents and is just outraged that (UNINTEL)-- is-- is-- is-- is being-- is selling-- is becoming sort of, you know, a real liability for-- for Britain. I just-- I don't know, it's just so funny (UNINTEL).

LEONARD BENARDO:

Okay (UNINTEL) whether Ben Judah lives with his parents or not.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Well, he does.

LEONARD BENARDO:

You know, I--

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Saving up for an apartment in Shepherd's Bush, for Christ's sake. Being attacked by-- he shall go unnamed. He's on an Alpha scholarship-- I mean, are you kidding?

LEONARD BENARDO:

Okay, Peter. Let-- let's-- let's definitely turn to--

PETER POMERANTSEV:

I mean, it's just-- it's just so upside down (INAUDIBLE).

LEONARD BENARDO:

--to-- to-- but I do-- let me, since I sort of blurbed O.S.F.-- I mean, we are in the belly of the beast. Let me say that Peter's book came out last week?

PETER POMERANTSEV:

November the 11th, which is almost last week.

LEONARD BENARDO:

Okay. Nothing is true and everything is possible-- and I should say that Tina Brown, the illustrious former editor of the *New Yorker Magazine*, says-- I'm gonna read Tina's quote. "A riveting portrait of the new Russia"-- blah blah blah. "I couldn't put it down." So do you want to put it up? (LAUGHTER)

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Hold on, before we do the Tina attack-- God, who are we picking on today? We're picking on Ben Judah and Tina Brown.

LEONARD BENARDO:

You know what's also interesting? In Pe-- in the blurbs for Peter's book, they spell his name three different ways.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

"A riveting portrait of the new Russia, with all its corruption, willful power, and spasms of unforgettable poetic glamour." That's what Tina wrote, and that's pretty (UNINTEL). (LAUGHTER)

LEONARD BENARDO:

Okay, no, I-- I very much look forward to reading-- Peter's book, because he's a tremendous journalist. Let's turn now to colleagues for-- for questions. It's ten to eight-- no, it's one--

RABAB EL MAHDI:

Twenty.

LEONARD BENARDO:

It's one-- it's 1:20. So we have around-- half hour-- 40 minutes. Justin Burke.

JUSTIN BURKE:

I'd like to get your take on how to re-- is it possible to reach Russian audiences with-- from a Western perspective? And specifically, can and should we use humor (something like Jon Stewart) to sort of go asymmetrical on the Russian asymmetrical approach?

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Asymmetrize your ass. I can just see McCain saying that.

MICHAEL WEISS:

Yeah, that's the one thing we do leave out-- Ed Lucas (PH) is big on this-- another friend of ours in the kind of vast, neo-con C.I.A. conspiracy against Russia.

LEONARD BENARDO:

An-- an economist (UNINTEL) journalist.

MICHAEL WEISS:

He-- it's-- for him it's about satire-- and you know, kind of-- the one-- the one chink in that armor I-- I would expose is that-- actually, the Kremlin has a very good sense of humor. It has a kind of morbid, perverse-- it-- it-- it-- it-- it's okay to poke fun at Putin within limits, right? So this would have to be done-- I-- I think in a rather sophisticated way. But yeah-- I mean, look-- Navalny-- I mean, his whole thing was using humor to expose sort of the thievery and the corruption, right? That's what made him--

LEONARD BENARDO:

An anti-corruption—

MICHAEL WEISS:

--popular.

LEONARD BENARDO:

--activist.

MICHAEL WEISS:

Yeah, sorry, I-- I'm-- I'm assuming that there's some base level of knowledge. I don't-- if I-- if I'm saying something that nobody knows (BACKGROUND VOICE) what I'm talking about let me know. So yeah, I mean-- like, you know, we-- we did this thing-- I-- at the *Interpreter*, which is the magazine I run.

Which, full-disclosure, is funded by Mr. Khodorkovsky. We put that in our report, thank you very much. You know, the-- the-- the adds that RT has, "In case they shut us down," and all that. Well, then when Russia booted CNN out of Moscow, we did one "In case they shut us down, go to CNN.com for the real story," or whatever.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Did they really shut them down? Or did they just leave?

MICHAEL WEISS:

They cancelled their license and--

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Really?

MICHAEL WEISS:

--yeah, (INAUDIBLE). So you know, the-- these kinds of things-- you know, trying to create sort of viral memes on the internet. I think-- you know, they're not gonna change the world. I'm not one of these sort of cyber utopians about it. But yeah, they-- they can help kind of recalibrate, if you like, the kind of psychological understanding of what we're dealing with here.

You know, there was-- there was a cartoon, I think it was in the Times of London. A lot of people thought this was-- this was really in poor taste, and-- and quite crude, I thought it was brilliant. And it was Putin standing there with his shirt off, another popular internet meme-- and on the wall, you know, he had the head of a boar, the head of a bear, and then the front half of MH17.

