How They TRICKED Germany Into the NEXT War | Dr. Petra Erler

Former East German state secretary Petra Erler joins Pascal to examine European narratives about Russia, hybrid warfare, and military preparedness. She questions intelligence claims, discusses Germany’s political divisions, and reflects on conscription, public shaming, and youth opposition to war. Their conversation also considers pandemic policies, social polarization, and the relationship between fear and political conformity. Drawing on her experience in the GDR, Erler warns about threats to free expression and argues for dialogue, critical thinking, and preserving human connections. Petra's Links: Nachrichten einer Leuchtturmwärterin (German Substack): https://petraerler.substack.com/ Der lange Weg zum Krieg (with Günter Verheugen): https://www.jpc.de/jpcng/books/detail/-/art/guenter-verheugen-der-lange-weg-zum-krieg/hnum/11673521 Neutrality Studies Links: Neutrality Studies Substack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com Support Neutrality Studies: https://neutralitystudies.com/donate Neutrality Studies shop: https://neutralitystudies.com/shop Time Stamps 00:00 Petra Erler on hybrid warfare narratives 07:53 East Germany, the AfD and the SPD 14:59 Intelligence claims and the risk of escalation 22:15 Conscription and the White Feather campaign 29:58 Young Germans and opposition to war 33:47 Pandemic policies and social division 43:39 Fear, propaganda and public skepticism 50:22 GDR parallels, free expression and dialogue

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Today we have an update with Petra Erler, a former state secretary of the GDR and later also a politician in unified Germany. You might know the GDR was, of course, East Germany. Petra studied there and then became a politician, starting there and helping bring East Germany into the West. She has a lot of experience and observations to share with us. So, Petra, welcome back.

#Petra Erler

Thank you, Pascal, for having me back.

#Pascal

Thank you very much for doing this, because we want to discuss some of the current narratives. You are one of those people from Eastern Germany who are very critical of all the media narratives that we are being fed. And one of them right now is, of course, that a hybrid war is being waged against Germany, against Europe. What is your assessment of where this hybrid war narrative currently stands here in Europe?

#Petra Erler

I do believe the term "hybrid warfare" has been coined in order to instill fear in the population and to project an enemy. This is by no means a new instrument. We had it in the Cold War, and we had it even at the beginning of the 20th century. People are meant to be prepared for the idea that there is an enemy out there, and that enemy is dangerous. And of course, if we are threatened by a dangerous enemy, we have to become ready for war. That is the main purpose of the whole discussion about hybrid warfare. Interestingly, the term was coined by Mark Galeotti.

Mark Galeotti is a Russia expert. He wrote an article in 2013 describing the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine and saying that the Russians were preparing for hybrid war against the West. In 2018, Mark Galeotti wrote a piece in Foreign Policy and said, "I'm deeply sorry. I have misunderstood everything. Hybrid warfare doesn't exist." But in the meantime, everybody had picked up on the Gerasimov Doctrine, believing that it was true, although Mark Galeotti made it plain that Gerasimov, at that time, was describing the Western approach towards Russia.

#Pascal

Oh, I don't know about this history. So, can you also tell me who Gerasimov was and what Mark Galeotti thought he was reporting on?

#Petra Erler

So Gerasimov was the head of the military staff in Russia. He gave a presentation and described the means of warfare—silent warfare against Russia—and described them as hybrid attacks. Originally, the term was used by General Mattis in 2005, and then it became a little more public through NATO publications. But whatever, Mark Galeotti got the whole thing wrong and attributed hybrid warfare to the Russian side. And everybody ran with that. In 2014, NATO had a whole paragraph about hybrid warfare, and there were a lot of studies. In those days, NATO was convinced that Russia's hybrid warfare was concentrated in the field of energy. So you'll find a number of publications up until 2020 dealing with the gray zone between war and peace and describing how the Russians were using energy as a hybrid weapon against the West.

