



Chris Hedges on Ukraine, NATO/Russia, Censorship & Julian Assange

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Taylor Hudak (TH): Hi everyone, I'm Taylor Hudak with acTVism Munich and welcome back to another episode of The Source, a show where we interview policy experts, former insiders, whistleblowers, journalists and activists to get a better understanding of topics and issues often left out of the mainstream media. And today, we welcome back a special guest, journalist Chris Hedges. Chris Hedges is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, a bestselling author and activist. Chris joins me today to discuss the case against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and its broader press implications, as well as Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, NATO expansion and the effect and impact of sanctions against Russia on citizens within the Eurozone. Chris Hedges, first of all, I want to thank you for joining me today, and welcome back to The Source.

Chris Hedges (CH): Sure.

TH: So we are living in a time of what seems like mass censorship and you have been subjected to this censorship; you had a very successful show on RT America On Contact with Chris Hedges. And RT and Sputnik have been banned throughout the Western world. Why do you think that the Western powers feel a need to control their narrative and what's really going on here?

CH: Well, because RT gave voice to dissidents such as myself, who were largely pushed out of the mainstream; and I used to work for The New York Times, I come out of the mainstream. And it had a very small, certainly in the United States, media footprint, but we know that the ruling class, both within the Democratic and the Republican Party, were deeply annoyed by giving a platform to people such as myself. That's not conjecture. You go back to 2017, you look at the Director of National Intelligence Report, about seven pages that our report dedicated to our team. And they don't complain about Russian disseminating Russian

propaganda. What they complain about is that RT is giving a platform to Black Lives Matter activists, anti-fracking activists, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist; of course, largely funded by the Russian government, they have a vested interest in promoting this kind of critique. I saw the same thing. I covered the revolutions in Eastern Europe when I was in Czechoslovakia. If you wanted to hear Václav Havel, you had to turn on Voice of America. Now, Havel didn't support American imperialism or capitalism, but that was the only way you could reach a public within Czechoslovakia. And much the same with voices like mine. I mean, Noam Chomsky, our most important intellectual, has for years been virtually blacklisted. When I worked for The New York Times, it was widely understood that you couldn't even mention Chomsky's name. In addition to being, of course, a cultural critic, he's one of the world's foremost linguists. But the walls have narrowed. It's gotten harder and harder. Just on the issue of Israel; I was the Middle East bureau chief for The New York Times, I speak Arabic, I spent seven years in the Middle East, I'm a strong supporter of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, that alone will see you pushed out of the mainstream. I saw my good friend Cornel West denied tenure at Harvard. The space, I mean, they pushed us into this space and then what they do is they demonise the space. But I think it shows how nervous they are that they see the need to essentially, in my case, six years of shows, remove them from YouTube and shut down RT. Not one of those shows had anything to do with Russia. There was not one show on Russia. In fact, the very few times that Putin was mentioned, he wasn't ever mentioned in a very flattering light, and was described as an autocrat and this kind of stuff. So it's part of - you couple that with the kind of algorithms, the persecution of Julian Assange, our most important publisher. I mean, here you have an innocent man, a heroic figure in my mind, sitting in a high security prison in London because he exposed the crimes of the empire and the mendacity of the ruling class, and not just within the United States, but globally, Haiti, Tunisia and everywhere else. So you have an increasingly discredited ruling elite, I would say global ruling elite. And rather than change or carry out any kind of reforms, what they're doing is engaging in harsher and harsher forms of censorship. I mean, I think this was quite naked in the build up in the last few weeks of the presidential elections. When you had Biden running against Trump, there you saw the contents of Hunter Biden's laptop exposed by The New York Post. The New York Post gets locked out of its own Twitter account. It is discredited in the mainstream media as being out of the Russian playbook. The New York Times called it disinformation. In fact, we know that everything on that laptop was accurate, in fact came from Hunter Biden. And then, of course, in Silicon Valley, we don't know because it's dark money, and significant amounts of money, probably hundreds of millions of dollars, were pumped into the Biden campaign, largely in terms of negative advertising against Trump. The quid pro quo, of course, is that the Democrats, that alliance with Silicon Valley means they won't break up their media empires, their kind of lock on digital social media platforms. And then, of course, what did they do after the election is they removed Trump from his Twitter account and from the rest of social media, which I opposed. There's a clip with me on Amy Goodman's show Democracy Now! opposing it, because these are opaque entities. We know nothing about them. They know everything about us. We don't want to hand them that power of censorship because of course,

