The Rapid Sovietization of Western Democracies | Dr. Peter Lavelle & Dr. John Laughland

Why is the West suddenly terrified of hearing the other side? We used to study opponents without fear, but now it is forbidden. Are our governments just managing stories instead of fixing real problems? It really feels like we are becoming the closed system we once opposed. To make sense of this strange new world, I sat down with two men who refuse to follow the herd. Peter Lavelle left the corporate world to become a leading voice in Russian media, while Dr. John Laughland traded British politics for honest academic work in Europe. They are true non-conformists who aren't afraid to speak their minds. Links: The Gaggle with Peter and George: https://www.youtube.com /@TheGagglewithPeterandGeorge Neutrality Studies substack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s /academic) Merch & Donations: https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com Timestamps: 00:00:00 Intro: From Academia to Dissident Media 00:10:55 The West's Self-Delusion & Decline of Universities 00:18:56 Why the West Fears Russian Media & Narrative Control 00:29:41 The Death of Neutrality & Rise of Block Thinking 00:32:20 The Security State: Secret NATO Obligations 00:37:26 The 2022 Rupture: Was Diplomacy Sabotaged? 00:40:49 Being an American in Moscow & The 50-Year Split 00: 46:10 Russia's Long Game with Japan & Asia 00:49:18 The Donbass Blind Spot & Russia as Status Quo Power

#Pascal

Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Neutrality Studies. My name is Pascal Lottaz. I'm an associate professor at Kyoto University, and I'm joined today by two nonconformist thinkers. I've got with me Peter Avel and Dr. John Laughlin. Peter, John, thanks very much for joining me. Thanks for having me.

#Peter Lavelle

It's wonderful to be here. Pascal, you're doing excellent work. I'm really happy to be here.

#Pascal

Thank you very much. I appreciate both of you. I mean, you've been in this game for quite a long time, and you were kind enough to invite me to your show several times. And Peter, you've got a lot

of shows in traditional media, on podcasts, and so on. Can you both tell me a little bit about what got you into the podcasting space, coming from academia, journalism, and authoring books? Maybe let's start with Peter, and then we'll go to John.

#Peter Lavelle

Well, I'm a refugee from academia. I'm still recovering. It's been decades, but still. When I left academia in the late '90s, I went first into consumer research. Believe it or not, everyone, I was doing consumer research on toothpaste, toothbrushes, shampoo—Colgate-Palmolive stuff. Remarkably, not in America but in Poland. I'd just finished a two-year Fulbright. I knew full well I wasn't going to stay in academia, but I took advantage of those two years to do what I wanted to do. Then I went into the business sphere, and from there I moved into finance—financial editing.

Within six months, I became a financial analyst, and a few months after that, I was deputy head of the Department of Finance, in capital markets, at a multinational firm in Warsaw. Everybody, it doesn't take much to become a financial analyst, okay? It's not very hard. And for those of you who have a choice between academia and finance—go to finance, make some money, and then retire and write books and do podcasts. Then, in 1998, an opportunity appeared to do financial and consumer research in Russia. I worked at Alfa Bank for a while, and I hated it the whole time. I don' t like finance. A lot of finance is really dishonest—very much so—and it's engineered that way.

It's all insider stuff. It's all insider stuff. Okay. Yeah. But, you know, after being in academia for 10 years and being poor, going into finance and suddenly hearing, "You'll pay me this to do that?"—sure. Then the financial crisis hit in 1998. I got laid off, which was a rarity in Russia—I was actually paid to leave. After that, I started writing op-eds. I was still in good standing with the mainstream media world—wrote for the *Moscow Times*, for example. That kind of rolled into writing for a lot of outlets, like United Press International—I don't even know if it still exists. And then, finally, people started paying me. And then, you know, everybody knows, RT came around, and the rest is history.

#Pascal

And John, what was your journey into this world?

#John Laughland

Well, I like your expression, Pascal—nonconformist thinker—because to me, that's a pleonasm. If you're a thinker, you're going to be nonconformist. The conformists are precisely those people who don't think, but instead navigate according to criteria other than thought—most notably self-interest and, I would say, cowardice. Lots of people, I think, navigate according to what they believe their colleagues and friends would like to hear. And that's very common—a human trait, the herd instinct.

Many great academics—I'm a great reader of the French anthropologist René Girard, who writes a lot about this and about crowds. Indeed, I've taught courses on the psychology of crowds, including virtual crowds and so on.

But my path is the opposite of Peter's, because I'm now a full-time academic—though I wasn't until about three or four years ago. I teach at a private university in the west of France, and I also teach in Paris, where I live. My trajectory really began in the '90s. While I was still writing my doctoral thesis, I worked for a Conservative member of Parliament in Britain who was campaigning against the Maastricht Treaty from the Conservative backbenches. That was a famous episode—the Maastricht rebels who opposed John Major and who, of course, had supported Mrs. Thatcher before she was overthrown in November 1990. So during the '90s, I did a lot of work, including writing books on sovereignty and on the European question generally, but particularly on sovereignty.