#Pascal

So, I mean, to me, it seems like a masterpiece of projection, right? And even how the term was coined, or how it was applied to the Russians, was basically just a misunderstanding: the Russians already thought that this was what the West would do to them. And then they just keep drumming that up when, in fact, this ongoing war against energy infrastructure is obviously something that

NATO is waging against Russia right now, trying to blow up all of their petrochemical plants and so on. Why is it, then, do you think, that the Europeans are so successful in convincing their populations that this is a real thing, that this hybrid war is actually happening?

#Petra Erler

I don't believe that. I don't believe that European leaders are very successful in convincing their populations. First and foremost, I would agree with your assessment. This is projection in its finest form. Already in 1947, at the start of the Cold War, Truman warned about negative activities by the Soviet Union, while his own services supported resistance and insurgency in the former Ukrainian Socialist Republic. So this is the essence of the whole story. We always believe that others have in mind what we have in mind ourselves.

#Pascal

That is the biggest weakness. Because we are doing this, because we are preparing for that, the others must be preparing something similar. So let's accuse them of exactly the same thing that we have already been planning for a long time. Of course.

#Petra Erler

And people are not so stupid. I have looked at recent opinion polls about what people fear the most, and it is still their economic and social living conditions. So, the fact of the matter is that the threat of hybrid warfare or of a direct war between NATO and Russia is not widely believed in by the European public. It's not the major concern. And you see that only a minority believe that they will be conscripted and fight in a war against Russia. They notice that the whole policy of the European Union, but also of the Coalition of the Willing, is aimed at shrinking their social rights and their rights to democratic participation, and that it affects their daily cost of living, with inflation and a future that does not look so bright for their children and grandchildren.

#Pascal

So overall, you would say that although the propaganda is massive, it's actually not that good at convincing people. I would say, especially in Eastern Germany, the success of the AfD, to me, is in large part a reflection of the fact that people don't believe it.

#Petra Erler

It's partly a result of the AfD's opposition to the government's Russia policy. And it's also a result of the continued neglect of the East German population within a unified Germany. So the AfD is exploiting a lot of this. But mostly, it is the result of the SPD's failure. The SPD has given up its core strengths, which have been peace policy and social policy for so-called ordinary people.

#Pascal

Hey guys, Autumn Spirit is here, and we've launched our new merch. For instance, the monster from our Kill for Symposium has arrived on T-shirts, tumblers, and magnets. The little fella is really cute. Check it out. Any purchase helps us directly to keep the lights on. So thanks a lot, and see you soon. When do you think the SPD basically got co-opted into mainstream neoliberal capitalist exploitation of the general public? Because there was once a time under Willy Brandt and the others when the SPD was completely different. And Egon Bahr. Egon Bahr was very, very important. And then the SPD just withered away into this very sad existence that it has today.

#Petra Erler

You know, I was recently looking at a speech by Nixon in 1974. And he proclaimed that it is a value in itself for societies with different ideological backgrounds to live together and preserve peace. So Brandt and Bahr were part of a larger movement, which even included the leadership of the United States in those days, that believed it was important to have peaceful coexistence. And it was therefore not really surprising that the Helsinki Final Act was adopted in 1975. I do not know precisely when the SPD changed course. But the SPD came under massive, massive attack starting in, I believe, 2013, for being too close to Russia. And the whole party was accused of collaborating with Russia.

And then we have a very unholy sympathy for U.S. Democrats. And, yeah, we do believe these are all social democrats. And we have had the experience of the U.S. elections in 2016. The main claim of the Democrats in those days was that Russia had massively interfered in the American elections to the benefit of Trump. And this was believed, widely believed. And the declarations of the secret services were treated like the ultimate description of the truth of this world. And the dislike for Trump had added to that. Consequently, the whole of Europe, including Germany, was in a frenzy, believing, "Oh God, these Russians have tried to undermine American democracy, and if they do that in that country, they surely will attack us as well."

#Pascal

We know that Russiagate has been a hoax, a kind of affair cooked up by the Democrats and Hillary Clinton in order to justify her own loss. And this is all proven. And all of the allegations were defeated in court, right? In court in the United States.

