

## **Democracy in Danger**

### **S3E13 Hot Spots Pt4 – Eastern Europe**

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:03] From the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger. I'm Will Hitchcock flying solo as my co-host Siva Vaidhyanathan is away this week.

**News reporter** [00:00:14] The front line between Ukraine and Russia is on high alert tonight

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:19] At this very moment along the border between Russia and Ukraine, armies are massing for what might be a very nasty war.

**News reporter** [00:00:26] Frozen solid. And according to the Ukrainian soldiers here, those Russian backed troops fire on them almost every day.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:34] The Russian military has sent more than 100,000 troops to the border of eastern Ukraine and is threatening an invasion. Both sides are digging in.

**News reporter** [00:00:43] ...but now has the potential to trigger the biggest conflict in Europe since World War II. Putin, I think, not stop in the Ukraine.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:51] President Biden last week pleaded with Russian President Vladimir Putin in a two hour video conversation for a de-escalation of hostilities.

**Joe Biden** [00:01:01] Good to see you again!

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:03] And he promised more diplomatic efforts and multilateral talks. But meeting Putin's demands to preserve Russia's influence in Eastern Europe will be a tall order.

**News reporter** [00:01:14] Today, the volatile situation...

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:16] Elsewhere in countries that once lay behind the Iron Curtain.

**News reporter** [00:01:19] Polish riot police fired tear gas.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:22] The fallout of the Cold War continues to play itself out.

**News reporter** [00:01:25] Pelted with stones.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:27] And it seems that not only is democracy in danger in this part of the world, but so is peace and security.

**News reporter** [00:01:33] Belarus is accused of facilitating and orchestrating this crisis, as we're told...

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:37] So, for the last installment in our mini-series on global hotspots. We are headed back to Eastern Europe to sort through these complicated threats. And we're fortunate to have with us two distinguished public servants with extensive experience in the region. Heather Conley directs the Europe, Russia and Eurasia Program at the Washington based Center for Strategic and International Studies. And she's the incoming

president of the German Marshall Fund, which is a think tank that focuses on transatlantic security. Heather began her career at the State Department, where in the early 1990s she helped coordinate assistance to the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. Heather, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

**Heather Conley** [00:02:19] Great to be with you.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:02:21] And we have here in the studio with us, Stephen Mull, the University of Virginia's Vice Provost for Global Affairs. Steve has had a long and distinguished career in the U.S. Foreign Service, including two appointments as ambassador to Lithuania from 2003 to 2006 and to Poland from 2012 to 2015. Steve, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

**Stephen Mull** [00:02:42] Good afternoon.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:02:43] All right. Well, let's jump into the real hot spot here. Let's start with Ukraine, where tensions have reached a very dangerous state now. We have talked about the Ukraine on our show before and its path to democracy. It hasn't been easy and there's been some progress and then some, some falling back, but it has shown promise even in the face of Russian aggression. Now, many in the U.S., I guess including me, see Ukraine as a kind of plucky democracy holding out against Russian pressure. But I'm sure Putin's government sees the situation very differently. Heather, let me turn to you first. Help us understand: What is Russia's narrative on this and why does Ukrainian freedom and democracy pose such a threat to Putin?