What is sovereignty? What is statehood? And so on. Then, when NATO attacked Yugoslavia in 1999, that was, I suppose, my awakening, because like many British conservatives, I'd been a sort of unthinking Atlanticist. And yet here was NATO, obviously not only violating international law and committing a war of aggression, but above all, doing so in the name of human rights. As it happened, I'd started to take an interest in human rights then, and I was, as you might imagine, very critical of them as a concept and as a practice. In the 2000s, after that, I did a lot of work in post-communist Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

I was always very interested in Russia and the Soviet Union, and I traveled behind the Iron Curtain several times before it fell, including to the Soviet Union. So I had an interest in that area and, of course, in the phenomenon of communism and post-communism. I suppose I really observed how the Kosovo War was, as I've often called it, a war of the new left against the old left. Certain aspects of Marxism—of original, of Ur-Marxismus—migrated back from where they had been lodged for several decades to their region of origin, which was, of course, Western Europe, among German expatriates in the British Library. What I mean by that is that the West, at that stage, became globalist and post-national, post-modern, internationalist, and all the rest of it.

#Peter Lavelle

It's interesting, John, that you say that, because maybe my epiphany is... You know, I lived in Poland for ten years, and a good part of that was during the communist era. So there was a lot of affirmation. I knew many people in the Solidarity movement, and they embraced me — you know, "He's an American, he must be on our side." And I actually went along with that for a long time, because it was very much the good-guy/bad-guy story. It was very simple. I'd been educated at the University of California, and when it came to economics, geography, politics, international relations — they were all Eastern European émigrés, every one of them. And so, "Peter, we know the Russians. We will tell you about the Russians."

And so I pretty much absorbed that. I didn't really question it much. And when you're a young person—20, 21, 22—and you have this cause, like, oh, Solidarnosc, it was invigorating. Because it was something unique, something nobody else I knew was experiencing. It was really kind of a useful exercise in experiencing the world. But my epiphany came when I moved to Russia. Well, I wanted to make money—so, '98, you moved in '98, right? I just thought, maybe I'll stay here a couple of years, stuff my pockets. I remember I was staying in the National Hotel, right across the street from the Kremlin. And so I was picked up at the airport, dropped off there.

I went and had something to eat, and I thought, I'm going to take a walk. So I walked down Tverskaya, the main drag. And immediately, gentlemen, I did this—we were afraid of this. And, you know, just living here, you start to realize these people have nothing to do with the caricature I was brought up with, reinforced by academia and by living in communist Europe. And when you have that kind of break, you suddenly realize maybe you should do some self-examination. And that's what happened. I mean, with all due respect to our academic fellow here, basically everything I learned as a university student in California was wrong, incorrect, or a lie.

#John Laughland

Oh, I agree with that. I think universities are terrible, by and large.

#Pascal

Not the one that I teach, but... Hey, very brief intermission, because I was recently banned from YouTube. And although I'm back, this could happen again anytime. So please consider subscribing not only here, but also to my mailing list on Substack—that's pascallottaz.substack.com. The link's going to be in the description below. And now, back to the video. So, you know, we've got this idea of universities being places of universal learning and openness and, you know, inquiry into reality. And then you go to the natural scientists and realize they have a lot to work with, and they have these beautiful methods, including doing experiments and so on.

And then you go into the humanities, or even the bigger fraud—the social sciences—which are not sciences. At best, they're studies, social studies. That would be the right description. But they try to imitate that, and they tell you, "We will now tell you what the world is about—the real world." And then you've got people who have never visited Russia and so on, and they'll tell you all about it. And you can't actually have, at least in Europe at the moment—I get a lot of emails these days from people who study Russia or the Slavic world more generally—and they're afraid. They're scared to actually say things that might get them kicked out of university.

And this is coming from the free West. When this first happened and I got contacted, I thought, oh, this must be something new. But then I started talking to people and realized, no, wait a second—the West was never that beacon. It never was. Excellent point. It never was. How is it so easy to

fool people into believing they live in a world that, once you start testing the principles and the values, turns out not to be like that? What's your conclusion at this point in your life, having experienced all of this? You go first, John. Go ahead, Chuck.

#John Laughland

Well, I haven't—I mean, I've experienced it, I suppose, a bit in my media work, in the sense that for two or three decades I used to write in the media. But that stopped quite a long time ago, and when I was doing it, I didn't really suffer from it. I mean, for instance, being a Euroskeptic in Britain wasn't unusual; there were plenty of other people doing the same thing. The Russia thing, of course, is very problematic. But I think it's not a coincidence that I no longer have any presence in the British media. By the way, George Galloway made this point recently.