#Petra Erler

Partly in court, Pascal, partly in court. The allegation of an internet influence operation has been defeated in court. And some major allegations made by Christopher Steele in his dossier have been

defeated in court. But it was Tulsi Gabbard, finally, who laid bare that the whole operation was not only an operation of Hillary Clinton. It was assisted by the CIA and the FBI, and it was endorsed by Barack Obama.

#Pascal

Right. And that was not in court. That was outside of court, through investigations and so on, which had legal implications. But yeah.

#Petra Erler

Indeed. And the problem is that, despite all these historical facts, so many people still believe the allegations against Russia and have consequently formed their views on that basis. In 2019, I once asked a former German foreign minister why Merkel, who is herself a scientist, had not questioned the whole Skripal episode, because scientifically it was wrong from day one. And he said to me, "You know, Russia has made so many mistakes and has behaved so badly that it was no longer important."

#Pascal

So, I mean, this is quite fascinating, right? Because what we're trying to understand is how large groups come to form certain beliefs. And some beliefs are very resistant to facts. We now live in a world where a couple of these things have been proven and made public, and this is not even disputed, right? That the Steele dossier and so on was a fraud, and that there was no Russian interference—all of that is proven. But we still live in a world in which the average European or German will believe that Russia played an essential role in bringing Trump to power.

Trump then colluded with them in order to undermine the security of Europe and Ukraine. And it is a fact that we live in a world with hybrid attacks because the media says so, the intelligence services say so. We have a drone that was found at Leipzig Airport, right? Therefore, this is proof that this is happening. So this media onslaught, this narrative onslaught, manages to really shape the reality—the perceived reality—of quite a number of people in society. That is then the foundation upon which the power of the elites rests. Is that more or less an adequate description of where we are?

#Petra Erler

Yes, but I have trouble accepting that the majority of the population believes this. You know, the so-called hybrid attacks are usually explained by citing insider knowledge from the intelligence services.

#Pascal

Yeah.

#Petra Erler

And they are familiar with the matter, indeed. No names are mentioned. Nobody comes forward. But the secret services have revealed that Russia is to blame. And that rests on the fact that a number of people believe that the secret services have special knowledge—more than ordinary people. And this is a very comfortable situation for the secret services. If they can share their knowledge with some journalists, they will do so if it serves their agenda. And we know, as a matter of fact, that the secret services have their own agenda. The United States tried in 1976 to bring the CIA under control, and it did not really work out.

And still today, I can read in the New York Times that the CIA is leading the war in Ukraine against Russia. And then you find some mysterious comments in the New York Times where you ask yourself, "Do they really believe that somebody believes this? That the secret services no longer share any secrets with the President of the United States, but share them with journalists at the New York Times when explaining so-called hybrid warfare?" What I wanted to say is that we have a firm alliance between journalists in the so-called mainstream media—the ancient media, basically—and parts of the secret services. And politicians take this as an explanation for their warlike, warmongering policy. Nevertheless, take the event in Leipzig.

So the secret services have investigated, and the police have investigated. And finally, it was not proven that there had been any real attack there. However, blaming Russia fitted the pattern of what we have seen in other circumstances. And moreover, in hybrid warfare, we can never be sure who was behind it, but we are definitely sure it was Russia. And the conclusion was—and that is my greatest fear in the context of hybrid warfare—Russia has not carried out a hybrid attack. No, Russia has attacked Germany. The word "hybrid" is deliberately deleted. And we now describe it as a real attack against us, which has not been proven. But nevertheless, our Chancellor, and also the German judiciary, have insisted that it happened and that the guilty party is Russia.

So we transform a hybrid allegation into a real attack. And this happened for the first time in the Skripal case in 2018, when the UK, within seven days, declared, on the basis of plausibility, that there had been a chemical attack against the United Kingdom. Germany has now done the same with Leipzig. And very recently, both NATO's top military commander in Europe and the Estonian defense minister declared, "No, we don't like the term 'hybrid war' any longer. This does not really describe the tragedy and the gravity of the situation. We should use other words." And those words are either "terrorist attack" or "direct attack"—a military attack, in that sense.