**Heather Conley** [00:03:28] Well Will, that's a great question. And thankfully, Vladimir Putin just answered that this week in an interview that he gave. December 26 is the 30th anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and I think we have to take a step back here and put this into historical context. Putin said that the collapse of the Soviet Union, we know he's told us this is the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. But he said that the collapse was the demise of a historic Russia. In June of this year, he also wrote a very strange and disturbing essay telling us that the Ukrainian people are not a separate people. They are one people with Russia. He's even said as early as 2008 that Ukraine isn't a sovereign country. So what this is about, I think, is Ukraine - in the minds of Vladimir Putin and his inner circle in the Kremlin - is absolutely essential for a new history for Russia. Russia can't exist with Ukraine not being part of its sphere of influence, its historical experience. So what we see here in the annexation of Crimea in 2014, its support of pro separatists in Luhansk and Donetsk, the Donbass region. It is trying to ensure that Ukraine remains within its sphere of influence. The problem is, as you noted, that plucky Ukraine, despite incredible internal challenges, political and economic challenges, keeps wanting to assert that it is a sovereign country and it has the right to choose its alliances, its perspectives, its economic relations, its political relations. And so this is the contest that we are seeing. Is the international system one of going back to spheres of influence where the strong control, the weaker or the smaller? Or is this an international system that we created after the end of the Second World War, which allows countries to choose their alliance, that they have that freedom? And this is what this is all about. Will we give in to the spheres of influence to allow, you know, a more accommodative approach to Russia? Or will the West defend those principles? And that's what's at stake right now.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:05:39] Steve, it sounds complicated, but it also sounds like there's a lot of local history, a lot of enmity, a lot of ethnic identity politics, disputes over borders. And

I'm just wondering, let me throw it out there. What's the United States a stake in any of this? It sounds like, you know, these folks are going to be arguing about who is Ukrainian, who's Russian, where the border should be no matter what. What is America's national interest, if any, in that conflict?

**Stephen Mull** [00:06:03] It's a great question, Will. It's one actually that former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson asked of his European counterparts at a meeting one of his early meetings there. Why should American taxpayers care about Ukraine? Well, I think the answer is pretty clear. Really since the end of World War II the United States has pursued a Europe that's whole, free and democratic and at peace with certainly with us and with each other. And that came out of some very painful experiences for the United States. In the 20th century, more than a million Americans either died or were injured and various European conflicts because we didn't do enough to prevent war from breaking out in Europe. So that's a lesson that's been very hard learned. Key to keeping Europe at peace - really, not just Europe but anywhere in the world - is in preserving the sanctity of borders. And back in 1975, at the height of the Cold War, East and West agreed through the Helsinki process that all of the borders that existed in Europe were permanent and would be respected. So Russia became the first established European power to violate that by lopping off a piece of Ukraine taking Crimea back in March of 2014 and invading the eastern part of Ukraine. So letting that go unchallenged has significant implications for how reliable will the United States be as a as a respecter and guarantor of borders in Europe. And if it's allowed to happen further, it will start to corrode American influence and will start to corrode the American Alliance system in Europe, which is one of our strongest national security assets that we have. So it's important for the United States. That said, I think President Biden's been clear on this. It's not so important that the United States would go to war over Ukraine. I think he's been quite clear that the United States is not going to send U.S. soldiers to fight a war for Ukrainian independence, but will defend it through other means.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:08:04] OK, Steve. So if we've ruled out war with Russia, what tools does the United States have to pressure and deter Russia from doing what it wants, which is seizing Ukraine again?

**Stephen Mull** [00:08:16] Well, they're primarily economic in nature. The United States certainly isn't shy about using sanctions in advancing its foreign policy interests. And given our centrality in the world financial system, those are particularly effective steps that the United States can use. And as President Biden and Secretary Blinken have both said, if Russia moves to invade Ukraine, basically they ain't seen nothing yet. They were quite explicit in saying that the United States will apply a new level of sanction that had not been used before, and they could be used specifically to target the oligarchs that are so central to Putin's hold on power to make their continued loyalty to him, come under some pressure and get them to start thinking about alternatives. So I think at least on the U.S. side, there's confidence that that kind of threat people sit up and take notice of. NATO's officials, EU officials, have all been united in saying that Russia will pay a very serious price. I think that has to be one of the principal potential sources of leverage. And it seems that based on the conversations we've had, at least with the outgoing German government, that the Germans would be open to putting the brakes on the Nord Stream pipeline. It's not complete yet, there's not gas going through it yet. So all of these are significant sources of pressure short of military action.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:09:41] Heather, you said that spheres of influence politics are bad and dangerous. We don't like that kind of thing. We feel states should choose their own path in

