

## **“Global” Episode One: Russian Disinformation**

**SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM:** Somebody asked me about the Russian Federation under Putin, what did I think. It's sort of like the USFL. It's not going to stand the test of time.

**STACIE BROWN:** Sam, here we are, finally, the inaugural episode of “Global”.

**SAM JOHANNES:** I am thrilled. We're doing my favorite country in the world, Russia (said in Russian). That's Russia to non-Russian speakers. But, before we dive in, I would be remiss if I did not mention that IRI, a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to advancing democracy worldwide.

**STACIE BROWN:** So, Sam, I am by no means a Russia expert or a Russian Federation expert. Could you tell me a little bit more about Russia? What do we need to know?

**SAM JOHANNES:** First off, I'm thrilled that you referred to it as the Russian Federation, because it is in fact a federal government. There are regional legislatures, regional executives, governors, and a federal level government that has a bicameral legislature, if we must get technical. That's the State Duma, which has 450 members. There's a prime minister and a president who, of course, is Vladimir Putin, who we all know very well.

**STACIE BROWN:** Vladimir Putin.

**SAM JOHANNES:** Uh-huh, Uncle Vova, as he's referred to.

**STACIE BROWN:** And Russia, despite its size as twice the United States in land mass, is very sparsely populated, correct?

**SAM JOHANNES:** That's right, Stacie. The population is about half that of the United States, roughly 146 million people. Most of those people are concentrated in the west in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Once you go farther east, it's very, very sparsely populated.

**STACIE BROWN:** And very cold.

**SAM JOHANNES:** And very cold. One could say most of it's very cold. The economy also is a little bit smaller than I think most people realize. It's approximately the size of Italy.

**STACIE BROWN:** I did not know that.

**SAM JOHANNES:** Indeed, indeed.

**STACIE BROWN:** Well, who's up on our docket today?

**SAM JOHANNES:** Today we have the senior senator from South Carolina, Mr. Senator Lindsey Graham, who in his long career on the armed services and foreign relations committees has dealt with Russia extensively. We also have Andrew Kramer.

**STACIE BROWN:** Oh, he's the *New York Times* correspondent who's based in Moscow, right?

**SAM JOHANNES:** Precisely.

**STACIE BROWN:** And our third guest?

**SAM JOHANNES:** Our third guest is Bakhtiyor Nishanov, a man of Uzbek nationality who is the deputy director for our Eurasia programs.

**STACIE BROWN:** Great. I'm excited to hear what they all have to say.

**SAM JOHANNES:** Likewise.

**STACIE BROWN:** So we've heard a lot about Russia in the news recently. It's kind of a hot topic, especially their disinformation campaign and what Russia's hoping to gain from this. So this is why we're focusing on that topic for this episode, and we're going to assume—correct me if I'm wrong, Sam, that most listeners will know a brief history of the Soviet Union.

**SAM JOHANNES:** Yes, as much as I would like to delve into the storied history, the 300 years of Romanov rule, the unbelievable sacrifice that the Soviet Union made in World War II, 50 dead soldiers for every one dead American soldier, just saying, or the turbulent presidency of Boris Yeltsin, we simply don't have time.

**STACIE BROWN:** To learn more about Russia's history, we chatted over Skype with Andrew Kramer, a correspondent for the *New York Times* who's actually based in Moscow, and he's been there for the last 10 years.

**ANDREW KRAMER:** Hello.

**STACIE BROWN:** We were hoping that you could give a quick rundown of some of the key major events the listeners need to know to understand the current state of Russia from 1991 through present day.