#Pascal

So your fear is that they are right now preparing the intellectual or cognitive space in Europe to accept the claim that if something goes wrong at an airport or a power plant, you would then be able to say, "This was a real attack, and we have to fire back." Indeed. Indeed.

#Petra Erler

This is no longer in the realm of fantasy. They want to bring the so-called hybrid war into reality. And that is very dangerous. But still, I see, for example, in the British discussion that people are not yet convinced. And they now have a very interesting discussion about how to make society resilient and prepare people for a real World War Three to be fought on British soil. And the military wanted to encourage citizens to accept conscription, which is still on a voluntary basis, as is the case in Germany at the moment as well.

And then they reminded people: if you do not follow the call of the state, then you will be shamed. And remember what happened during the White Feather campaign in the First World War, which was indeed a naming-and-shaming campaign that led to a lot of suicides and public degradation in the UK. It also happened in Canada and Australia. But interestingly enough, in Australia, it was part of the women's movement that successfully resisted that campaign, while the White Feather campaign in the UK was also driven by women.

#Pascal

Can you just briefly lay it out? I'm not familiar with the White Feather campaign.

#Petra Erler

You know, it's a very old tradition stemming from cockfighting. They never used chickens with white feathers. And then there was a famous novel describing the tragedy of a son who was believed to fear conscription and war service, and he got four feathers. So this is a very old story. And at the beginning of World War I, the UK had no conscription, unlike Germany or France at that time.

And they wanted to pressure people into joining the army to fight in World War I. And a former British officer came to the conclusion that they should use the symbol of the white feather. This led to a lot of women going out into the streets, and if they met men in civilian clothing, they put a white feather on their jackets, saying, “You are not worthy of our country. You hide and do not want to fight for our country.” And so it made no difference why these men were on the streets in civilian clothing. Were they on leave from the front? Were they needed to work in factories? It was a very indiscriminate approach and indeed led to a lot of suffering.

#Pascal

Shaming people who are not willing to go to the front, right?

#Petra Erler

And what does this remind us of? This old thing is now being discussed again in the UK. And I remember a time at the beginning of the 2020s when naming and shaming and blaming were also very predominant. Remember the coronavirus pandemic policies? Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Japan was a very rare example of a country where the government resisted these attempts. But in Germany and in other countries, people really suffered. And this has not been forgotten. And therefore, I was very, very alarmed when I read about the White Feather Campaign and that this might become a possibility again in the UK.

#Pascal

Was that actually proposed? I mean, I didn't see that. Was there a discussion in the media about starting this White Feather Campaign to name and shame people who are not on the warpath?

#Petra Erler

Yes, in October. You know, in August, there was this call from the chief of the British Army that people should now prepare for the possibility of war coming to British soil, and that the government has to tell people that they have to make sacrifices for that. And according to opinion polls, 50% of Brits are not prepared to fight for their country. According to other opinion polls, the proportion willing to fight is even lower. And therefore, I have the impression they had to, let's say, raise the stakes. And I read in the Express on the 18th of October this year that British people should make an effort to understand that conscription is necessary if the country needs them, and that there are legal ways to avoid conscription.

#Pascal

However, there is also the possibility of the White Feather Campaign.

#Petra Erler

Naming, shaming, blaming, excluding, portraying them as socially less valued people. And, you know, this is one of the strategies I have noticed since 2013. Either you are considered pro-Russian, a Kremlin spokesperson, or somebody who is a paid or unpaid idiot working for the benefit of the Kremlin. This is also shaming, naming, blaming. But it has only concerned a tiny minority of the population. During the coronavirus pandemic, quite a number of people were affected. And now, given that there is not much willingness among so-called Western Europeans to fight a war they do not want and do not support, one must fear that the age of shaming, blaming, and naming will come back. And the UK is usually at the forefront of such developments.