George Galloway, the former Member of Parliament, was, as I was, detained at a British airport—Gatwick. We were both detained there under absolutely disgraceful counterterrorism legislation. He was held for six hours and made a big stink about it. In one of the video pieces he did afterward, he said that in the run-up to the Iraq War—so that's 2003—he was a vocal opponent, on television every single night arguing against the war. And he said, speaking late last year, that he has not been invited on the BBC for more than ten years. This is a man who is a national party leader, quite a well-known politician, and so on.

So there's been a decline. There's no doubt there's been a decline. I mean, I'm lucky enough not to observe it in the university context because I work in a very special private university that, luckily, does have academic freedom. But of course, I'm aware of it from the outside. And I'm afraid I think the explanation is very straightforward. First of all, it's the herd mentality that I mentioned. People feel under pressure—and may indeed be under pressure—to conform. And people, by and large, human beings by and large, don't like not to conform. Matthias Desmet makes this point in *The Psychology of Totalitarianism*. He says there are basically three thirds of people: there's one third who will just drift along.

#Pascal

There's one third who will be actively in favor, and one third who will be against.

#John Laughland

So I think a third is probably rather a large estimate for the number of people who are against—but whatever. Obviously, there's that psychological, anthropological element. But the other explanation is very straightforward: universities are, of course, largely dependent on public money. And in order to get research grants and so on—you know this perfectly well, Pascal—you have to go through a bureaucratic process that ultimately is in the hands of the state. And there's no real value put on it, I would say. Independently of the sort of conspiratorial side of this, I mean, I was at the University of

Oxford in the 1980s, and I have to say that even then I found it intellectually very, very backward and very uninteresting. I remember somebody saying to me at the time, "You don't have to be an academic in order to think." And I think whoever made that remark to me probably encouraged me not to be an academic—as I wasn't for most of my career.

#Peter Lavelle

That's my experience. Instead of going through the humiliation of trying to get grants and all of that—and plus, you know, you have to check the boxes. You know what I mean? They're looking to give... you know, okay, I think everyone got my point here. I didn't fit that profile. And I'm not complaining; I'm just observing as a fact, okay? Yeah. And so, I mean, that's one of the things I've learned in this space: I don't have to be in the ivory tower to talk to people in the ivory tower. It's a shortcut, isn't it? I love it. I mean, being, you know, being shunned— I had Stephen Cohen on a number of times on my program, and it was always a delight, particularly when he would come to Moscow with his wife.

We would go out to dinner and spend a lot of time together. What an amazing person. We miss him so much. I had him on with John Mearsheimer—this was about ten years ago. And Mearsheimer said, "I haven't been on television in years." And look what's happened now—he's everywhere. He's so ubiquitous that people are copying him. He's chased down all of these fakes. But, John, one of the things that's really interesting—if we look particularly at Russia or even China—I'd say that when we were coming up, it was the traditional left-and-right divide. And, you know, for all the criticism of the Frankfurt School, I actually liked reading it. I thought it was very stimulating.

It was very different from other paradigms. I don't think it's a good idea to embrace it as a user's manual, but that was the axis here. But what happens when you have a country like Russia or China that are largely not ideological anymore? How do you critique that? Okay. And then, you know, Russia is a fundamentally very conservative country, so you can't just say, "those communists." People still slip up and say "the Soviets." I mean, Russians still say that all the time. So critiquing a country like Russia in a normative sense became very, very difficult. It's just, "Oh, they're barbarians, they're the antithesis of us," which is such a juvenile critique. I mean, you don't learn anything from that.

So, you know, the kind of very stale tools for analyzing international relations became dysfunctional, and then it just became absurd. And then you throw in the fact that we know a number of people—I won't mention them, the academics or quasi-academics—who say, "Sorry, I can't come on, it's a little too sensitive right now." And I perfectly understand that. I mean, it's people in the West who are courageous enough to stand up for free speech. I'm not a hero for doing it, because there are no repercussions for me. But this is the fundamental change—the fear, the genuine fear people have. I mean, there are some people, again, I don't want to name names, but there are some in the podcast space that I watch very regularly, and I'm in contact with them all the time. And they just say, "It's not a good time. It's just not a good time."

#Pascal

Yeah, but it's like, you know, it's this environment that's being created, right? And Russia Today, to me, is an important source to actually read in order to understand how, from a Russian side of things, you would write about stuff in the English language. I mean, what does this medium want to say? So it's...

#Peter Lavelle

Well, Pascal, one of the positives—it's almost kind of like a ricochet when it comes to RT's website—is that it's infinitely better now than it was a few years ago. They're providing that service: the economy, society, what's popular in culture, things like that. Before, they wanted to be like everybody else. And why go to an imitation when you can go to the original? So when you have a unique message, it becomes very attractive. And I think that's one of the things I really want to compliment the people who work on the website for.

#Pascal

Where do you think this idea came from—that we can't study this anymore? You know, Jacques Bourg made this point a lot: back in the Cold War, the West wasn't afraid of the propaganda from the East.

#Pascal

You could read all of those newspapers—they were being imported. There was no...