**ANDREW KRAMER:** In the Soviet Union, there were really three pillars that propped up the government and the country. And these pillars of the Soviet Union were the economist party, the red army, the military, and the KGB, the security apparatus. After the collapse of Communism, all three were wobbled. And, in case of the Communist party, collapsed. And in the 1990s, the country was looking around for alternatives, and one idea of what happened in the 1990s was it was an effort by the Yeltsin government with Western support to create another pillar in Russia, which would be a capitalist class, people with a vested interest in economic reform. And this was done very quickly by privatizing state property for -- ended up in hands of a few lucky Russians who came to be known as the oligarchs and created a lot of resentment in the rest of society because of this unfairness and because the broader economic reforms had failed at least initially. In the 1990s, the economic reforms, well, ultimately they led to a period of prosperity in Russia, which is what we had in the last decade or so. The initial consequences of these economic reforms was a deepening of the poverty that people had experienced in the late Soviet period. So people in Russia blamed the reformers for this hardship, but really it was the extension of the economic problems of the late Soviet period. So you have this broad arc in the post-Soviet period of initial chaos and then stabilization and resentment to anybody involved in the early reforms, including people associated with the Yeltsin government. And this is really exploited today by President Putin and his team to criticize the West and cast anybody inside Russia who wants to cooperate more closely with the

West as—by tarring them as similar to the reformers of the 1990s who brought chaos and difficulties to Russia.

**SAM JOHANNES:** So how does that shape the citizen psyche today under a Putin administration?

**ANDREW KRAMER:** That's a very good question, thank you. It's easy for the state media to point to the hardships that took place back then and blame it on the West, and that's really what the meaning of it is today that referencing these difficulties is a way to discourage Russians from wanting to cooperate with Western governments, with Western Europe, and wanting to reform their political system because democracy, during this transition, democracy and capitalism became joined in the Russian consciousness as liberal reforms.

**SAM JOHANNES:** So who is Vladimir Putin in all of this and how does this messaging benefit him?

**ANDREW KRAMER:** Vladimir Putin grew up in a suburb of St. Petersburg and as a young man joined the KGB and eventually the foreign section of the KGB to work in Eastern Germany where he was during the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. So Putin came back to Russia and St. Petersburg in the early 1990s at a point when there was a lot of interest in these reforms. He had exposure to life in Western Germany via his work in East managing spies. And he joined with a very progressive Mayor Sobchak as an aide or a deputy mayor under Sobchak. So he was a public figure, a public politician as a deputy mayor of a large Russian metropolitan area, 5 million people. He, in 1991, came out against the August coup, the hard line coup. So you have hard liners trying to preserve the Soviet Union and restore a more authoritarian system, and Putin at that time organized protestors to come out on the streets in St. Petersburg to oppose this coup that was trying to retain the Soviet Union as it was. So later he would say the collapse of the Soviet Union was a geopolitical tragedy. But, at the time, when he had a chance to choose a side, he actually chose the side of his reformist mentor Sobchak rather than these hard liners. And that was his job up until Sobchak was voted out in 1996, and the lesson from this local campaign was that democracy doesn't always produce the right results. That was the lesson that Putin took away from it. After that, Putin accepted the offer to come work in Moscow in the property department of the Yeltsin administration, sort of mid-level bureaucratic job, worked his way up, parted that into other better opportunities, eventually became director of the FSB, the successor agency to the KGB for internal affairs for domestic security under Yeltsin. And, from there, he was chosen as Yeltsin's successor.

**STACIE BROWN:** So what is his long term goal?

**ANDREW KRAMER:** That's a difficult question. I think that the initial two terms of his presidency were very successful in restoring Russia domestically. He prosecuted the war in Chechnya very brutally, but brought it to a close. And he through the oil boom restored economic stability. I think his second spell as president, which began in 2012, in my mind the focus is on restoring Russia's historical role in its sphere, which spans Europe and Asia, not necessarily the restoration of the Soviet Union but the restoration of the Russian Empire in some form of a great power role for Russia.

**STACIE BROWN:** So, given what you've just described, what in practice is the type of government that currently exists in Russia and how does it work?