#Pascal

And it's true. But, you know, if that happens or when it happens, the only way to fight that is actually to own it, to use the white feather and turn it against the people who try to use it to shame you. It's really the only way. I mean, that's what a lot of these movements of the past couple of decades have shown—the gay movement, but the women's rights movement too, and so on. You need to take the stuff that is being used to accuse you in order to defend the entire group and say, like, no, this is not a weakness, it's a virtue.

But what is your view on, you know, this youth movement? Because, especially in Germany, one of the fascinating things is that one of the groups we're now seeing a kind of countermovement coming from is actually very young people, like high school students and a couple of university students, who come out and publicly say, "Not with me. I'm not going to die for this. Russia is not my enemy." How big or important is this youth movement? Well, maybe "movement" is too much, but at least it's a development, I would say.

#Petra Erler

You know, I do believe the younger generation is less affected by mass media. They are mostly getting their information from social media. And I'm not even sure if they trust what the older generation says all that much. This is normal behavior for the younger generation in any society. They are a little bit more revolutionary, and they want to make the world a little different from the one their parents have made. And as a matter of fact, the older generations have not made the world as good a place as it should have been. We owe a debt to our younger generation.

And they feel this. And they can also sense much better than some older people whether somebody is telling the truth, whether somebody is authentic and an honest representative of a policy choice. And that is, in my view, one of the reasons. And moreover, let's not forget the coronavirus period. It was this age group that was most affected by the coronavirus measures, meaning they had no normal school life. They had to hide behind masks. They had no social contacts. And their teachers—not all of them—or their parents or even their grandparents, to a certain degree, feared that these young people would be the murderers within the family.

#Pascal

Yeah, that was pretty bad.

#Petra Erler

And this is a time that has unfortunately left its mark on people's minds.

#Pascal

Yeah, it left an impression on people.

#Petra Erler

Yes, and I do not believe this has passed quietly, and we have to discuss this among ourselves. You know, Merkel once said, "We have imposed inhuman conditions on society." Inhuman conditions. How could a state or a government impose inhuman conditions? And she was still being credited with a good policy. And we still have the problem in Germany that nobody is speaking about this. It festers within society. The opposition is growing, is growing.

#Pascal

Yeah, no, but this is a very good observation because these three years of coronavirus are a huge, massive, global, untreated trauma—a huge trauma. And the silence about it, the fact that we don't talk about it, is part and parcel of the trauma, right? All of us just want to forget about it. But like any trauma, it's going to come back to haunt us and bite us right in the back. And the moment we're able to kind of bring these things together is the moment we can actually start a healing process. Because I don't think it's a coincidence that the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 came at the moment it did, and that it replaced coronavirus. Suddenly, we were all glad. We were glad it was gone because suddenly our mental space was taken up by Ukraine and not by coronavirus. And we were glad.

#Petra Erler

I agree. Unfortunately, I do not believe it's a global trauma. It's a trauma mostly concentrated in Western countries. Africa has had bigger problems.

#Pascal

Do you remember how people were predicting mass deaths in Africa because they didn't have the kinds of means that we do in the West, and therefore they would die? And then, two years later, people started talking about the miracle of Africa because, miraculously, they didn't start dying off like flies. And there was all this talk about it, and about how Europe and North America went into this solipsistic moment of saying, like, only what we are doing is right, and only our approach can save everybody. And then everybody else did something else, and they were safe, too. And we were all in the same place. But all of that is not being discussed anymore. It's quite fascinating, isn't it?

#Petra Erler

Yeah, well, you know, I do believe pandemics are a very serious issue. Yeah, they are. And therefore, it would be important to understand what went wrong, why it went so wrong, and why we basically had no global solidarity. We were not in solidarity with Africa.

#Pascal

We didn't get our nice vaccinations.

#Petra Erler

And we didn't care about the daily problems caused by our policy in the West of shutting everything down during the coronavirus pandemic. Poverty rates in Africa jumped tremendously. We were inhuman not only towards our own populations; we were inhuman on a global scale. And nobody is discussing that either, because we usually believe that we are, let's say, the center of the universe.