the world. But let me just make the argument here that in some ways, the United States, perhaps when the Cold War ended, felt that it now had gained new influence, maybe a 'sphere of influence' even in those countries that we're on the other side of the Iron Curtain, and that now could be brought into a closer alliance with the United States and with the European Union. So the United States policy was to push pretty aggressively for the expansion of a military alliance, NATO, into Eastern Europe and to encourage the European Union to bring in some of these former communist states into the EU. To some people, that might look a little bit like America was exercising a kind of sphere of influence policy, pushing its influence further into Eastern Europe. I guess where I'm going with this is - Is it reasonable to say that the United States might have provoked Russia might have gone too far in pushing its interests into what Russians still felt was their backyard? Maybe this is a clash of visions of how the international order should work, but I'd love to know how you deal with that argument that really America is the provocative revisionist power here.

**Heather Conley [00:10:55]** Well, you certainly hear that type of comment emanating from Moscow quite a bit. "This is all of your fault." And I'm going to come back to that. But to connect both of these questions, what the Kremlin is trying to do is rewrite that post-Cold War legal framework the Paris Charter, which, you know, establish that we respected the new bounds after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now, I think the goal here is to rewrite and to return back to those spheres of influence. So let's talk about NATO's EU enlargement. It's also important to note that at one point, President Putin in the early 2000s had mused about Russia becoming a member of NATO. So I think we have to again go back to this understanding. We were trying to create a new framework for European security that would not be this destabilizing. And I think Russia was going along with that vision. Or, you know, some in Russia would say that they were too weak to fight that vision. But it really wasn't until 2008, or you can even go back before 2007, when Vladimir Putin gave a historic speech at the Munich Security Conference, where he basically said, OK, we've tried this. We've tried to be sort of this normal power and it's not working for us. We're stronger now. And so this is when we saw modernization of the Russian military, the invasion of the Republic of Georgia and the effective occupation and annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. You saw the violations of major treaties like the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty. And then, of course, the ultimate was the annexation and invasion of eastern Ukraine. So the reason that there were four NATO battalions sitting in the three Baltic states and Poland is not because NATO wanted to put forces there. It was responding to Russian aggression. In Ukraine's treaty they were neutral. They prohibited them from joining NATO. They were trying to seek an economic relationship with the European Union, a trade relationship. And even that was too much for the Kremlin. What the Kremlin fears is democracies and modern economies on their borders, because if the Ukrainian people can be democratic and have a different orientation, why can't the Russian people? Because that's forbidden. Change - any political change is not allowed in Russia. My view and I was part of the historic NATO enlargement that brought in the Baltic states and Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia. In some ways, we prepared for this day by advancing security and prosperity to 100 million more people in Europe. We have created a stronger alliance that is not going to war because of Russia. Poland and the Baltic states feel reassured that NATO is their strong deterrence, but also open to dialog. I think it's prevented conflict and we should not apologize for that policy. So I think we should feel that this is a process that has brought freedom and prosperity, but it's something that is costly. We have to defend those freedoms as they are challenged increasingly on NATO's eastern flank.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:14:10] As a historian, I can imagine how we're going to keep coming back to this question of clashing narratives and how difficult it is to resolve them when people have dug in. Well, Steve, let me take us to yet another hotspot in this neighborhood, which is a particularly dangerous one. And that is Belarus. I'm sure as U.S. ambassador to Poland and Lithuania, you became very familiar with Belarus since it shares a border with those countries. Now Belarus is a puzzle, especially since we've seen a wave of, you know, democratization and modernization take place. Generally speaking, the narrative has been pretty positive in that regard in Eastern Europe, but not so much in Belarus. Since the early 90s, it's been ruled by Alexander Lukashenko. Some people call him Europe's last dictator, but I don't think he's quite the last one, but he's a brutal thug. He has ruled for almost three decades. The most recent round of elections, the 2020 elections, were clearly rigged, and there was a significant outburst of protests in the street against Lukashenko following those elections. So far, he has hung on to power. How has he done it? What makes him distinct? What's his story?