#Pascal

There was no fear that this would suddenly sway all of Western Europe to become communist. But now, the idea in the European Union seems to be that if you access RT or talk to people at RT, then you yourself are an agent, trying to transform others. You're doing mind control, and you're part of the cognitive warfare of "the others," when we perfectly well know that NATO is studying cognitive warfare and how to use it against the Russians and against Europeans, right? So, I mean… it's just so bizarre. It's such a bizarre moment. And, well, ten years ago—if you'd told me this ten years ago, that this is what it would come to—I would've said, no, no, I mean, I know it's maybe not perfect, but it'll never go that far.

#Peter Lavelle

Pascal, you asked why? I mean, because people like Hayek, Hollis, and Wunderlein are in power. People have very limited intelligence and creativity, because the arguments they make are so flaccid—they're literally laughable. The reason is, they just don't have a strong argument. It's as simple as that.

#John Laughland

John, you mentioned ten years ago. Pascal, you said they wouldn't have believed this ten years ago. And I think ten years ago is about right. A lot of the trends that have now reached a very severe, very dangerous degree did indeed start ten years ago—2016, of course, being the year when Trump was first elected and the year of the Brexit referendum. I mean, I mentioned it briefly earlier—it's a big subject—but I do very firmly believe, and I've written a lot about this, that there has been a sort of *translatio imperii* of Marxism from Soviet Russia back to Europe. I do believe that. And, you know, as Vladimir Bukovsky said, "I've lived through your future"—a Soviet dissident living in Europe.

And many of the things that Solzhenitsyn wrote in the 1970s—we can recognize them, obviously, in Europe today. So my personal position is that I'm often framed, indeed, as someone who's close to or interested in Russia. I'm not. I have no expertise on Russia at all, except for having been interested in the country for a long time. Instead, I think of myself as a critic and an analyst—a critic of Western policy, of American, particularly American, and of course also European policy. That's what I do. And what I think I'm good at is identifying—and again, I think Peter said this just now, or perhaps it was you, Pascal—this notion of narrative control.

We live, just as the Soviets did, in profoundly ideological societies. The ideology is probably even stronger now than it was in the Soviet period, because it tapered off, I think, after Khrushchev—or maybe even after Stalin, I don't know. But it did taper off, whereas in Western Europe the ideology is absolutely all-encompassing. And it's so all-encompassing that, not only does it have the anthropological effects I mentioned earlier, but it also means—and Peter and I have discussed this on our podcast—that a very large percentage, if not the totality, of government activity in Western Europe now is devoted to narrative control.

That is what they do. They don't do anything else. They don't run state finances correctly. They don't build up their militaries to prepare for conflict. They don't protect their populations with proper police forces. They obviously don't protect them against immigration. They don't repair the streets. They don't do any of the functions of a state in the real world. Peter, you said you started off selling toothpaste—they don't do anything in the real world. Instead, it's all about narrative control. And that, of course, is precisely what makes us in Europe so Soviet at the moment.

#Peter Lavelle

Well, but see, this is the point—and John is absolutely right. Everything I do in the podcast space and in my program, I'm not propagating anything. I'm critiquing. I'm just critiquing Western narratives. That's all I do. I don't want to scale it down; that's what I do. Because, you know, when RT was started, we wanted to explain Russia to the world. And I just said, that's almost an impossible thing, because television is linear. You can't stop and, like when reading a book, say, "You read this—what does that mean? Let me go back to the beginning." You can't do that. So I would need to do a mini-documentary on a topic before I'd be able to have a discussion on it. It was just a fool's errand at the end of the day, because it was too hard. The attitudes and lack of knowledge about Russia are so insurmountable—you have to make an effort. Okay. And so I decided, no.

I mean, I would critique the critique of Russia. That's what I do—almost all the time. Yeah. I'd love to have all three of us, maybe throw in George Samueli and Mark Sloboda, and do a weekly two-hour roundtable on certain topics. Was the revolution a success? And then people can learn from it. But if I just say, "It was a success," then what are your bearings? What do you mean by success? And of course, if we had a panel like that, John would say, "Well, Peter, what does it mean to be a success?" And I'd agree with John. I mean, they have no new ideas in the West, and they're terrified of losing power. And we have these things called elections—no, there are many referendums. You're not given a choice. You're asked over and over again, with all the bells and whistles, to reaffirm the status quo. That's all elections do now in the West.

#Pascal

In Switzerland, we've been running this experiment for the last 130 years with direct democracy. And you see quite often that the voting population doesn't actually vote the way the government or parliament suggests—although not always. I mean, there are good moments when there's a lot of alignment. But even just having the choice to say no to certain policies is already quite something. Even so, in Switzerland—although I'd say the temperature boils at a lower degree—it still does boil to a good extent. And if I compare that to Japan, you know, the Japanese have similar speech acts, but they don't have the same attitude toward Russia. I'd really say they don't have Russophobia. They don't hate it. At my institute, about a year and a half ago, they hired a Russian researcher from Moscow—because she's good. So they hired her. That was, you know, a year and a half ago. And I think, in the context of Europe, that's almost unthinkable.