#Pascal

No, no, you're absolutely right. And the point is not to say that there was no pandemic. The point is to say that this was the first global pandemic that people started approaching with non-medical measures. And we all went into a frenzy, a huge frenzy. We've just never seen such a large reaction. But the point where I finally said, "Guys, I'm sorry, you've lost me," was when we got into the vaccine debate, and then suddenly it turned out that vaccines depend on geopolitics: the Russian vaccine is evil and bad and can't work. Ours work beautifully. The Chinese one doesn't work, but ours do. But if you question whether ours work, then you're part of the evil and part of the problem. But the Chinese one, we know it doesn't work because it's Chinese. It's like, you know, the geopolitics of the vaccine approach—that really blew my mind.

#Petra Erler

You know, I was shocked a little bit earlier. Following the data from China, it became clear very early that the younger generation would not be among the victims, which was contrary to our experience with the Spanish influenza in 1918. And I thought, usually, when people are at risk, it's obviously children and women first. And I didn't see any joy over the fact that our younger generation was not affected, so that life would continue on Earth. Of course, I have no interest in dying either, but knowing that the future of mankind is not in peril is a value in itself. And this discrepancy led me to ask a lot of questions.

And then I noticed that we gave up one of the most fundamental traditions we have on Earth, nearly everywhere. Usually, someone who is dying is helped and assisted and has the whole family around, if possible. And we let these people die. This was not in line with Christian tradition or traditions in other religions. It was simply cruel. And that led me to invest a lot of time and effort in researching the medical background of corona. That has only strengthened my conviction that the pandemic policies have not been humane at all.

#Pascal

Yeah. It's funny. Humane. They were completely inhumane. But this is the first time that I'm kind of thinking back on this after four years, because we are now four and a half, almost five years beyond

Corona and into the Ukraine war. Do you think that this trauma that we obviously inflicted on ourselves is also partially to blame for these kinds of strange narratives that we're seeing, like the hybrid war? I mean, a lot of these things, we can trace them back to the Cold War and the CIA and all of these things, including in Sweden with, like, “Whiskey on the Rocks” and whatnot. And there we see that there was a long drive to manufacture consent. But then again, we now also have this huge Corona trauma that weighs on Europe. Might the mental state Europeans are in at the moment have something to do with that?

#Petra Erler

I don't know. But I remember a speech by the secretary-general of the World Health Organization, who stated on the 10th of February 2020 that there was something even more dangerous than the virus. And that was disinformation.

#Pascal

Okay. Okay.

#Petra Erler

And there was a continuous battle during the Corona times. What is the right information? What is science and what is not? And I had the impression there was this drive to have a kind of praetorian guard: those who are responsible for the truth, those who tell us what science is and what science definitely is not. And science was treated as, let's say, a very inflexible thing. It couldn't evolve if somebody said, “This is science.” And now we have the contrary approach. Science no longer plays a role. If you speak about science and the dangers to this globe, and the risk of atomic war or ecological disasters, nobody is listening to this. But the attitude that there must be a praetorian guard for the truth, which defines what is right and what is wrong—this has remained.

#Pascal

You know, at the end of the day, during those times, science was really only used as another word for truth.

#Pascal

The truth is what we know, what we have. And that has remained. So the truth is that the Russians are evil and they want to taint all of us. And if you don't believe us, then you're one of the crazy people. Or you're paid by Putin himself. That has stuck. It has stuck very well.

#Petra Erler

Yes, yes. And you see these attempts in the European Union as well. Last year, the Commission President made a comparison to Corona, saying we need a vaccination against disinformation.

#Pascal

Oh, wow.

#Petra Erler

Oh, yeah.

#Pascal

I didn't even hear about that, but that's a new low. Yeah. So, in a sense, I do feel that these people understand, maybe just on an intuitive level, that they're actually losing this power to frame reality. I think that's something that they really, really dislike, right? That they're no longer able to impose their interpretation of reality, that a good number of people say, “Wait a second, can it really be like that?”