**Stephen Mull** [00:15:17] Well, it's a pretty traditional Stalinist playbook. Joseph Stalin would be very proud to see what his ideological descendant is up to in Belarus. That's not rocket science here. The press is heavily censored. All of the media just promotes Lukashenko's authoritarian grip on the country. He brutally persecutes any opposition. He arrests people. He throws them in jail. People have died. He tortures people. This is all backed up by a very strong, well-organized and well-financed security service - secret police - that all of us who followed the Soviet world during the Cold War became very familiar with. He's had his ups and downs with Russia, with Putin. But generally speaking, when he feels threatened, Putin has his back. And when the elections last August in 2020 indicated that the opposition might have won, Lukashenko ruthlessly cracked down and drove, either arresting or driving out of the country those few people who were opposing him. And Putin immediately stepped in to offer additional law enforcement support. He also is helped in that Belarus is a relatively small country. Only about 10 million people live there. It's relatively disconnected from the West. Unlike Ukraine, which has growing Western connections, the civil society has traditionally been very weak. In contrast to Ukraine and certainly in central and Eastern Europe, the solidarity movement was nothing like that in Belarus. And so he gets away with it. There's a very little price that he pays. The West to respond to the stolen elections last year with a wave of new sanctions. There are indications that that maybe has put a dent of two or three percent into Belarus's GDP, but not enough yet to have Lukashenko turn away from this path of repression. So I think he's probably there for the foreseeable future. The opposition has done heroic work. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who fled certain arrest and is operating - not a professional politician by any means - but she really united the opposition behind her, even in exile. So it's clear that there's growing dissatisfaction. I think we have an obligation to support them any way we can. Going to war is not an option there, either. Just as it isn't in Ukraine, but there are brave people who deserve better than they have.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:17:50] Do we know how close he came to fleeing the country or losing power in that period after the elections? And there was a few weeks there where things looked a little bit...He looked a little shaky, didn't he?

**Stephen Mull** [00:18:03] Yes, it's true. And there was the example back in 2014, in Ukraine, when Yanukovich ended up quickly fleeing away into a life of luxury somewhere in Russia today. And I suspect that might have crossed his mind for a while, but I think he came under some pressure from Putin, who didn't want a vacuum in Belarus, and that the Russians persuaded him to stick it out and that they would help him with that.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:18:29] Well, Heather, Belarus has recently been trying to manufacture a humanitarian crisis by luring migrants from the Middle East - mainly, it seems, Iraq and Kurdistan - and then bussing them to the border with Poland and Lithuania and essentially pushing them or forcing them to try to cross the border. What is Lukashenko trying to accomplish here and how have Polish authorities responded to this? What's going on?