they're also bonded, especially to the deep state, the intelligence community and the Democratic Party. Little did I know that a few weeks later I would be a victim of that. So, I mean, my shows were very wonky. It was kind of, you know, public; if we had a functioning public broadcasting system, it's what you would see almost all authors, biographies of Susan Sontag or I did a show on the 100th anniversary of the publication of James Joyce's Ulysses with Sam Slote, who is a Joyce professor at Trinity College Dublin. And I just want to before I finish, that show used to be on teleSur. And then teleSur imploded with the collapse of the Venezuelan economy and then the shift to right wing governments in countries like Argentina; they didn't want to fund it anymore. And then RT just picked it up and rebranded it. So it was always- the head of RT America used to call it my intellectual show- it was the kind of show that public broadcasting would put on, I don't know, at one in the morning or something. And that's what's so, you know, I didn't violate the community standards of YouTube at all, but it was just that it was disseminated by RT and because I gave a voice to fierce critics of American society, American imperialism. I did a lot of shows, of course, on Julian Assange. I know Julian. I was one of six people invited to his wedding. And of course when we got to Belmarsh, they wouldn't let us in. So that's the real reason. And I think if you go back and look at the 2017 Director of National Intelligence Report, they're quite upfront about why people like me got cut out.

TH: While we are on the subject of media freedom, censorship and press freedoms, let's talk about Julian Assange and his case. Just last week, UK Home Secretary Priti Patel approved the extradition order, which means that Julian Assange is one step closer to facing extradition to the United States. What is your perspective on this case and how do you see this case moving forward?

CH: Well, he's been railroaded. I mean, it's judicial pantomime. I've sat in on some of the hearings in London and then monitored others online during the pandemic. So, you know, I've followed hours of court proceedings. It is a judicial farce; I mean, on innumerable points, I mean, getting the fact that he never committed a crime. What he did, he was a publisher. He didn't actually, like Daniel Ellsberg, he didn't actually steal the documents to publish them. He was provided this material like any publisher. And a lot of this stuff occurs, especially back in 2010, this was all picked up by major newspapers and news organisations, El Pais, The Guardian, Der SPIEGEL, The New York Times. He's the most important publisher of our generation, hands down. He's done more to expose the inner workings of power than any other journalist or publisher alive. And they're going to make him pay for it. But, you know, the way they have had to deform basic law is quite staggering. I mean, for instance, UC Global, the Spanish security firm, was filming all of his meetings with his attorneys and providing them to the United States, which on top of it was considering assassinating him and kidnapping him. I mean, that alone invalidates the trial because it eviscerates attorney client privilege. It's really quite staggering how the UK has essentially decided to engage in this judicial pantomime. I mean, those of us who have followed the case since it began understand that he's being railroaded. We don't have much hope but we're going to fight it. But now he

gets to appeal on other points and it goes back- it is kind of strange and convoluted, these were none trials, by the way, they were all hearings- it goes back to the lower court. So that's probably another year of legal wrangling. But it seems pretty clear that the UK is working in collaboration with the Biden administration to extradite him. And then of course the end result, if/when he's found guilty, is that even to possess classified material will become a criminalised offence. I mean, let's remember, he's not a US citizen. WikiLeaks is not a US based publication, and yet he's being charged under the American Espionage Act. I mean, that in itself is a tautology [meant: paradox], that doesn't make any sense. But what it does is shut down any kind of serious investigation into the mechanisms of power. I just want to say, as a reporter for The New York Times, I possessed and published classified material. And so it's quite ominous in terms of our ability to hold power accountable.

TH: This case could really potentially criminalise standard and normal journalistic activity. And we at acTVism Munich have also covered this case extensively, and there has been a number of legal irregularities with this case. Now, if Assange is extradited to the United States, we know that he is likely to be tried in the Eastern District Court of Virginia. This is a very secretive court, perhaps a very corrupt court as well. So can you speak a little bit more about what he would potentially face in the United States as far as the prison conditions as well as what his court case would be like?