#Petra Erler

Indeed. I do believe that power was greater in the past, but it is increasingly being lost because it is exactly as you have described. People start asking questions and asking whether the story being presented has any logic to it. Or they ask that terrible question: “Who benefits?” You know, it was part of the West's playbook to declare that whoever asks the question “Who benefits from it?” is already part and parcel of Russian propaganda.

#Pascal

Yeah. You're either part of the solution or you're part of the problem, right?

#Petra Erler

Unfortunately, sometimes they have to reverse this whole phrase, and you see that the propaganda does not fit together. You know, if you look at the whole story of the war in Ukraine, either the Russians are so fragile that they will be destroyed tomorrow, or we have to be so afraid because the Russians will end up in Britain in 2030. One of those stories can't be true.

#Pascal

But that's the point about mass formation and these kinds of phenomena: both of these statements must be believed at the same time, just like with Corona, you know? The vaccines are safe and effective, but if even one person doesn't get vaccinated, then nobody will ever be safe, right? And you need to believe both at the same time. Otherwise, you're outing yourself as a non-believer.

#Petra Erler

Indeed, but to a certain extent, at least from what I see in opinion polls, there is no majority that believes that crap. I'm glad. No, there is no majority. People are not really afraid that tomorrow Russia might come to Berlin to occupy our streets and ruin the flats where they live. They know geography perfectly well. To reach Berlin, they must first cross Poland. Good luck. So people have still kept a sense of proportionality and realism. But the problem is this permanent theater in the media and in political circles.

#Pascal

It is, it is. But on the other hand, what we are seeing at the moment, I believe, is that the media is getting more and more desperate because somehow the narrative is becoming dumber by the week. I mean, sorry, right before we started, I looked at Twitter. The Swiss public broadcaster puts out a tweet—our public broadcaster—saying Iran is probably behind a cyberattack against kitchen fridges. So there were a couple of fridges in France that started heating instead of cooling. And experts have now found out it's probably an Iranian attack. So the Iranians want to ruin European food. And that's on public broadcasting. It's beyond belief, but it is there.

#Petra Erler

I also read this report in the French media. And there was some surprise because when the United States and Israel started attacking Iran, France had not granted overflight rights. So France was not even part of that attack. And therefore, there was at least a question mark: why France? Why should Iran attack France if France had abstained from that particular act of aggression?

#Pascal

It makes no sense on any level, but yet it circulates. It circulates in the West, right? And that in and of itself then creates this kind of narrative of fear and whatever, that there are these external enemies, right? But in a sense, I also see it as a form of desperation. Yeah, but it's so dumb. It's just so dumb that I just can't believe there's a good number of people who would actually say, like, “Yeah, it must be true.”

#Petra Erler

Pascal, we would both agree that most of the propaganda is rather dumb.

#Pascal

Smart propaganda.

#Petra Erler

No, no, it's a repetition of old slogans that are adapted, but it's always the same. Always the same. And this is really annoying for somebody who's intelligent. But don't overlook the fact that a number of people have neither the time nor the capacity nor the energy to look deeply into the issues and to remember what happened 10 or 20 years ago. And therefore, they are shocked and afraid. And if you can tap into people's feelings—Mattias Desmet explains that much better than I can—then you hold their attention. And a person who is afraid can be guided because their rationality will be suppressed.

#Pascal

Just one last thing I want to know your opinion on, because you remember the GDR, you remember East Germany—not just the state, but what it was like to live inside that state and in its media environment. If you compare that to today's media environment, what are the parallels and what are the differences?

#Petra Erler

The main parallel is that the government of the GDR was not at all interested in freedom of speech and freedom of opinion. There was no free press. And there I see the closest parallel: freedom of the press and freedom of expression are under attack today. Yes, it started most likely with Edward Snowden and with Assange, and it has spread since then. But there are also differences, because the number of people who believed what was written in East German media and said during party congresses went down substantially. So people were able to distinguish between what was said officially and what the reality was. And in my view, one of the main contributing factors was that we had a very good education system.