Now, a lot of people had exactly that reaction. And I thought, "You know, no. That-- good on whoever the cartoonist was, because that's exactly the kind of message that

ought to be sent." You know, this would not have happened but for this man, and this dirty war that he is waging in East Ukraine. So absolutely, I mean, you know.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

I like humor as well. But I think Michael makes a very important point that—in the Soviet Union the Kremlin lost humor, so you (UNINTEL) actually use as a form of cultural s-- a subversion. It's very aware that it won't make the same mistake now, and makes very good satire programs within the country which laugh at itself. I mean, like, there's a sketch show which is full of jokes about, sort of, corrupt Duma deputies going whoring, going: "We're gonna go to Russia."

You know, it's-- it's-- it's-- you know, so-- so they've co-opted humor and make sure it's part of their package. Actually what they're greatest Achilles heels are-- sort of a moral earnestness. 'Cause their-- their idea is satirical, there is no such things as values. You know, everything they do is-- sort of a satire of the West to show it up.

So they-- you-- I'm not sure you can out-satirize satirists. I mean, humor's great to get a message across, or to get a fact across. But Navalny's great strength was that he named facts. Facts and earnestness is what they're scared of. It's when you start going, "This bank account, this bank account, bet this bank account," and you can do it in a jokey way that's not dry. That's when they got scared of Navalny.

LEONARD BENARDO:

Can I just say some-- in terms of the structures of power-- your-- the-- the-- illustration-- of-- of-- of Putin with MH17. At the end of the day, as you yourself said, Michael, it's not just Putin – it's the structure of power. You talked about the (FOREIGN LANGUAGE). So getting rid of Putin-- and I'm curious the same, getting rid of-- of Sisi (PH).

It's-- it's-- it's the entire infrastructure of power that needs to be contended with at-- at-- at so many different levels, that Putin-- I'm not just saying that he's symptomatic, or is-- he's one small part of the-- the-- the-- the equation. Of course it's-- it's a very significant part. But-- but we don't want to mislead ourselves and how we describe the problem. And it's-- it's-- it's a very complex infrastructural--

MICHAEL WEISS:

Yeah, it's not—

LEONARD BENARDO:

--power.

MICHAEL WEISS:

--I mean, regime decapitation is, you know, not the answer here. Which is essentially what you have in Egypt.

RABAB EL MAHDI:

(UNINTEL) in Egypt.

MICHAEL WEISS:

And you know, I-- I will-- I will say this-- you know, if-- if I am an agent of Langley I'm not doing a very good job. The C.I.A. takes-- a handful of journalists every so often and gives them a kind of-- briefing in Washington. And-- a friend of mine, who shan't be named-- attended one of these recently. And the line was-- "We can't really get rid of Putin, because what would come next would be so much worse."

Which you can take that at face value, you can believe that that's the case. Or you can think that that's just kind of-- extenuation of current U.S. policy. It's certainly an arguable position, but it tells you a lot. I mean, an-- another thing we haven't touched on in-- in-- in this discussion-- and again, I think the Russian government understands this sometimes better than we do, or we-- we have to pretend it doesn't exist.

There is a top-down nature to-- discourse in a democratic society. By that I mean, when a government sets a certain policy, everyone starts discussing, you know, the policy as a phenomenon and then all the epiphenomenon of it. So you know-- the *New York Times* writes about Ukraine in such a way, because of what the White House has decided is going to be the policy with respect to Ukraine.

There's-- a journalist at the *Times* who told an official at the State Department-- who then told me. State Department went to the *Times* to say, "Why do you keep-- guys keep referring to them as 'pro-Russian separatists?' Most of these people are-- a lot of them are Russian separatists, or Russian-- you know-- military intelligence officers or Russian soldiers." And the *Times*man replied, "Well, if the President of the United States isn't saying that, why am I duty-bound to report it that way?"

So there is a kind of hierarchical nature to this. And I think-- you know, depending on your perspective here, the good and the bad-- you know, the next administration-- I don't know if it's Hillary Clinton or if it's Jeb Bush, or I mean, even Rand Paul for Christ sakes. I think there's going to be-- a policy adjustment.

I think there's gonna be a much more confrontational line against the Russian state-- and that will kind of precipitate. I mean, it-- it's no coincidence that some of the best investigative journalism about Russian corruption has happened after Euro Maidan, right? Where do you think these journalists are getting their information from? It's being leaked.

Because the U.S. government wants to sort of shake things up. It wants to put Putin on notice a little bit, not completely. They're not disclosing everything they know. They-- he wants to-- he-- he wants to sort of put his feet to the fire a little bit.

LEONARD BENARDO:

And so there's-- there's nothing similar in the-- in the-- in the Egypt case?

RABAB EL MAHDI:

No. I mean--

LEONARD BENARDO:

Even Elizabeth Warren.

RABAB EL MAHDI:

Of course, (LAUGH) of course. I mean, the lazy-- the lazy answers of-- that's a better alternative. You know, what we know is better than we don't know. Which as you know, the whole Mubarak-- thing. Mubarak followed by-- Morsi. Now-- with Sisi. In our case, the idea of the Islamic threat so magnifying not only the-- the-- the ISIS threat, because that's pretty big.