#John Laughland

I think that's because Russophobia is a specifically European phenomenon—it says more about Europe than it does about Russia.

#Peter Lavelle

It's very British.

#John Laughland

Yeah, Europe has this long history of it. There are books about it. One of your compatriots, Pascal Lottaz, wrote—I think he wrote quite a good book about it. There's an Italian book about it. There are plenty of books about it. And as far as I recall, what they all say is that it's part of Europe's self-image—Western Europe's self-image. So this whole idea of Russia being backward and barbaric, and, you know, we are more progressive—it's all part of Western European progressivism, which, ultimately, I give courses on. Progressivism started in the 17th century. And that is, of course, as it happens, the time when Russia—as we know, Peter the Great—went to the Netherlands and so on. And that image of Russia being behind—well, everyone was behind the Netherlands, I think, in the 17th century.

The entire world was behind—if such words as "in front" and "behind" have any meaning. But now, of course, it's become even more pronounced than before, because in the European context—in the European Union—we are post-national, we are post-Christian, we are post-historical. We've turned our back on our own history. We don't—"never again," you know, *nie wieder Krieg*, and so on. We've moved into a sort of postmodern politics. And the image of Russia, which is built up as the negative image, is of a country that is nationalist, Christian, reactionary, and, you know, authoritarian and all the rest of it. And that's the psychological function of Russophobia.

#Peter Lavelle

Yeah, but Russophobia is also a mechanism to project all the negative attributes onto the other—attributes that are very much part of the European experience. Exploitation, for example, imperialism, colonialism, and all of that. And, you know, John listed a number of things. But, you know, Christian, conservative, respect for history, respect for the older generation.

#Pascal

I kind of like those things.

#Peter Lavelle

So, you know, call me a reactionary if you will. OK, now, it's really interesting—you have the same kind of Cold War dynamic. There was ideology then, but now it's culture and civilization that have replaced it. And it's a huge leap to go in. I mean, the West, particularly the United States, has done this to Iran since 1979. What do people born after that know about Iran? If you don't make an effort, you're only going to know the mainstream narrative. And that's why people who offer critique—many of those who talk about Russia on these podcasts we all know—some of them are pretty pro-Russia, but most of them seem pretty neutral to me. If they see something they don't

like, they just say it, without fear or favor. I mean, just being dispassionate—well, you have to be passionate. You can't be dispassionate. There's something wrong with that.

#Pascal

You know, we're going to have a referendum in Switzerland, either in the fall this year or the spring next year. This stuff always takes a long time—it's about writing a proper definition of neutrality into our constitution, because at the moment the constitution mentions it but doesn't define it. And this particular proposal says, like, okay, now we need to understand neutrality also in the economic realm—so no sanctions, if possible. There are asterisks there, but he really wants to change this. The party that I'm part of—I'm a paying member of the Social Democrats—they're fighting against it, and they're fighting it by calling it a pro-Putin initiative. And it's so infantile.

I wonder where this comes from. But it really shows how one part of the European establishment—or European thinkers, I mean, on the other side—just frame everything that isn't pro-NATO automatically as pro-Russian. There's no space in between anymore. And that bothers me so much, because the whole idea of neutrality is to be friends with everybody: be friends with the Russians, the Americans, the Europeans, the Chinese, the Japanese. But something constantly pushes European elites into this camp and block thinking, and it strikes me as infantile. I don't know how you see that.

#Peter Lavelle

Maybe let's look at how much pressure Switzerland is under—how much pressure from outside Switzerland to vote in the direction of accepting an anti-Russia position. I mean, you know, when people mention Switzerland—which is a wonderful country—it's always treated as an exception, and for so many reasons. But is there pressure from the EU, from NATO? I mean, Switzerland isn't a member of either.

#Pascal

No, but the pressure is great. And the pressure also comes from within. I mean, for the last four years, they've been publishing white paper after white paper saying, like, we are neutral, but we're going to practice integration with NATO, you know.

#John Laughland

Yeah, but this has been going on for a long time. Yeah.

#Pascal

It's the same in Ireland. It's the same in Austria. It's this mind capture that happened to the Germans and the French, and it also took the other neutrals. It's basically thinking of security solely within this Western mindset—this idea of deterrence.

#John Laughland

We have deterrence against the Russians. Again, Pascal, you've raised this on your own podcast. I can't remember her name, but that young German woman—you mentioned her first name.

#Pascal

Nel Bonilla. What? Nel Bonilla. Yes, Nel Bonilla.

#John Laughland

That's right. You did a podcast on the security state, and this is something I feel very strongly about as well. She makes this point very well. Then you and I had an email exchange about it. We discovered—the party I work for in the Netherlands discovered—that the NATO member states are subject to certain secret NATO objectives. This slipped out when a Dutch minister, the Minister of Health as it happens, said she couldn't pursue certain policies because of these NATO objectives. One of our MPs submitted questions to the Dutch government and got answers. It was stated quite openly in the written replies, which we've published, that these objectives—well, actually, obligations—are secret but obligatory.