**Heather Conley** [00:18:59] Yes. I mean, what Lukashenko wanted to do was first punish the European Union for placing sanctions against it after not only the failed election, but their incredibly repressive tactics used on the opposition. In fact, you know, the very dramatic - they turned around an aircraft that had a blogger and arrested him. I mean, these were pretty extraordinary measures. So how does one punish Europe? Well, you identify its greatest political weakness and crisis, and that's migration. And in some ways, Belarus was inspired by what Russia did in 2015-2016. They also, I mean, in the case of the Russian Norwegian border, gave migrants living in Russia bicycles so they could bike over the border. They pushed them across in Finland. Why? Because this is incredibly divisive in Western societies, and this was a way to try to break unity within the EU and apply enormous pressure on the two countries that were being so supportive of the Belarussian opposition. Lithuania and Poland in particular. It did not work. You saw where there was very quick mobilization in both Lithuania and Poland, a very strong EU support. Now there's a big difference, though, with how Lithuania handled this crisis and how Poland handled this crisis. Lithuania: huge transparency invited the media and humanitarian officials so that they could see what the Belarussian regime was doing with this weaponization of these migrants who were brought there and literally pushed over the border by Belarussian security officials. Poland took a very different approach, and I think that approach rightly and continues to be strongly criticized. They were not transparent at the border. They prohibited journalists. They prohibited humanitarian workers any visibility into what was happening along that border. What was the reasons? I can speculate. I think they did not want transparency into what was happening, which the Polish security officials were pushing those migrants back. There were deaths. Children are freezing to death in the forest in the neverland between these two as literally security forces are pushing them back and forth back and forth on the border. I think this was also extremely sensitive for a Polish government that's already under siege for a variety of issues: judicial reform, a very active opposition, and they had presented themselves as the best government at handling migration, refusing to accept any EU migrants from the migration crisis in 2015 and 2016. So two very impacted countries, but had a very different response to that border problem. But as I said overall, the EU showed great solidarity. They identified what was happening and thankfully that solidarity made Lukashenka step back. He's now had to remove some of these migrants. They are still there. They're still people trapped. It's still a horrific humanitarian crisis. But it was that solidarity that helped. The transparency that Poland did not implement, I think, eroded what was an enormous amount of support for Poland and sympathy for what was happening.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:22:18] Well, Steve, this gives us a chance to talk a little bit more about Poland and what it has been going through in the last couple of decades. I teach the Cold War history class and love dwelling on the rise of solidarity and the trade union movement. Against all odds, they fought for the right to organize and then they fought for the right to free elections and it took them a decade. At various points they had to go underground and they were persecuted by the military government. But as we like to say, they helped bring democracy not just to Poland, but they certainly helped roll back communism in Eastern Europe. If ever there was a plucky democracy we like to point to, it's Poland. And yet there has been backsliding in Poland. At least that's how we see it in the U.S. on a range of issues. And of course, the Poles are entitled to run their country the way they

want to run it. But things are getting a little ugly there, and I just wondered if you could try to situate what's happening in Polish politics in the last 10 or 15 years, the rise of the Law and Justice Party and its political views, its values, its ambitions. What's going on there that Americans should know about?

**Stephen Mull** [00:23:27] Well, I personally, it's hard for me not to be sad about what's going on in Poland, what has been going on in Poland over the past several years. I spent fully one quarter of my 36 years in the Foreign Service in assignments in Poland during communist times and the immediate democratic period in the 1990s and then back as ambassador a few years ago. And Polish Democrats did a remarkable job in creating a success story. An economy that grew - was the fastest growing economy in Europe for very many years became such a steadfast ally of the United States. Now, as happened in so many countries around the world, not just Poland, also here in our own country, as globalization took hold, societies began changing a lot more quickly. Economies began transforming a lot more quickly. A significant group of people were left behind in that transformation of those countries. And the Law and Justice Party, which now has been governing Poland since 2015, proved remarkably adept at creating itself as a party of grievance in mobilizing people who were very resentful of those changes, very skilled at using social media, and they basically were really skilled at promoting narratives that would enhance that sense of grievance. They spread many stories, some of which we recognize ourselves here in the United States, things that are just blatantly untrue and very provocative. For many years, they claimed that the previous government conspired with the Russians to murder Lech Kaczynski, the former president of Poland in the airline crash back in 2010 that nearly wiped out the whole government. They demonize minorities, migrants, sexual minorities, just targeting minorities and creating a sense that all of these minorities were somehow conspiring against the Catholic Church against a sense of Polish nationalism. And it was a very successful political formula that launched them into power. They've been there for six years now, and they've paired that with very generous social welfare programs that help poorer people. Poland is a largely rural country. Still, people who lived in the countryside didn't benefit so well from all the changes that took place. And so they're rewarding that base and mobilizing them even more. So as they took power, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the leader of the party, said that he wanted to create a new elite in Poland, and he's gone about doing that by claiming that Poland, more than 30 years after the end of communism, is still controlled by communists at the top levels. He's had a major purge of the court system packing the Supreme Court, the Constitutional Tribunal. Firing thousands of people in the military, senior military officers and the intelligence agencies in the diplomatic corps, wiping out state funded media and a voice of independence, and replacing all the editors and journalists with propagandists for what law and justice interests are. They dredge up resentment against the Germans demanding reparations for World War II, even though the West Germans had paid reparations 50 years ago. Raising that up today or last week, they were outside the German embassy, comparing the incoming government, the new government of Germany to Nazis, that they were trying to steal Poland's patrimony from it and even reached this crescendo in December. A leading member of the Law and Justice Party started a social media campaign accusing Joe Biden of stealing the election, basically repeating the same lies that former President Trump was repeating. They had a picture on Twitter of Joe Biden visiting his son in the cemetery, and the Polish political leader put a caption, "Here is Joe Biden thanking all of his political supporters who stole the election for him." I just I couldn't believe it. The United States is Poland's security guarantor. Joe Biden has been an incredible friend of Poland over the years, and to attack somebody who's been your friend just shows how insidious this kind of tactic has become.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:27:41] You know, for both of you, a good point of comparison might be Hungary, and this will be the last hot spot that we look at. This is an also an example, I think, of how anti-democratic politics in Europe have gained a pretty secure foothold in some quarters. The hard line right wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who we've talked about on this show from time to time, he's dominated Hungarian politics since 2010, active even long before that. And he cemented power through various changes in electoral laws and putting in loyalists into the media and so forth. And what's interesting and to pick up on your observation about Poland, Steve, is that Orban has also won some support in the United States. In at least one prominent media figure, Fox News host Tucker Carlson recently broadcast from Budapest for a whole week this past summer, and he talked about Orban's policies and his style with great reverence and admiration, and indeed highlighted his immigration policies and suggested that maybe Hungary could teach American politics something. And he praised him for sort of rejecting the liberal mainstream of the European Union. This is a fascinating moment, Steve, when European and American politics mesh, but not in the way that we normally would like. How is this happening, I guess? What are the implications for the United States and our democracy about this backsliding in Europe?