But equating everything with ISIS, so they're just different brands of the same thing. And those stands (SIC) in binary-- and in opposition to everything that Sisi represents. Which is absolutely not the case, because clearly they feed into other-- into each other. Clearly at the height of the revolution-- we didn't see any kind of ISIS-- or even Al Qaeda-- threats, because they are actually mutually exclusive.

You either allow people to mobilize within, you know, civil society and express themselves, or you leave them-- hostage to just, you know-- feeding-- or letting out that frustration within ISIS-- and whatnot. Again, Sisi, I believe I always say the idea is-- this is-- this country, Egypt, is being run like-- like a big-- mafia.

So there are different gangs out there. And at some point, those gangs agree that even though they might kill each other otherwise-- they agree that it's-- the least common denominator, and the safest bet is to choose that representative. I'm not sure if you guys have been following, but-- four days ago-- there were leaks coming out from the office of the-- chief of staff where Sisi was-- a big general. And it included the general prosecutor, the ministry of sec-- the minister of security, and-- (NOISE) (UNINTEL PHRASE) I cannot think of what would be in English. So basically-- what's, like, the Chief of Staff within the military? Like, the second-- the person that, you know, runs the show on the ground? Big thing-- anyways.

LEONARD BENARDO:

We're-- we're very civil society oriented. (LAUGHTER)

RABAB EL MAHDI:

Oh okay-- oh okay whatever. And I'm so militarized, but not in translation.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

We have the joint chiefs. (BACKGROUND VOICE) The Chairmen of the joint chiefs.

RABAB EL MAHDI:

Yes, exactly, thank you. And basically the leaks were-- were taped. They weren't just from-- they were taped from the office of the-- the personal assistant of-- Sisi, whereby their demand-- their-- the general prosecutor was saying that, "We need to forge some papers about the imprisonment of Morsi." He's calling the minister of security.

A big thing whereby at some point of the leaks-- the-- the-- the Chief of Staff says-- "Don't worry-- (FOREIGN LANGUAGE)." "In forgery, we have-- no one can top us." Right? This cannot be-- this is not the brotherhood, this is not opposition, this is not gat-- good activism. This is basically some kind-- of security apparatus being leaked, because the Sisi, two days earlier, had said that he would-- he's thinking of-- issuing a decree (again, very authoritarian, but a decree) stopping people from-- demolishing-- the good name of the-- both revolutions. January and-- whatnot.

So what we're-- what we're seeing-- is also sort of-- frictions and fights within the establishment-- itself. But at some point, that head becomes a representation of some kind of common denominator. And I think what we need to look at is how do we, standing on the other side of the fence-- how can we play out those kinds of differences? And how can we pragmatically, but also morally, use them out? Not just to build a counter of discourse, but to expose the kind of information that you guys were talking about.

LEONARD BENARDO:

And I should say, for those of you who are unable to-- to glean it from Rabab's words, but she is the-- the model of the kind of (FOREIGN LANGUAGE) scholar involved both in the academy, and in-- in-- in-- in-- in the opposition to-- can I-- can I ask one thing about the relationship with-- with Israel? Is there, as far as you know-- or do you have any empirical evidence about a relationship between-- Egypt and Israel, with respect to propaganda vis-a-vis Turkey, vis-a-vis-- Palestine, Gaza in particular?

Vis-a-vis Iran-- or is this--

RABAB EL MAHDI:

No. I mean, we have-- we have certain facts that we know. I don't know what's within the-- black box. But-- listen to this. So Turkey was added-- last week to a list that only included Israel-- so far, where they-- where-- whereby Egyptians under-- between the age of 18 and 40 need to take a security permission before traveling to either of those countries.

So equating-- Turkey with Israel, Israel being, historically speaking, the archetype of-- of-- enemies-- one. Two, the discourse, the-- the-- the general-- hegemonic narrative during the past Gaza-- Gaza war-- whereby you have editorials in (FOREIGN LANGUAGE). (FOREIGN LANGUAGE) is the State-owned, widest, oldest newspaper-- and editorials saying, "Thank you Netanyahu."

Because he's-- because the real threat is Hamas, and Netanyahu is getting rid of Hamas, and hence, you know, we should be thankful. Equating old Palestinians and the Palestinian cause to the idea of Hamas, and Hamas being equated to the-- to the brotherhood. And the brotherhood is ISIS and (UNINTEL). And hence all Palestinians are terrorists by definition.

The-- the president-- Sisi, using historical references all the time, that actually-- I got emotionally caught up, so-- but blames-- Palestinians for actually having sold their land, having led Egyptians to a number of unnecessary-- wars. And equating this with the kind of at-- atrocities and colonial heritage of the Ottoman Empire, hence Turkey.

And again, because he has got-- very religious Sunni Sufi-- element to his discourse, and his-- being, that's also being put-- on the same par with Iranians being Shiite. So what we are looking at here is actually a discourse, as sectarian or even more sectarian, and sometimes racist as that of the Muslim brotherhood. But giving-- gi-- given both-- a religious zeal, and a nationalist-- twist. So you're actually being a good Muslim and a good Egyptian (Muslim being the big thing, of course) once you denounce-- the Palestinians-- the Turkish, the Qataris, and then we're gonna think about the Israelis later on.