**ANDREW KRAMER:** That's also a very good question. Sometimes what exists is called a phony democracy and not only in relation to Russia but in relation to other governments around the world

where you have a constitutional order which describes a democratic process, but you have de facto control by a clique of individuals, perhaps. But you have a lot of countries, particularly in this part of the world, where they're not all democracies but, in fact, there's no competitive democracy as we would see it in a Western country or in a local contest in a state, in the United States, for example, where you'd have multiple people vying for leadership positions. In Russia we've had politicians shot and also prosecuted. Now, in the Russian understanding though, they disagree with the idea of—the government disagrees with the idea that opposition politicians are the liberal, pro-Western figures who are under so much pressure these days, people such as Boris Nemtsov who was assassinated in central Moscow two years ago. They say that the opposition is really the Communist party, which has representation in parliament, the liberal democratic party of Russia, nationalist group, also represented in parliament, and some other political parties which are, in fact, consistently supportive of the government rather than being in opposition to it.

**SAM JOHANNES:** The story of Boris Nemtsov is important to know. Here's Bakhtiyor with more information.

**BAKHTIYOR NISHANOV:** So a couple of years ago, and this anniversary's coming up, a prominent Russian opposition figure, somebody who's worked in a Russian government, somebody who's been a truly, truly massive supporter of the things that we send for, something that Russian citizens stand for, Boris Nemtsov, literally walking with somebody else downtown Moscow, literally steps away from the Kremlin. He was gunned down in downtown Moscow. And this is shocking. For me it was personal to me. We've all known Boris in some capacity, a truly life-loving, freedom-loving person who stood for the right things, and no one really knows. And this is fascinating because Russia is a country where everything is being recorded and watched, and especially if you're right in front of the Kremlin. It's like it's right in front of the White House or Congress. I mean where are the cops? Where's the surveillance? Nothing of that sort came to light. And right now there's a court case going on against the alleged—the person who killed him. But there are so many murky details on that, and I think, complicating all this, following his death Putin disappeared from public life for a couple of days. Just no one knew what happened. Anyway, but Boris is dead now, and, yeah, I hope that at some point in the future the truth will come to light.

**SAM JOHANNES:** Now back to our conversation with Andrew Kramer in Moscow.

**STACIE BROWN:** You mentioned that there really is no competitiveness in the democracy to speak of at all. Who are some of the current opposition leaders or where are the groups that are kind of fighting for change in Russia?

**ANDREW KRAMER:** It seems most likely that political change will come from the emerging consumer society in Russia where you have people expecting more from the companies they patronize, from the services that they use, and, as they demand more from these services, these companies, they also demand more from their government and so on. So there's this pressure building for better governance from—and particularly large metropolitan areas in Russia. And it seems most likely that this would be where political change would come from. We saw this in 2011 in the so-called White Ribbon movement protest led by Alexey Navalny, real estate lawyer who was concerned with these issues of fighting corruption, bringing better governance, better local government to Russia. And this ultimately fizzled. He was prosecuted and sidelined, but he did win 25% or so of the vote for mayor in Moscow, a city of 10 million people. These people are also—this emerging middle class is also situated in the politically important geography of Russia. Within a 10 kilometer radius of the Kremlin there are about 5 million middle class Russians. They're there for

the long term. Their interests are not changing, and that will be a challenge for any authoritarian government inside the Kremlin to coexist with this group which surround them.

**SAM JOHANNES:** Mr. Kramer, thank you for speaking with us today from Moscow. Stay warm.

**ANDREW KRAMER:** Thank you, bye.

**SAM JOHANNES:** For our listeners, if you'd like to follow Mr. Kramer's reporting from Moscow, he's on Twitter @AndrewKramerNYT. To learn more about Russia, Stacie and I had the incredible opportunity to sit and talk with Senator Graham in his office in Washington, D.C. He was most gracious.

**STACIE BROWN:** Well, Senator, you've been in the U.S. Senate since 2003 and a member of Congress since 1995, and you've spent most of that time on the foreign affairs and armed services committees. So, given your role there, how have you seen Russia evolve over those 20 years?

**SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM:** Coming out of the shadows of the Soviet Union, breaking apart, attempt at democracy, an effort to stage a coup by the military that was rejected by the Russian people, struggling young democracy lost its way in terms of its identity. Along comes the strong man and its gone from being an emerging democracy Russia bordered by other emerging democracies to basically a police state, not in ideology, not Communism, Putinism, which is all about him. And it's sad to see every instrument of democracy, institution of democracy to be diminished. The Duma's a rubber stamp, and the judiciary is not independent, and he's a crook. It's really sad to have somebody running Russia, which is a great country with proud people, who is just stealing them blind.