**Stephen Mull** [00:29:06] Well, you raise a great point Will. The United States, since going back to the Second World War, as I mentioned at the beginning, we've invested billions of dollars and thousands, millions of hours of diplomatic work and military work promoting the growth of democracy in Europe, and that's paid huge dividends for the United States over the years. Europe has blossomed into an incredibly wealthy partner for the United States. An incredibly influential partner, the transatlantic bond has made a huge difference in lives on both sides of the Atlantic and the roots of that success - our democratic success - are very much at risk right now. Last time I was in Poland, I just when I turned on state TV, I thought I was back in Poland in communist times. This is very heavy handed, clearly propagandistic approach to the news that Orban excels at. And so here are the same tactics that we fought against during the Cold War. The squelching of individual initiative, the squelching of individual freedom, the curtailment of personal liberty that is the secret of our success. And Orban is in fact using these Soviet tactics to bring back these same practices that were going to hurt us, that are going to hurt the transatlantic community. And it's a challenge for us, and it's one that successive governments in the United States don't really know how to handle. You can't kick anybody out of NATO. Maybe you can, but it hasn't been tried. It's very difficult to kick people out of the European Union as well. So the United States has a challenge on its hands. And I know the current Biden administration - the summit for democracy that happened last week - is certainly trying to mass efforts to stop this negative process, but we have huge interests in stopping it.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:30:55] Heather, I would love to hear your thoughts about Orban and his style and his the threat that he poses. But I'm just thinking, I don't think during the Cold War, a prominent American news anchor praised the Soviet Union or any of its Warsaw Pact allies. So this echo between parties of the right in Europe and in the United States is really interesting because they're both, in a sense, learning from each other. Testing ideas, tactics, strategies to demonize certain quarters, as you talked about in the Belarus case, to exploit the politics of immigration and ethnicity. I find that worrisome because, of course, the United States you know, that's something new that wasn't common back in the Cold War.