LEONARD BENARDO:

Excellent, thank-- thank you, Rabab. So more comments or questions? Yeah, please Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH:

I wanted to go pick up on a thread that I think was here, which is about the

asymmetry of tools. That people who aren't really-- who-- who would want to think about restoring critical thinking, have vis-a-vis operations like the Kremlin. So-- and-- not to go into too much detail, but there are some grassroots organizations that are really interested in this question of-- it's not quite a retreat, but it's sort of using the internet as a place to house ch-- house a challenge to commonly-accepted facts and rumors in the public sphere.

So the rumor comes out that X, Y, and Z is true and has always been thus, and organizations or individual actors in this grassroots space try to gather the actual facts that either prove or disprove, or nuance that point. And from my perspective, that seems like it has a lot of value. It's kind of expensive to support, but it does have value in producing-- producing a place where data and seeking out the facts, and housing them for others to reuse, becomes important.

But that's responsive to some things that we can't really control. Like, I can't really control if a group that I think does do that kind of excellent rumor-catching, and-- and counter balancing gets picked up by the *New York Times*. So what's-- so in that civil society space, what's the missing ingredient that might elevate that kind of fact finding and data-housing, and data manipulation? And-- and really that-- catching the zeitgeist. Like, what do people actually care about? They might not care about how many people are in prison, but they might care about what the (FOREIGN LANGUAGE) are spending their money on.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

It's-- it's-- I'll-- I'll say a few things—I think we're just starting at-- at the start of the learning curve, of what we can do with internet-- activism. So I'll tell you co-- about a couple of initiatives which I-- I'm just fascinated with their work. But I like the way-- I like the way they're at least conceptualizing the pro-- the-- the problem.

So one of them is actually inspired by some sort of Californian phenomenon that is being put into Russian context. So it's actually the-- what they've done is-- let's say you have a question on the internet. Let's say-- I don't know, it can be anything. "Why's the sky blue?" Or, "Would-- how does the oil price influence the ruble?" Or anything-- anything you find interesting.

You go to this place, and then-- then they will very quickly select experts, 'cause they have a (UNINTEL) pool of experts who will give you an answer. So they're trying to stimulate you away from the Kremlin n-- news, into a space where you can get real answers. I think that's brilliant, 'cause that actually f-- 'cause the genius of the internet is engagement, you know. That's why Mashable works, (UNINTEL) or whatever.

It's all about how do we-- 'cause the whole myth-busting stuff is really necessary, and inspires people by proxy to think critically. But you'll never-- in the age of the internet, to do myth-busting is absurd. I mean, you're always gonna be ten steps behind. So it's great what myth-busting organizations do, but it-- that's really the

infantry work. It really can't be the main strategy. So it's about changing patterns of behavior.

Another is Arvay (PH), which is against violence extremism. Which is nothing to do with Russia at the moment, but I'd love to spread it into Russia. So that's Google ideas and the (UNINTEL) Institute. And there they take people who are former extremists (skin heads, their focused mainly on Islamic extremism) and they literally-- they were-- they act like social workers online. They literally go inside into these forums, into these discussion groups and try to change people's behavior.

I-- so those are two things that I've heard of. Are they the future? I don't know. But-- but it's certainly very exciting. But it has to be-- it has to be based in engagement rather than just giving information, I think. But it's a long journey, and some-- you know, it needs a lot of funding and-- and grassroots stuff. (UNINTEL) organizations who do that.

MICHAEL WEISS:

Part of it, too, is I think-- you know, educating journalists and, you know, people who cover these issues on, you know, how to avoid being duped or manipulated or exploited. So in our report, we sort of have a-- slate of recommendations, one of which is maybe it's worthwhile having disinformation ombudsman for major news organizations.

I mean, and not just focused on Russia, by the way. I mean, you could do this with respect to Egypt, Syria, Iran-- other authoritarian regimes. You know, when there is a story that-- that is-- doesn't smell right, and you suspect it's been cooked up for the purposes of trying to sway public opinion in the West-- investigating that full bore. I mean, the-- the Lukashovich thing, for instance. That you didn't even need a specialism in Russia to figure out, you just needed common sense, right? Knowing the difference between time zones. A little more-- rigor and a little more care with which what they call the editorial framing of even news stories are packaged, can go a long way.

And people say, "Well, this--" one of the criticisms I had-- I've had about this is, "Well, we don't like that. That's-- that's trying to control the press." Well, no, not really. Because if your press standards are based on your, you know-- ability and-- you know, the speed with which you arrive at the truth, then this is in your interest to do this.

I mean, nobody's coercing you to do it. But you should just do it, you know-- you know, for your own sake. So these are things that can be done. During the Cold War, there actually was a governmental effort to go around, and sort of peda-- peda-- pedagogical-- campaign to instruct and teach journalists, and academics, and intellectuals about the dirty tricks of the K.G.B. I don't think we have to go that far-- because you know, the one thing about most of the Putinist propaganda is a lot of it's so crude-- and it's so easily debunked.