**SAM JOHANNES:** One of these tools of the police state that we see is campaigns of disinformation obviously. How does Putin and the Kremlin execute those campaigns of disinformation?

**SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM:** Well, one, you control the media. There are no independent voices left. Didn't you all get kicked out?

**SAM JOHANNES:** We did.

**SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM:** Okay, so the first thing you do if you're a totalitarian autocratic dictator is you get rid of IRI and NDI, because you all are up to no good in their eyes. Dissent, another view of looking at the same problem is a really scary proposition. Dictators are scared people, and scared people, rather than convincing somebody of the power of their idea about persuasion, debate and dialogue, basically try to suppress dissent. The consolidation of the media in the hands of Putin's Russia, there is no independent voice. Having opposition leaders gunned down in the shadow of the Kremlin when all the video cameras suddenly were turned off. So it's a bad place right now. The opposition in Russia, they're very brave, they're very limited, and they have few tools available to them. That's why what we're talking about here today matters.

**SAM JOHANNES:** And how does this, the campaigns of disinformation, serve Putin's agenda?

**SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM:** Well, I mean it creates a narrative. His narrative is that proud Russia under siege by West, treated like third world country, that all of your problems are generated by the West not by my incompetency. You're creating boogeymen, selling the strong leader model. Russian TV is just one long commercial for Putin. A lot of pretty creative

programming that has a common theme that our dear leader Putin is the right guy at the right time for Russia and under his leadership we're coming back, we're going to come back. And the media and the disinformation is trying to mask the reality that most Russians' lives are deteriorating in terms of quality, prosperity, and longevity.

**STACIE BROWN:** So, Senator Graham, you just returned from Estonia, as I understand. How has this disinformation campaign penetrated that area of the world and also what are the attitudes of elected officials in Estonia?

**SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM:** Estonia's very worried. The last eight years has been bad for our frontline democracies. Obama's been pretty weak in the eyes of Russia. Putin's kind of run us over all over the world. When they removed the statue of Lenin in 2007 or '08 in Estonia, the Russians hacked into their power grid and cut the lights out. There's constant misinformation. Russian media is very dominant in the Russian-speaking populations of Estonia. To the Estonian Russian-speaking people, they've been very patriotic, but I worry that it will take a toll over time. And what we need to do from the West perspective is to—I'm okay to create a counter Russia account in the appropriations bill I'm in charge of, the foreign operations bill, that will have grant money available to governments like Estonia that can come up with ways to counter the propaganda of Russia, the disinformation.

**SAM JOHANNES:** Movements like this have already begun. Here's IRI's own Miriam Lexmann calling in from Brussels to explain more.

**MIRIAM LEXMANN:** So the Beacon project countered this information efforts of Kremlin by building coalition between government and civil society, as well by development of 1-52 which is shedding light on these efforts of Kremlin. The 1-52 base application which is trying to or through which we are trying to shed light on the Kremlin's disinformation efforts by producing data-driven analysis on the connections between disinformation and anti-liberal movement or sentiment or narratives.

**SAM JOHANNES:** Okay, back to Senator Graham.

**STACIE BROWN:** So, in your opinion, do you believe that the sentiment that you observed in Estonia is reflected in other Eastern European democracies?

**SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM:** Oh, absolutely. I went to every Baltic nation, and there are two messages. Keep your troops here. We want a permanent U.S. presence of trainers. Help us push back against the disinformation and the propaganda and create free trade agreements with us so that we'll have an outlet in terms of our economy beyond Russia. So what I hope to take back from this trip is to tell our colleagues and ask General Mattis, the new Secretary of Defense, to commit to the Baltic states.

**STACIE BROWN:** So it sounds, based on what you've said, that they really feel the pressure of a lot of threats coming from Russia. What are those threats and are they real?

**SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM:** Okay, well, number one, the military threat. The western district of the Russian military has tripled, doubled in size in the last couple of years. So the Russian military presence along the Baltic borders has grown dramatically. That's why they want some U.S. presence. Very aggressive cyber warfare, attacking—like in Georgia, not a Baltic state but an emerging democracy, they invited Crimean parliamentarians to come to regional conference to kind

of stand up to Putin. And, for that invitation, the parliament's website was shut down by Russia. So, at the end of the day, I think what we need to do is more, more trade, more troops, more presence. And the threats are military, but, more than anything else, I think they're propaganda, disinformation, and economic sanctions.

**SAM JOHANNES:** And IRI, obviously we are committed to a more democratic world. And, ideally, that more democratic world would include a future version of Russia that is in good standing in the community of nations. What, in your assessment, does that version of Russia look like?

**SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM:** Okay, how does this movie end, right? Okay, here's what I think eventually happens. If we go on the offense, if we expose Russia and the way Putin does business to the Russian people through radio voice of America and get more creative, give tools to the frontline states to inform their populations, stop the expansion of Russian propaganda, contain it inside of Russia, sanctions. If we stand up to Putin in the Mideast, this Syrian agreement's a nightmare for us in the region, and Congress passes sanctions that hits Russia in their energy sector, in their financial services sector, then their economy which has gone from the size of Italy to Spain is going to fill it. That combined with a real effort to inform the Russian people where you're headed under Putin and he's stolen you blind will be his demise. All of these autocratic dictators eventually run out of asphalt, run out of propaganda, because the average Russian's life is going down, not up, and sanctions I think are necessary to not only deter Putin but to create the mechanism for change inside of Russia. There'll be a new leader one day. Russia will go back to the democratic way of doing business one day, because, if they want to succeed, that's the only way to do it over time.

**SAM JOHANNES:** Are there any specific political or democratic developments that would be necessary for Russia to be readmitted into the community nation?

**SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM:** Yeah, I think, one, Putin's got to, one, stop invading his neighbors. He's got to stop trying to break in—his goal is pretty simple: destroy the European Union and weaken NATO. His Syrian policy is to support the Butcher of Damascus Assad, who's killed 400,000 or 500,000 of his people. Russia's been right behind Assad, creating a refugee problem for Europe. You can see how Europe is beginning to divide, at war with itself. Pushing the refugees into Europe has created a backlash, and you see a worldwide movement basically to look inward. You see it in Italy. I worry about France and Germany. You can see Russia's hand in Italy. You can see it in our elections, more to come. And we're just going to have to push back and realize that international organizations that support democracy are the safest way for America to exist and the best foreign policy.

**SAM JOHANNES:** Do you have an estimate on the timeline for Putin leaving office?

**SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM:** No, I don't. I don't know how it's going to happen, when it's going to happen, but it'll happen. It always does. History does repeat itself, doesn't it? You know systems that are designed to help a few and indifferent to most don't last over the span of history. The Soviet Union collapsed of its own weight. People got tired of not having any hope or a sense of hope. Putin's Russia is becoming more autocratic, more dictatorial. And there'll come a time when the quality of life deteriorates and the propaganda begins to make less sense. Our job is to expedite this. The biggest beneficiary over time of Russian sanctions, believe it or not, will be the Russian people, because it will create some opportunity for change.

**STACIE BROWN:** Well, thank you for your time, Senator.

**SAM JOHANNES:** Thank you very much. So we've heard from a reporter from the *New York Times* and a sitting U.S. senator. But to learn more about where Russia's headed in the future, we wanted to talk to someone who actually grew up in the Soviet Union and the so-called Russian sphere of influence. That's where IRI's own deputy director for Eurasia comes in.

**STACIE BROWN:** A man who was born in Uzbekistan, has worked in the democracy and governance sphere for over a decade, and speaks three languages: Uzbek, Russian, and English. I'm actually going to let him introduce himself, because I can't even pronounce his name.

**BAKHTIYOR NISHANOV:** Thank you so much, Stacie. I'm really happy to be here and honored to be here, and my name is—so, okay, I'm going to give you the full version and then the short version. The full version is Bakhtiyor Nishanov, but then so I go by first name only, like Madonna or something, so Bakhti.