And this is part of the bigger picture, which you discussed with Nell—the security state, the way that everything now, all kinds of issues, never mind Russia, but we saw it also with COVID—these issues are brought under the remit of security threats. And when I say "under the remit," the example I quote very often, again from 2016, is a debate in the European Parliament about strategic communication, where the Commission was represented not by the Director-General for Communication—the part of the Commission that's supposed to basically do propaganda for the Commission. No, the commissioner who spoke for the Commission on this issue of strategic communication was the Commissioner for Security.

In other words, the person who was supposed to deal with defense and security policy, secret services, and so on. And this was a very emblematic example—but there are many others—of how the security services, either the intelligence services or the armed forces, are upstream of politics. They are the people, as your podcast with Nell showed so well, who demonstrate that the security state has become so embedded in Western societies that it's essentially running the show. And yet again, this is, of course, an aspect of our Sovietization. Everybody knows the KGB and all those secret services had the word "security" in their name. That's what they were doing.

#Peter Lavelle

Well, I mean, if Europe needs deterrence, it needs deterrence in light of the United States—which is kind of a forbidden topic. Why can't you talk about that? I mean, there's a mountain of evidence about energy security, dependence on the United States—very expensive. The British, I think, very foolishly got into attacking the shadow fleet, you know, controlling energy supply lines and whatnot. I mean, how much more imprisonment do you want? I find it really extraordinary. And these things are written about in the mainstream media. But, you know, it's a bad idea.

#John Laughland

It's a psychological problem. It doesn't have a name, as far as I know, in psychology, but it's very well described in a wonderful book by the Swiss author Max Frisch—*Biedermann und die Brandstifter* (*Biedermann and the Fire Raisers*). It's a play that tells the story of a man who lets rooms in his house. Biedermann is a very goody-goody, as the name suggests—a goody-goody man, rather small-minded, petit bourgeois. And he lets rooms in his house to people who, as the audience very quickly understands, are arsonists. They are the fire raisers, and they're going around setting light to buildings in the city. And he, of course, refuses to believe the evidence in front of his eyes. The play, which is a wonderful sort of psychodrama, ends with one of these arsonists coming down from his room upstairs and asking Herr Biedermann if he can have a match.

And Biedermann gives him the match, then turns to his wife and says, "But Anna, if they were terrorists, they'd have their own matches." You know, this is basically Lenin saying the capitalists will sell us the rope with which we'll hang them. Europe is clearly the theater—one of the theaters, the main theater—of an energy war between the United States and Russia, which began about twenty years ago when America discovered fracking and became a major exporter of gas. And Europe is the natural market. Yet we in Europe, our European leaders, are in a Biedermann-style situation where we've got ourselves caught. And the truth, if it were ever to be revealed, is just too difficult to bear. Humankind cannot bear too much reality.

#Pascal

But it hurts—because it hurts, doesn't it? I mean, if you have to come to that realization, it really takes time. I can't forget that moment, you know, when the special military operation—the full-scale war—started in February, four years ago, right? I was devastated. And I know, Peter, you predicted it. I always thought people would calm down again. And I thought so because I knew what the solution was. The solution was for Ukraine to go back to neutrality, because neutrality would fulfill everybody's security needs.

It was the obvious choice. And when it didn't happen, I was so, so devastated that I thought, I need to figure out why it didn't happen. I even wrote to Mr. Dmitry Trenin, saying, can we talk again? Can you explain why, from a Russian perspective, neutrality failed? And he just wrote back and said,

look, this is something for the West to figure out by themselves. And he was absolutely right. By now, we know it was the West that undermined a win-win situation, because that's not what was wanted.

#John Laughland

Well, that's because it wanted to, as General Milley, the former Chief of Staff of the American Armed Forces, said shortly before he left office—I've forgotten now whether it was under Trump or not—but he said, "We're going to make Ukraine into Russia's Afghanistan." The goal was never to have peace; the goal was to have a war, because it was believed—and he still believed—that the Polish foreign minister, Radek Sikorski, my old mate from Oxford, said, "We're going to fight this for two more years, and in two years the Russian economy will collapse." That is the policy. That is the policy: to put a festering sore on Russia's doorstep in the hope that it will weaken Russia irredeemably. So the solution was there, but it was precisely that solution that the Western powers rejected.

#Peter Lavelle

Well, I mean, it was patently obvious that the Minsk process was a complete fraud. It always was, and Merkel admitted it publicly, but it was well known here. There was a great deal of frustration on top of that. You can read it in the pages of the Washington Post from December 2021—I don't remember the exact title—but it was about the NATOization of Ukraine and how gleeful they were. I mean, it's right there in front of you: the failed Minsk process, then the NATOization, and then the very glib attitude of the Biden administration. And one of the things I talked about at the time was how people were saying, you know, "turn the ruble into rubble." And I said, no, no—they learned from the sanctions of 2014, when it came to Crimea, and they really put their minds to it.