It's just about understanding that, you know-- when they say-- "Sukhoi 27 jets shot down, MH17--" you know, you can go to Wikipedia and figure out the ceil-- the-- the altitude ceiling of the Sukhoi's 27 fighter jet compared to where MH17 was in the sky. And all of a sudden, put the brakes on running a story that says, you know, "Russian general's staff claims this was--" no. I mean, Russian general's staff doesn't know the laws of aerodynamics, that's the story. (LAUGHTER)

LEONARD BENARDO:

Can I-- can I ask one-- one thing, Michael? I saw a documentary a couple of years ago about Lee Atwater, who was the-- the great political technologist. We don't use that term here, but-- for the Republican party. And he was George Bush, Senior's-- George 41's-- main political strategist during the 1988 campaign.

And there was a famous-- incident in the 1988 campaign, the so-called Willie Horton story, that-- Lee Atwater helped-- propagate. And it seemed as if, in that-- and-- and it was full of-- full of lies, riddled-- riddled with fallacy. But it seemed as if that was the first actual political race in the U.S. in which it was possible to spew out and out lies.

There had been so much venom-- and nastiness in political campaigns before that, to be sure, from John Adams down. But this was the first time when you could actually say something that was just-- a wholesale falsehood and get away with it. Right? I mean, Grover Cleveland did have an illegitimate kid, right? It was real, he was impugned in 18-- whatever, '92 for it but it was true. But in this case, it seemed as if American-- and I-- I apologize, this seems like a tangent, I'm gonna get back on track. It's-- but it seemed like-- after '88, and we experience this in political elections now all the time, this just pure, unadulterated lies. They're lies.

Now, I'm not saying that this lies, if we have some sort of l-- you know-- prevarication meter, these lies-- rise to some of the falsehoods being-- be-- being spewed in Russia today. But there-- they're sort of still l-- you know, likes nonetheless, you know. And sort of contending with that reality, where I agree with Peter's point that we're always gonna be ten steps behind. You know, what's the-- who's the guy-- David Brock who runs-- what-- what is his website called?

MICHAEL WEISS:

Media Matters.

LEONARD BENARDO:

Media Matters. Does the-- does that website have any impact or influence whatsoever on public debate, in terms of righting alleged falsehoods?

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Yeah, this is exactly the problem with the myth-busting stuff, is that-- is that it becomes just part of the partisanship very quickly. Like, "Oh that's a Right wing site, myth-busting against (BACKGROUND VOICE)-- you know, Times is a Left wing site."

MICHAEL WEISS:

I mean, in-- in-- in Brock's case, he is the Lee Atwater for Hillary's campaign. And-- well, next year, so.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Well, we have an idea to-- how-- how to maybe stop talking about that. I mean, there's two things that could be done, maybe. I mean, could we-- I mean, to return to a reality-based conversation where we can at least agree on the facts before we start debating them-- or debating--

LEONARD BENARDO:

That's like-- that's Habermas. I don't-- I-- I f-- quite honestly. I-- I-- I don't think that will ever want-- be possible in our lifetimes, the idea of a fact-based reality. I just-- it's not possible anymore. How do you-- how do you return to that?

PETER POMERANTSEV:

By-- by-- by seeing the consequences of not having one. (LAUGH)

MICHAEL WEISS:

You know, and a lot of this too is-- is just-- it's the-- the-- the effect or the hangover of-- Democratic society in a state of crisis. 2008, you have this enormous economic blow not seen since the 19-- late '20s, early '30s. You know, America is extricating itself from two wars in the Middle East while starting three new ones.

You know, it-- it just-- we're in a state of discombobulation. And that is, if you like, the-- the-- the soil in which Putinism I think kind of takes root. He understands it, he sees America's sort of shabbiness-- its-- its-- eagerness to-- I mean, we don't have political technologists. Instead we call them directors of strategic communications, right, in the White House.

It's the same thing. They're not as good as Sircoff (PH), but you know, the-- they do

the same-- they serve the same function. And they tell lies, they tell (UNINTEL). Or they tell, you know, half truths. You know, so yeah, I mean, I-- I-- I would like-- in an ideal world I would like my government to-- to sort of get up and say, "This is what happened, and here's how we know it. Now you go discuss it." It's not gonna happen though.

I mean, so long as politics is politics. I think, you know, Peter's right in-- when the *Interpreter* does its debunking of things, nobody ever assails us for the, you know, im- - empirical shoddiness. Nobody can say, "You got your facts wrong." Instead it's, "Well, Khodorkovsky." Or, "Oh it's Weiss-- you know, neo-con C.I.A." or all this kinda crap.