**STACIE BROWN:** So when are the next elections?

**BAKHTIYOR NISHANOV:** Presidential election is the next big election in Russia, technically not supposed to take place until 2018. However, multiple, multiple sources including the state budget, there's a line in the state budget that actually provides money for an election to be conducted in 2017. It makes a lot of sense if I were President Putin probably I would want to have my election next year, just because the reserve fund that's been kind of keeping Russia afloat, even in light of really low oil prices, they have a national fund that they use to pay salaries and what not. That money's going to run out pretty soon. So, you know, if I'm somebody who's considering running, I probably do want to run for president in a situation where I still can pay my people to pay salaries and what not and while I still have that image. So I do think there is a really high probability we're going to see an election in Russia in 2017. There are regional elections in September of 2017. They're regularly scheduled.

**STACIE BROWN:** Next election's in 2017 maybe. When those elections occur, what will they look like? Will there be opposition candidates? What will the messaging be like from the Putin administration and the Kremlin?

**BAKHTIYOR NISHANOV:** Absolutely, so an independent opposition candidate has already announced that he's going to run. It's Alexey Navalny, somebody who's ran for mayor of Moscow a couple of years ago and within a few months put together an amazing campaign, and he got 25% of the vote, I mean close to that. So he's already announced that he's going to run. But, again, the issue is, as an independent candidate, he's got to collect signatures. So I mean this is a process that allows the government to really control who is part of the election process and who's not. So he's announced he's going to run. We're also definitely going to have handpicked opposition candidates running, but those are Kremlin-controlled people. Somebody like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy who's been a mainstay of Russian politics as a nationalist politician. Communists going to be probably allowed to run. Somebody from just Russia is going to run. And the bottom line is you're going to have an election where you're going to have all the elements of a competitive election. You're going to have opposition. You will have some fiery rhetoric and all that stuff, but, if Putin runs, I think we are pretty obvious he is going to win this election, and he's going to continue being president of Russia. So we will have all the elements, but it's not going to be a free or a fair election, let's be real. I mean opposition candidates are not allowed on national television. Television by far is the most dominant medium in Russia. They're not going to be allowed to do it. So we're going to have elements. We're going to have all the stuff, but, again, it's not going to be a fair election.



**STACIE BROWN:** So you said you moved here in 2006, so you were in that part of the world during a Putin administration, right? So you've kind of first hand seen and experienced a lot of what we're talking about. So I'm wondering what is the pulse of the Russian people on the administration? What are their opinions on the next elections? Do they want change? Do they really want that?

**BAKHTIYOR NISHANOV:** They do want change. Again, this is something that I keep telling people. They are not blind to the reality of their incomes are falling and they're not blind to the reality of their living standards falling. They're not blind to the reality that they don't have any—really they don't have any true friends in the world anymore. They are not blind to any of that stuff. So they do want change. But, at the same time, for 16 years, I mean since they took over N-TV in 2003, they are constantly being told this is our Messiah, this is the guy who's going to save the country, who saved the country. The country was falling apart. He kept the country, he gave you decent living, all of that stuff. Therefore, he's the only one. Opposition does not have access to television. The government is more strictly controlling the Internet. There are all these things happening. So, generally, when people say, especially people outside of Russia, people who don't really know Russia, who haven't been to Russia say this is what Russian people want, well, we don't know that. We don't know that. Let's allow free and fair competition, and if in that free and fair competition Putin wins, that's what Russian people want. When everybody gets access to equal resources, when everybody has access to television, when everybody who's running for president has time to campaign, when they have financed resources, sure, then if he's elected and held responsible, sure, that's what Russian people want. So people do want change, but people just don't see—for years they've been told there's an alternative, so they basically say, well, look, this is what we're going to do. We're going to vote for this guy.

**STACIE BROWN:** Do you believe that the American people in general see the Russian people as the foe whereas, in reality, it's actually the regime? Or how do you believe the perception around the world and in the United States is of the Russian Federation?