They did it in a very serious way. I wasn't particularly worried about being economically crushed. I was more worried about how Russians were going to be crushed psychologically, because I told them, I said, the great experiment of Peter the Great has come to an end. It ended in 2014. People began to realize that in 2022. So I was psychologically braced for it. And I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I welcomed it. I didn't welcome the war—I welcomed the separation. Russia needs to be isolated from the West for a generation, because the West is going to go through its gyrations, and it's going to be messy. It's going to be very sad, maybe even violent. And I want Russia to be insulated from that. Yeah, because there's no corrective here. It has to fail. Sorry.

#Pascal

How is it for you as a U.S. citizen? Because in my...

#Peter Lavelle

I'm a Russian citizen too.

#Pascal

But, you know, if you were a European citizen, you'd probably already be sanctioned. But I've got this perception that in the United States, for all it's done, some of their values—they actually keep them stronger, like freedom of speech. Americans tend not to be afraid to go on Russian TV. Europeans are.

#Peter Lavelle

A lot of us are, like, very chicken and so on. The British are afraid. The British are afraid. That was one of the big changes—I'd say a third, maybe 40% of my guests were from the UK. After the special military operation started, it went to zero.

#Pascal

Thomas, is it still possible for you to go back and forth and visit the United States? I mean, RT also has Mr. Sanchez, right? The former CNN reporter who's on RT now. How do you see that relationship—kind of skipping the continent?

#Peter Lavelle

Well, Pascal, I'm not going to test that proposition, okay? Because it's not worth it. I have a full life here—I have a family, property, assets, dogs. There's not a one-percent chance I'd risk losing all of that. So I'm perfectly willing to wait it out. But I think one of the things we see—there's this obsession in many of these podcasts with what I call "last-leg-ism": when is Ukraine finally going to collapse? And when you get into the prediction business, you usually end up with egg on your face.

Okay, and I've constantly—and I think I've talked about this with John—said that even if there's a cessation of hostilities, if there's some kind of recognized status of peace—I'm not talking about a ceasefire—the accusations of a fifth column and the pointing of fingers, "How did the West fail? Oh, it was inside, somebody sabotaged this," that's where it's gonna go. Those who kept an even keel in Europe, talking about the conflict, I think they'll be under just as much, if not more, pressure, because there won't be amicable relations between Europe and Russia in my lifetime.

#Pascal

Do you think so too, John? Yes, I do.

#John Laughland

I do think so. Are these bridges burned for the next 50 years? Absolutely, yes. I think it's a generational thing, without any doubt. Not least, by the way, because, of course, as we've indirectly mentioned already, there was a huge buildup even before the invasion of Ukraine—even before 2022. You know, obviously the 2014 events, but also the 2004 events, the Orange Revolution, and more generally the whole constant Russophobic, anti-Putin attacks, which started around 2000 when Putin took power. Then they were in abeyance for a bit under Medvedev, but of course started again very much in earnest in 2012. In other words, a whole atmosphere had been built up over many, many years—at least a decade before the events of 2022. And now, of course, it's gone into violence and war. And indeed, I'm convinced that it will now be over for a very, very long time, until there is some major institutional, cultural, and philosophical change in Europe.

#Peter Lavelle

John, I pinpoint the change to the Yukos affair. If you look at the pieces in the Financial Times, that' s when they really started—went back to their old habits. But Pascal, John and I are in agreement that an amicable relationship between Russia and Ukraine is not in the cards for a very long time. But this is a remarkable mental change in Russia. Yeah. People don't expect it now. They've moved on. They really have moved on. And the worshipping of the West—which I always, you know, shook my head about, living here—that has dissipated. In fact, it's been translated into a kind of pride. My wife is in fashion design, and she made an observation a week ago. She said, "You know, four years ago, Russian fashion designers were in awe of the West, and it was hard to compete with them." She said, "Now the Russians only compete with Russians. They don't care about the West."

#John Laughland

Mm-hmm.

#Peter Lavelle

It has happened. That is a remarkable change because, you know, you both know—the Westernizers and the Slavophiles, that debate that's over a hundred years old in Russia. It's Western aggression, Western Russophobia, that has kind of decided that debate.

#Pascal

What do you think? On Sunday, we had this interesting election in Japan. What do you think the Russians make of Japan? On the one hand, it's in the Western camp; on the other hand, it's kind of a different thing. I made this prediction that Japan is now under a lot of systemic pressure to maybe pursue a rapprochement with Russia, just to get its hands on the oil and gas they've been working on. Do you think Russia views Japan differently?