And you-- you-- you know, we have an impact. We-- we-- we have an effect when it comes to people who I think can see past all that craziness and just-- they're interested in the truth. But when it comes to changing the debate whole-- scale, or-- or large scale rather, I-- I don't see it having-- a measurable impact to be honest.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

I think-- I think there's two things that we can't-- one-- one of the things we suggest in-- in the paper, and it might be a pipe dream, is--

LEONARD BENARDO:

By the way, this paper is linked to, on the invitation, to this event. So for those of you who want to read it, it will stay up there.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Which was-- having like a trans-- there's two things and they go to-- to-- together. One is developing new glossary for propaganda, 'cause something that I came across-- - we both came across when we researched the paper was that-- there's this thing, everything's propaganda. We were talking in Cambridge, as in, like, the best university in the world, this Ph.D. students stood up and said, "well, what's the different between a shampoo ad and what the Kremlin does? It's all the formation of men's (?) attitudes." And I just put my head in my hands and wanted to cry, and yet (UNINTEL PHRASE) from *Stop Fake* said, "Well, you know, when the Hutus and Tootsis (PH) here are killing each other, you know, that was propaganda. Nobody's died from shampoo stuff."

But-- but even more simple than that, I think we need a new glossary. Going from misinformation, disinformation, public diplomacy, all the way through to, you know, facts. So that we actually have a much more critical way-- so actually media education in schools, universities-- very important. (FOREIGN LANGUAGE) who's the best sort of media thing for-- in Russia, is very, very big on this.

And she has a whole system about how to approach this. So it does actually have to go that deep. If we're gonna face a deluge of disinformation in the 21st century, the-- if the great challenge of the 21st century's gonna be the abuse of freedom of information as opposed to censorship, then we really have to start changing behavior at a very early and fundamental level so everyone becomes their own editor, so everyone starts thinking more critically. But-- and also with--

LEONARD BENARDO:

You know what's the best malapropos in this paper? And I don't know-- and it was certainly not deliberate. But-- you spelled Masha Lipman's name like Walter Lippmann. (LAUGHTER)

PETER POMERANTSEV:

That's very (INAUDIBLE)-- that's-- that's--

LEONARD BENARDO:

It was fantastic.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

--that's a lovely slip. That's very--

LEONARD BENARDO:

It was perfect. Walter Lippmann, folks if you don't know, is a very famous American journalist-- for many years-- at the *New York Times*. Some people think is like the godfather of American journalism. But spelled his name with two p's and two n's. Unlike Masha Lipman who's-- a Russian journalist-- who spells her name with one. (BACKGROUND VOICE) That's fantastic, actually.

By the way, what happened-- where-- where-- there are no acknowledgements in your paper. I spent so much time with you on the phone. (LAUGHTER) You talked about so much stuff. And at one point I spoke with you from my home at 6:00 in the morning. Where-- where-- where are the acknowledgments? I was looking for (UNINTEL).

MICHAEL WEISS:

We don't-- we didn't wanna cause harm to anybody by-- by thanking them for their--

LEONARD BENARDO:

So let's take (UNINTEL). Is there anybody on the phone-- I apologize, haven't got-- who wants to ask anything? Please.

FEMALE VOICE:

I have a question, too, about the-- I was just wondering if you can elaborate further about the point where you said-- the sort of independent-- media outlets in Egypt have a limited role in changing the State-- discourse. I think that these-- media outlets-- they play an important role in the sense they provide information that otherwise is not available.

And I think that this summer we saw a very powerful example where the mainstream media in Egypt were forced to report on the hunger strike. Not because they wanted to do so, but because it was a growing online presence, where-- bloggers, independent journalists, as well as, like, independent media outlets. They were-- reporting on this issue so it kind of-- you know, forced the main stream media to report on this. So I just wanted to hear your thoughts.

RABAB EL MAHDI:

What-- what I was saying with that is that within the mainstream-- media, the big establishments, there's no difference between the plo-- public and the private. So the idea that, you know, something-- this is, you know, on TV for example, or (FOREIGN LANGUAGE) while is owned by-- business independent-- supposedly business men.

Versus the-- national TV, owned by the state. That makes no difference in terms of the kind of discourse they put forward, that's anti-- revolution, that's pro-Sisi, so on and so forth. What you're talking about in terms are-- what I think of as small islands within the alternative channels, particularly social media. So within the prin-- the printed-- journals-- for example, newspapers or TV, we don't have anything alternative.

Within the-- the inter-- internet sphere, of course we-- we have that, and that has been one of the amazing things about the internet. But again, to what extent does this affect the main sk-- mainstream-- discourse that is-- something that I see clearly, it's very-- it's very marginal.

Because with-- within a main-- I mean, the mainstream discourse doesn't have to agree on everything, right? Even those-- disagreements that I mentioned between State institutions, right? There are more-- there are pro-Sisi versus the pro-Shafik (PH)-- people. Shafik being-- also a Mubarek man who had run-- for elections, and-- stood to run off (?) with Morsi. So you see those-- differences, right? Accordingly, you see those voices reporting on the hunger strike, or-- those who are in jail, or the sixth of April.

But then how does this get translated? Everything becomes lost in that translation when it comes-- to the mainstream media. So within the mainstream media, the story becomes the-- those people just wanna tarnish the-- this-- reputation of-- Egypt, that they are doing this because they're being funded by-- by the U.S. The-- no, of course, look at this. They are eating-- you know, behind cameras, look how fat he is. So those kinds of things. So yes, it's reported. But what kind of-- report?