**BAKHTIYOR NISHANOV:** What is important here is that Russian people are as much a victim of this regime as everybody else. It's very important for policy makers in D.C., but when we talk about this, you know, Russian, if you will, aggression, Russian attacks, whatever you call it, it's very, very important to remember it's not the Russian people. We're not talking about a nation. It's 140 million individuals, just like all of us in here. These are individuals with their own opinions, with their likes and dislikes, and they don't hate America. They don't want to destroy it. They don't want to go to war with us. So it's really important that we're talking about a small group of people that, because of their financial interests, because of their business interests, because of their hurt egos, because of their expansions, views on how they got to be running foreign policy, they do not want to see any competition. They do not like what we talk about, and they create this fake reality about U.S., and they feed to their own people some of the greatest freedom fighters in the history of humankind were from Russia. They were born in Russia. They were raised in Russia. They were Russian. These are the people who brought down the empire. These are the people—so we should not forget that. These are freedom loving people, but we have to support them when we can, and it's really important that in our rhetoric we do not forget we're talking about individuals and we're talking about a regime and we're not talking about every child, women, old person, and whatever in Russia. They are not the enemy.

**STACIE BROWN:** Do you have—just off the top of your head, do you have an example of some of this propaganda you speak of that comes out of Russia about the U.S.?

**BAKHTIYOR NISHANOV:** Oh, absolutely. Just to give you a very, very small example, right, a couple years ago there was a bridge collapsed in Washington, just a very small example. Russian media, they took that story, they ran it. They falsely presented it as Washington, D.C., in the capital of the nation that claims to be the greatest country in the world bridges are falling apart. Everything is falling apart. This is terrible. And is this the country that claims to be the leader? I mean they can't make their bridges work. So they took what was truly a tragic thing, because people died there, they took a truly tragic story and they turned it into this propaganda piece about how terrible the U.S. is, truly everything put out there, that instead of getting involved in all the Middle East and stuff, why don't you go fix your bridges? And, again, this is something—the thing is what makes it propaganda is how systematic it is. It wasn't just one outlet, because freedom of speech is important. They are entitled to their right to talk about this, 100%, any media outlet is. But, when you watch 10 media channels and they all basically send the same signal, and you know that it's being coordinated, that's one small example but they're—I mean, there are millions of those. And, again, obviously the rhetoric is the anti-American rhetoric is extremely, extremely strong. And, again, anyone you talk to is like why do you always have to get involved in things where you don't belong? Why do you go to places where you don't belong? That's the main message.

**STACIE BROWN:** Bakhti, how do you define the Russian soul?

**BAKHTIYOR NISHANOV:** The idea of Russian soul is I mean, when you go to Russia, when you talk to people, it's definitely there's something to the collective psyche, that idea of when people think of Russians they automatically think, well, tall, blue-eyed blondes, but there are so many minorities. There are so many different kinds of people there who live there, and they constitute Russia. But there's this idea of Russians, right, of the idea that you're always essentially have to rely on your own. You are by yourself. You are on your own. You have to be tough. You don't have to show emotion, because, if you show emotion, that's weakness. If you show—you got to be tough because everybody else out there are out to get you. I mean it sounds negative but really what it does do to people is this really creates character, this belief that we are tough people, we are somebody who are masters. I mean, for all the feudalism that is in Russia's society, we are masters of our own destiny.

**STACIE BROWN:** What do you believe the Russian people view their role in the world as?

**BAKHTIYOR NISHANOV:** This is the question to ask. Think about it this way. You are a super power, super power, super power, and one day you wake up and you're not. Not only you're not, but you're humiliated. In their perception, right, they are humiliated. You believed in the idea of Communism and all that stuff. It's just gone, like that in one day. So people took it super, super hard that we used to matter, and we don't anymore. We just don't. In the '90s that idea that Russia doesn't matter anymore I think was especially—it was extremely strong, and I think it really hit home with '98 and '99 when the Asian economic crisis. Russian economy was a terrible mess. And then the NATO bombing of Serbia, which, look, it was justified, in my opinion, but, in the opinions of many, many Russians, it was we protested. You're our allies. They thought of U.S. and NATO as allies, but they went and they bombed their brother Slavs. So that I remember was a pivotal moment in that, oh my God, we don't matter anymore. Because the idea was like, sure, we are not as great as they are, but at least we talk to them and they listen to us, but that was the moment where it was just like oh my God we don't matter anymore. And Putin came to power at exactly that moment. He came to power at exactly that moment. They went through humiliation of losing Chechnya. I mean, Chechnya, a tiny Chechnya republic essentially won its independence from a ginormous Russia. You know, Putin came, he turned that around brutally. I mean what