#Peter Lavelle

Russia plays the long game with Japan—a very, very long game. Yes, we'd like a rapprochement, absolutely. But, you know, you can tell us better about the dynamics of Japanese domestic politics. The United States is a very erratic, very unreliable, and reflexively aggressive country. So, if I were the Japanese, I'd, you know, make Japan great again and have much more of a regional approach—working with South Korea, maybe a rapprochement with North Korea and with China. Asia has natural markets for itself. I mean, the United States overexaggerates its importance.

Its piece on the board is the military, of course, but in every other respect, it becomes less and less significant. These Trump people—well, it's interesting—they overplayed their hand at the very beginning of the second Trump administration. Over the last few weeks, we've seen this kind of shift. I can't quite interpret what's going on right now. But Japan is in a pivotal position. And I think it should—I don't want to see Japan as a nuclear power, no. It's already really crowded in Asia with China, Russia, North Korea, and then Japan. Enough in this neighborhood. But, like I said, Russia has a very long game with Japan, and it would like a rapprochement.

#John Laughland

John? Well, I'm not really qualified to answer, but I imagine they'll take into consideration two more or less immovable factors. One is, of course, the presence of American troops in Japan, and the other is the relationship with China, which is obviously a massive priority for Russia at the moment. I think any rapprochement with Japan would have to be coordinated with Peking. Beyond that, I don't really have—it's not something I know enough about.

#Pascal

It's just interesting, because Russia is so huge and has so many interests on so many sides. And this is one of the things the Europeans often forget, right? Russia.

#Peter Lavelle

Russia is, like, at full stretch in the Far East and everything. You know, but see, Pascal, one of the things that's, I think, misunderstood—or not understood well enough—is that Russia is fundamentally a status quo power. It wants to keep what it has, okay? People have criticized or commented on why Russia wants to take over Ukraine. No, it doesn't, okay? Though it feels a very strong moral obligation because of how the Soviet Union collapsed, leaving millions of Russians in different countries. Now, that's a sensitive issue here. I want our viewers to understand that from 2014 to 2022, Putin was severely criticized over the Donbass and other areas with Russian majorities. I mean, I've seen documentaries where he's lambasted.

OK, because the perception at that time was that Russia was meddling in Ukraine. And the Russians were saying Russia wasn't meddling enough in Ukraine. Yeah. He really took—and he's admitted, his administration has admitted—that they miscalculated a number of times, from the Orange Revolution all the way up to the Maidan coup. So this has been a long corrective policy, and a political one, too, because I would always remind people, before the special military operation—see, Pascal, John, did you see images and videos on a daily basis of how the people of the Donbass were being slaughtered by the Kiev regime? No, you didn't. Of course not. There was no transmission. Yeah, you didn't.

#John Laughland

But that's like in all these conflicts, Peter. It was the same in the Syrian civil war from 2011 onwards. We never saw any images in Western media of the atrocities—the horrible murders and so on—carried out by the Syrian Islamists until the proclamation, by the way, of the Islamic State. That changed things, but that was later, in 2014. And yet those images were being shown on Russian television all the time. And similarly, we never, as you say, saw anything from the Donbass. And by the way, the journalists there—there's a French woman and a German woman who lived there and made documentaries about it—they've been sanctioned, you know, because that information and those images are forbidden.

#Peter Lavelle

Because in the newsroom, when we would be showing these videos, people would say, "I have family in that village." Of course—they dress the same, they have the same religion, they eat the same food, the same foliage, the same kind of trees. And that created a lot of attention with the authorities, and more broadly across Russian society. Russia is hardly a monolithic place. And so it is with eastern Ukraine and Crimea—well, Crimea is Russia, but that's not the near abroad; it's a domestic issue. And that's something that's never been explained to Western audiences.

#Pascal

My friends, I do have to wind it down. We're nearing the hour, but this was fascinating. I'm really happy we could do this. And, you know, what you said at the beginning—it's fascinating to just ask people questions that let us see where the discussion takes you and what kind of insights you get.

#Peter Lavelle

Pascal, I want to ask you—what do you think?

#Pascal

Are you from Japan, or did you move to Japan? You work in Japan? I moved to Japan 10 years ago for my PhD and stayed. Why? Because even 10 years before that, in 2004, I went there for a high school exchange, and I really liked it. I've been in touch with Japan for over 20 years now. It's a good place, a good place with good people. And Switzerland's good too—but, you know, Japan is more fascinating.

#Peter Lavelle

Well, I asked you a question that a lot of people wanted me to ask you. Really? Yeah.

#Pascal

Well, thank you very much. Thank you also for the public thinking and the distribution—I think it's really important. Everybody, please check out Peter Lavelle and John Laughland on their channels. I' ll put links in the description. And of course, you're also on The Gaggle with George Szamuely. All of those are very important podcasts.

#Peter Lavelle

And everybody, subscribe to *Neurology Study*. It's a must-watch channel—you really have to see it.

#Pascal

Robbing each other's bags. Thank you, my friends.

#John Laughland

See you soon. Okay, Pascal, thanks a lot. Bye.