LEONARD BENARDO:

Alex Clement (PH), perhaps the only person at the table speaks both Arabic and Russian. Anything-- anything you wanna share, Alex? We have a few minutes left.

ALEX CLEMENT:

I mean, I-- I just-- actually was struck most by-- by what Michael said about-- how a lot of this has to do with the responsibility of journalists themselves, right? I mean, it-- you know, there's a lot of talk about traditional media sort of being under fire, it's not profitable anymore, where do we go for money?

You know, two of the best organizations that have done reporting on Ukraine have been *BuzzFeed* and *Vice*, right? That's an interesting, you know, kind of dynamic. But I-- but I think-- I think this-- this question of, you know, what-- what-- what-- what-- what further responsibilities are incumbent upon journalists sort of as foot soldiers in this information war, whatever we call it, I think is an important one.

And I think also, you know, there-- there's a higher responsibility placed on governments themselves to be more transparent and accountable, right? I mean, the reason-- as you said, Podemos and (FOREIGN LANGUAGE) and all these-- and all these-- you know, I mean, or the-- or the Far Right on the other end, the reason these exist is because of a crisis of faith in their own governments.

And here we are in the U.S. two days after this horrendous torture report has come out, which is a victory for transparency but is a tremendous condemnation of U.S. policy. And I think those-- you know, so both on a journalistic side and the governments sides, I think that's what we're really talking about. The-- the-- the-- the targets of the Russian strategy are journalists and governments, and so the responsibility is to not treat those like victims, but actually actors in this (INAUDIBLE).

MICHAEL WEISS:

And you know, by the way, what happens in 25 years when Putin is out of power and there's been some kind of cataclysm in Russia, and State secrets start to emerge? And then, you know, U.S. intelligence becomes declassified and we find out all the kind of dirty shit that our government has been sitting on about what Putin has been up to.

I mean, I was in-- we were in Europe-- about a month ago, and-- you know, heard it from somebody who was in a position to say these things, that there-- apparently there's a phone call between Putin and Poroshenko in which Pu-- Putin tells Poroshenko to go shoot more people dead in the streets of Kiev.

LEONARD BENARDO:

Yanukovych.

MICHAEL WEISS:

I'm sorry-- Yanukovych. Yeah, good.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

That would be amazing if that were (INAUDIBLE). (LAUGHTER)

MICHAEL WEISS:

Rewind-- sorry. That's-- (BACKGROUND VOICE) not really a Freudian slip. But anyway-- yes, with Yanukovych. And-- you know, this-- this-- it was-- intercepted by signals intelligence, and it's-- it's sort of an open secret among-- the various-- you know, government-- apparatuses-- throughout the world now.

Well, you know, if they-- if the K.G.B. can upload conversations between Victoria Nuland and Jeffrey Pyatt or the Estonian foreign minister and the E.U. high representative allegedly embarrassing Western policy with respect to Ukraine. Wouldn't that change the conversation, like, forever? If the president of Russia's telling the-- the president of Ukraine to shoot more people dead in the streets.

And yet we're sitting on it, because-- and my supposition is I think somewhat validated by what I said about this-- this sort of C.I.A. journalist confab-- they don't want to-- to-- to change the regime in Russia. They don't want to see Putin out of power. They wanna keep his secrets for him, and he knows it, which allows him, I think, greater impunity to carry on.

JUSTIN BURKE:

Well, what about Edward Snowden? We don't know what Putin is sitting on with that?

MICHAEL WEISS:

Oh for sure, absolutely.

LEONARD BENARDO:

So we could come out-- with something and he could, you know, body slam us.

MICHAEL WEISS:

Absolutely. My-- my--

ELIZABETH:

But then, even in this context, we also have (UNINTEL)--

PETER POMERANTSEV:

You think Putin controls Snowden?

LEONARD BENARDO:

Well, he-- he's probably sitting on all those secrets.

ELIZABETH:

But we haven't even addressed the-- this-- another-- I don't know, how-- we're not on a tripod anymore. There's-- this sort of a centipede holding something up. But one of the-- another leg, which is the journalists can validate their information by going to academics, but nobody's tracking the academics and the influences they get from Russia. And that's never talked about or exposed, and it's incredibly pervasive. So the journalists--

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Is it?

ELIZABETH:

--yes. Journalists can't actually find a way to get someone else to validate their

information.

MICHAEL WEISS:

And so-- so much-- you know, my other thing in-- in-- in life is Syria. And so much of the reporting on Syria in the early days of the revolution was just garbage on-- because people the-- the-- the construct was, you know, Assad is a reformist. That was the U.S. policy position too, for a long time.

Assad is a reformist, no, he'll never be overthrown, no, he'll never do what his father did in Hama, no, he'll never use chemical weapons. People are-- are loyal to the regime, blah blah blah blah blah. How much of that has been just turned into toilet paper over the last four years, you know?

And it's because people were going to-- I mean, I don't wanna name too many names, but you know, sort of the-- the-- the established figures and the self-appointed sort of-- you know, grey eminences of-- of Syriology (PH) who were essentially telling them this. And they just took it at-- as gospel truth, at face value, without investigating or trying to do any digging themselves.