happened in Chechnya with Putin, it was brutal murder of innocent civilians, don't get me wrong. But, in the collective psyche, it was like oh my God, we are, okay, getting back what we used to be. So Putin came at a really—I mean, from that perspective, he came at a right time, at a convenient and good time for him. So I think Putin really, for many people, symbolizes that return to making a difference. This is the thing. This is the drug that really is preventing many people to see through the fog of propaganda, because the drug of we are a great nation, we'll matter. So, anyway, like I said, these days many, many, many Russians see themselves as kind of ascendant, emerging, whatever next super power, not next but co-equal, equal super power and they matter again, and they want to continue that.

**STACIE BROWN:** What can other countries learn from Russia?

**BAKHTIYOR NISHANOV:** Here's what I think all—any country looking at Russia that a lesson learned that it should not do. Russia is a great cultural hub in that part of the world. Russia's greatest export could have been that, soft power, not through controlled propaganda but through genuine engagement with the world, telling people, educating people about that great Russian culture, about the language, about opening up, just open it up, just open up the country, use that, use the soft power. When you don't have oil to sell, you have a great culture to sell, do that. So I think what every country—we are in a world now where soft power and ability to influence other actors internationally through soft power is by far the most important thing that you can do.

**SAM JOHANNES:** Every episode we like to ask our guests this light-hearted question. Bakhti, if humanity sent an international time capsule into deep space, what item would we include in there to represent Russia?

**BAKHTIYOR NISHANOV:** Wow, okay, you got some questions here about Russian soul and about this. A couple of things, first of all, definitely matryoshka, right, those nesting dolls. You would need a set of those 100%.

**STACIE BROWN:** By the way, I have a joke about that. You know how they fit inside each other whatever, well, why don't people like them?

**BAKHTIYOR NISHANOV:** Yeah, no, I have no idea.

**STACIE BROWN:** Because they're full of themselves.

**BAKHTIYOR NISHANOV:** Oh, okay, wow. So if it's a dad joke by a girl, then is it a mom joke?

**STACIE BROWN:** I don't know.

**SAM JOHANNES:** So, Stacie, throughout this entire process, I've got these three main takeaways. First, the Russian people are not the enemy of democracy. The Putin administration is the enemy of democracy. Two, the Putin administration's goal in manipulating the information space in Europe and inside their own country is to weaken NATO's unity and divide Europe. Three, today's disinformation propaganda is much more subtle and creative than historically what we've thought of when we hear of Russian propaganda. Today's propaganda is designed to make you question the reality and viability of the democratic system we have. So to be an informed “Global” citizen we have to learn to distinguish between truths, half-truths, and outright lies.

**STACIE BROWN:** A very special thank you to our guests, the senior senator and former presidential candidate from South Carolina, SENATOR LINDSEY GRAHAM, Andrew Kramer, a correspondent for the *New York Times*, and IRI's own—

**SAM JOHANNES:** Bakhti.

**STACIE BROWN:** If you liked what you heard, please subscribe, share, rate, and/or leave a comment. E-mail us at [podcast@iri.org](mailto:podcast@iri.org) or tweet us @IRI“Global”.

**SAM JOHANNES:** Thank you to Miriam Lexmann for telling us more about the Beacon project. To learn more about IRI's efforts to counter Russian disinformation, please visit IRI.org. Our theme was composed by Alex Hollinghead. Throughout this episode you've heard the Russian national anthem and Million Scarlet Roses by Alla Pugacheva. Many thanks to Chris Holzen, our man in Warsaw, for the music recommendations.

**[00:45:00]**