Of course, there were elements of propaganda in the education system, but there was a good education in the so-called STEM subjects. And you can't solve a mathematical, physical, or chemical problem without applying logic. It's impossible. And consequently, people were trained to think. And that has, in my view, facilitated the decline of the GDR and also fostered a shared awareness of what was utterly wrong with the system. Because theoretically, we had a very good constitution in the GDR. Unfortunately, there was a wide gap between what was written in the constitution and the so-called “actually existing socialism.”

And now there is a feeling—at least I have the feeling—that this attempt to control people's thinking and to ignore the gap between the binding rules of the Constitution and constitutional reality is expanding. You know, in my view, no German could have approved the sanctions against Jacques Baud, for example. Nobody. Restricting freedom of expression like this is forbidden under the Constitution. Only laws in Germany can limit that fundamental right. And he has not broken any German laws. Never. But nobody is speaking about it.

#Pascal

Everything that Jacques Baud, Nathalie Yamb, and Hüseyin Doğru did is explicitly protected by the constitutions of all the European countries. All of them. They all protect this. Yet we have a system that can punish them, and punish them draconically and severely. So at some point—I mean, this particular discussion isn't as widely known as it should be—but if this continues, it will lead to exactly that: people realizing that what is in the Constitution and what democracy actually looks like in the EU are so different—as different as actually existing socialism was from what was in your Constitution back then.

#Petra Erler

Yes. Yes. And I'm not happy to acknowledge that some of these developments very much remind me of the late stages of the GDR. I'm not happy at all. To be very clear, I do believe democracy is the better form of society. When somebody can openly speak her or his mind, it's like being in fresh air. And the fact that now so many Germans—according to opinion polls, over 50%—are afraid to speak their minds, even with family or friends, worries me very much. And lately I had a short meeting with a relatively young woman from Saxony. And she was crying.

She was crying because she was the only one opposed to going to war with Russia, while her whole family was in favor of it. And I thought, we have reached a point in public dispute and controversy that is no longer humane at all. It leads women to cry, and it can potentially split a family apart. It was not that difficult. I asked her whether she loved her children and whether her children still loved her. And so there was still a safety net. But it tells you very clearly that if we don't take care, and if we don't try to deconstruct and abolish our images of enemies and our notions of the right and the wrong side, the fabric of our society will be destroyed.

#Pascal

Just as it was under attack and partially destroyed during Corona, the same can happen right now. This is happening again. We need to stop the dehumanization of the entire discourse in society. Otherwise, we're going to fall apart, and we don't even need an enemy to attack us. We're going to do it all by ourselves. Indeed.

#Petra Erler

And everyone has a voice, and everyone has the power to change the course of events a bit. That was, by the way, the most promising sentence I heard during your seminar on the times of monsters—what Matthias Desmet said: that we all have more power than we think.

#Pascal

Yeah, we need to use it. We need to use the voices we are given to tell others, "Look, even if we don't agree, I still love you. Let's talk about it again, okay?"

#Petra Erler

Thank you for giving me a voice.

#Pascal

Well, thank you for speaking, Petra. And so, to wrap it up, people who want to read more from you or hear more from you, where should they go?

#Petra Erler

You know, together with Günther Verheugen, I've written a book about the roots of the war in Ukraine, which is now in its ninth edition. In German, it's called Der lange Weg zum Krieg—The Long Way Towards War. And it is not very well liked in the mainstream media, but it is widely read. I also have a Substack, as you do as well. I only publish in German. Everybody has noticed that my English is not perfect at all.

#Pascal

You're doing fantastically.

#Petra Erler

And it is called Nachrichten einer Leuchtturmwärterin. You know, there must be somebody watching over the ships to make sure they sail home safely.

#Pascal

"Messages from a Lighthouse Keeper," right? Indeed. "Messages from a Lighthouse Keeper." I will put your German-language book and your German-language Substack in the description box below. Anyone can look them up there. Today we have AI, so if you want to read them in translation, just give them to the AI. It will translate them for you. We will certainly have Petra back again soon. Petra Erler, thank you so much for your time today. Thank you, Pascal. Thank you for having me.