You know, the-- the-- the al-- the completely polar opposite line from that is the Tom Freedman approach where you ask a cab driver, "Explain to me how things work in this country," right? (LAUGHTER) I'm not saying do that. But you know, a little bit of shoe leather journalism. And you're quite right, the crisis in media and journalism today-- you know, I-- I think I said it-- it's either in the report or I've said it publicly.

If the *New York Times* doesn't have the money to send people to Cyprus or the British Virgin Islands, or the-- the-- the Dutch Antilles, which is where the Russian oligarchy likes to register its offshore companies, and where they do a lot of their money laundering, then you know what? *BuzzFeed* does have the money to do it, they can do it. *Mashable* probably has the money to do it, *Vice* has the money to do it. You know, offshore-- Putin talks about the offshorization (PH) of-- of-- you know, or the--

LEONARD BENARDO:

Deoffshore--

MICHAEL WEISS:

--de-offshorization of Russian wealth, bringing it all back into the country. We should be offshoriz-- izing journalism, because all Russian wealth is still stationed outside of Russia. Again, put the focus on what the real story is. This is-- you know, you said-- Sisi, it's like a mafia. Virtual mafia state is one of the-- the most poetically and-- and-- and precise terms-- invented for Putinism, came from the U.S. State Department. We know what's going on, we just don't wanna say it publicly.

JEFF:

A question, if I could, on the line for-- for Peter about the-- idea of alternative Russian language television. How would you propose to get this before a mass audience in any country farther East than Ukraine, where the governments are gonna do everything possible to keep it away from mass audiences?

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Well, I mean, we have to split-- split up our audiences. So I mean, the-- the-- the-- the main-- the-- the-- the-- the main-- actual target is-- is-- is west of Ukraine. So-- so-- so the Russians and Ukraine in Latvia, Estonia, Germany-- Moldova. So those are-- that's actually the-- the swing sort of demographic that-- that-- that we really have to be focused on first and foremost. Inside of Russia, it's a much--

JEFF:

Except for Ukraine, you're talking about tiny groups of people, and-- and huge, huge investments.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Well, are-- are they that huge? I mean, this is-- I'm actually doing meeting after meeting at the moment trying to evaluate, which is the best way to go. So do you form a production company that creates programs for existing channels? How-- how's 4.5 million in Germany a small amount of people?

But-- do you-- do-- can you-- can we pool resources? So news from (FOREIGN LANGUAGE)-- you know, stuff being done in Moldova to create one channel? So this is-- this is the discussion that's happening. How exactly do you-- how do you structure that approach to make it-- to make it contemporary?

LEONARD BENARDO:

How's the new website doing in Riga?

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Which one? Medusa (PH)?

LEONARD BENARDO:

Yeah.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Yeah, really-- I mean, I don't know what their numbers are like. But it's up and running. So we're have-- I mean, this is serious conversation that's happening now. I know several-- one of the endowments for democracy is about to do a feasibility study which I'll be involved in. So I'll tell you in three months' time when we're done.

LEONARD BENARDO:

Okay, Jeff--

JEFF:

I just wonder, because most people--

LEONARD BENARDO:

--Jeff, quickly.

JEFF:

Yep-- just-- to point-- I mean, you pointed out how good Russian television is now from the eco-- from the entertainment point of view. And I wonder whether a news-only format is really going to be applicable.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

No, no, I don't think that at all. I've been arguing in meetings about this, about what the appro-- what the programming strategy approaches might be. I think news is a sine qua non, but so not the main problem. The-- especially if we're talking about-- they actually-- people do actually have sources of information.

This is not true. They're being emotionally captured, emotionally manipulated, and that's where the great-- conversation has to be. So no, I completely agree. I think news is something that has to be done-- especially local news-- 'cause that I think is very important to people. Like, somebody in (UNINTEL) hearing about their own lives. But no, no, no the main-- that's not gonna save the situation at all. I'm-- I make reality shows, so my focus is on something completely different.

LEONARD BENARDO:

Okay so Peter, Michael, and Rabab, this has been-- amazingly stimulating. Thank you so much for coming in. I will say Peter's book again. (LAUGHTER)

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Keep them coming.

LEONARD BENARDO:

Nothing's True, Everything's Possible. Of-- it's the holiday season.

PETER POMERANTSEV:

Chosen by *GQ* as one of its recommended book gifts. If-- but main-- mainly for you guys-- very nice reviews of it in the *Journal* this week, and in *Tablet*. That seems to be more the crew here, (UNINTEL) yeah.

LEONARD BENARDO:

And-- and good luck-- to Michael who's finishing a book on ISIS this Monday. You're handing in the manuscript.

MICHAEL WEISS:

Inshallah, yeah.

LEONARD BENARDO:

So thank-- thank you for-- for-- for coming out-- at the 11th hour, Michael.

MICHAEL WEISS:

Cheers.

LEONARD BENARDO:

And thank you all very much.

* * *END OF TRANSCRIPT* * *