**Heather Conley** [00:31:41] Yeah. I mean, for me, that sort of bringing the three threads together of Russia, Poland and Hungary, all three are attempting to rewrite their history based on grievance. So we talked about Russia, Poland under Yaroslav Kaczynski is trying to very simply rewrite Polish history, in part how he was treated at the Solidarity

Roundtable. But he's attempting through grievance to rewrite that Polish history, and in some ways, the Polish government is serving as a sort of a model of nationalistic socialism, ultra nationalistic while extremely distributive of its wealth. Hungary Viktor Orban has been doing the exact same thing, trying to in some ways in a modern 21st century way, create a greater Hungary and reassert Hungarian greatness. Now what these three governments have in common is that they're using this veneer to remain in power. This is about survivability because they know after a certain point - and this is Mr. Orban - because of the corruption of his government you either stay in power or in Poland and Hungary is circumstance you may end up in jail if you fall out of power. So this becomes very existential. To to mask this need to retain power you can wrap it in a lot of things: fear of the other. So for Russia, it's fear of NATO. For Poland, it is fear of changing cultural attitudes, as Steve said. This is the decadence of the West. By the way, this is exactly Russia's theme that this is the social agenda that's being forced upon these countries by the European Union, by a decadent, progressive United States. We have to save our identity, our Christian values, our traditional ways and beliefs, and that's what Viktor Orban has done. He's really skillfully used all of these fears to mask corruption and staying in power. And so what makes this so disconcerting? Well, to your point, why are so many political leaders and parties - why do they admire this? Because it's about power. Of course, keeping the riches of power, keeping, you know, in some ways, the corruption of that power, but they have to place it in a veneer of fear. And this is, I think, the reflection for me in our U.S. election. It is no longer about two political parties fighting about ideas. It is two political parties fighting literally to the death because they feel it is existential. If their side doesn't win, they will be eliminated by the other side. So that's why there's such an admiration club for tactics and tools. But here's the good news. The international movement of these ultranationalists aren't successful. Why? Because it's really hard to collaborate when you're so utterly nationalistic about yourself. You can't agree. So Poland is anti-Russian. Mr. Orban is very pro-Russian. That's not a good place to begin to compare notes.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:34:52] Well, Steve Mull. Heather Conley. When I hear words like grievance, nationalism, revision of borders, the decadence of the West. As a student of European 20th century politics, especially the interwar period, I get very, very nervous. And of course, that's what we do here on Democracy in Danger. We leave people thinking-worrying a little bit - but maybe hoping for policies that can lead us out of this difficulty. Thank you both so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

**Stephen Mull** [00:35:21] Thank you.

**Heather Conley** [00:35:21] Thank you.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:35:32] Stephen Mull is the Vice Provost for Global Affairs at the University of Virginia and a former U.S. ambassador to Poland and earlier to Lithuania. Heather Conley is the incoming president of the German Marshall Fund and a frequent commentator on foreign policy for CNN, the BBC and NPR. Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit [DemocracyGroup.org](http://DemocracyGroup.org) to find all our sister shows. Here's a quick message from our friends.

**Elie Bashkow** [00:36:01] Hi, I'm Elie Bashkow, an intern here on Democracy in Danger. We wanted to let you know about a podcast we've been listening to from Foreign Policy Magazine. It's called Ones and Tooze. Economic historian Adam Tooze is like an encyclopedia about basically everything from the COVID shutdown to climate change and pasta sauce. On ones and twos he joins FP editor Cameron Abadi and together they

unpack two numbers one from the news and the other something fascinating. Find Ones and Tooze - That's TOOZE - on Apple, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:36:39] That does it for today's show and for season three of Democracy in Danger, Siva will be back with me just after the winter break, along with two of our favorite regulars, Nikki Hemmer and Jamelle Bouie, for a special episode to mark a well less than joyous anniversary.

**Announcer** [00:36:58] As White House chief of Staff, Mr. Meadows played a role in all was witness to key events leading up to and including the Jan. six assault on the United States Capitol.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:37:11] In the meantime, we'll drop some past episodes in your feed. Catch up on anything you missed and stay in touch. Shoot us a tweet @DinDpodcast. That's DIND podcast and visit DinDanger.org for much more, including a sneak peek at what's coming up in season four. Democracy in Danger is produced by Roberto Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Sydney Halleman edits the show. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel and Elie Bashkow. Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab. We are distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Will Hitchcock have a joyous holiday and please keep doing your part to save democracy.