CH: Well, this is another legal anomaly because Judge Vanessa Baraitser decided to halt the extradition process, because first, Julian is in very poor physical and psychological health. He suffered a small stroke. He has been hallucinating. They found a razor in his cell under his socks, banging his head against the wall. I mean, it's quite distressing, the kinds of things, as anybody would break down after ten years of this kind of persecution. Seven, of course, in the Ecuadorian embassy. And then now in this high security prison where he's held in isolation. So then what happened was the US provided, quote unquote, assurances, they have no legal validity, in a diplomatic note and that saw the high court agree to the extradition. But in that note, they said that those assurances would be given so long as Julian didn't violate any rules. I'm paraphrasing, I do not remember the exact language, which is ridiculous, because the moment he steps foot in the cell- I teach in a prison, I mean, it's a totalitarian system- they are able to do whatever they want. I mean, they said in the note they wouldn't hold him in Florence, Colorado, in the supermax prison there, pre-trial. Well, I mean, this is another faint because nobody is held pre-trial in Florence ADX. I mean, it's just the absurdity of it. So there's no question what they'll do to him. They said they wouldn't use SAMs, these are special administrative measures; it's just complete isolation. You can't even communicate often with your lawyers, certainly with anyone else, which breaks you down. That's what they did to Fahad Hashmi, who was a graduate student in London and they brought him back. And by the time after 23 months of this treatment, they brought him into the courtroom, as a case I covered and he was just a zombie, he didn't even know where he was. So that's the goal. That's what they will do. You're correct in pointing out that there was a reason they sent him there with Gordon Kronberg and these figures who are rabid Islamophobes and far right

figures who have persecuted, especially Muslims, Sami Al-Arian, the Palestinian academic, right after 9/11 they went after all of the major Palestinian figures in the United States, the Holy Land Society, everyone else, and wipe them out; at Israel's behest, of course. So the court has just a horrid reputation. That's when they hauled in Chelsea Manning, because what they really want is to get Manning to collaborate with them and say that there was collusion between Manning and Julian to extract the material that was leaked to him, and that then becomes a criminal offence they can use against Julian. Manning, to her credit, has refused to do that, but crumber they threw her in jail, she had there another suicide attempt. I mean, these people are ruthless. I mean, remember, these are the people who run black sites around the world and Guantanamo, and they're the same people.

TH: I do want to shift topics here for a moment and discuss Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, which is what really prompted for RT and Sputnik to be censored. So what would you say the average person doesn't really know about this conflict in Ukraine?

CH: So I was in Eastern Europe in 1989 covering the revolutions as I mentioned. I was acutely aware that assurances were given to Gorbachev that NATO would not be expanded beyond the unified borders of Germany. In fact, of course, we all thought NATO had been rendered obsolete. NATO was ostensibly formed I believe in 1948 or 1949, I can't remember, to halt Soviet expansion into Central and Eastern Europe. It shows you how naive we were- that peace dividend and everything else. And then there was a long, over many years provocation. I mean, I think there's now 14 countries in NATO. The only reason you do it is, I think one, to enrich the arms industry because you convert Soviet bloc military equipment to be compatible with NATO equipment. And then of course, I think the United States, Washington saw after the collapse of the Soviet Union that they were prostrate and could really do what they want. So there's no question that Russia was provoked. I don't think it's a military operation. I think it's a criminal war of aggression. I mean, under post Nuremberg laws, and of course this is what we did in Iraq, which was a criminal war of aggression with probably even less *raison d'etre* than Moscow has. I mean, Moscow was clearly baited, but in the end, they pulled the trigger, which in many ways is what people in Washington wanted. So that historical process, I mean, Clinton had promised Moscow with the expansion of NATO there wouldn't be the station of NATO troops in these countries. I mean, and now I think there's 100,000, there's a missile base in Poland that's about 100 miles from the Russian border. I mean, if this would happen to the United States, we would all be apoplectic; along the borders of Mexico or Canada or anywhere else. So I don't defend the war. I've been very critical of the war itself, but I've also been critical of the arm shipments that have gone into Ukraine, because this is fuelling a conflict, which is what they want. They want to lure or they effectively have, I think, lured Russia into the Ukraine. And then you get a long war of attrition, which is going to destroy- the people are going to bleed or the Ukrainians. It will destroy Ukraine, but it will weaken Russia. That is the goal in the same way that Russia or the old Soviet Union was weakened by the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. That's what's happening. That's why we're seeing such staggering figures. The United States now is

\$55 billion worth of weaponry and assistance. That's \$130 million a day. And then you've got Germany talking about, or I think it has doubled its defence budget and now it's going to be 2% of GDP, which will make Germany the third largest military power in the world after the United States and China. The Russian military, by the way, is pretty small. But these Neocons who are in the Biden administration, they have long kind of stoked conflicts with both Russia and China for endless and perpetual war. It feeds the militarists of the Pentagon. We spend more on our military than the next nine countries combined, including Russia and China. And, of course, it's hollowing the country. There are domestic costs to that because it's hollowing the country out from the inside, our infrastructure, we don't have any high speed trains. And the trains we do have - I mean, I take the train often - on the northeast corridor between New York and Washington, you get out and the whole section of the track, you can't even walk down the aisle because it's not even. It is constantly breaking down, the roads, the bridges and then the social programmes. So really the government, even both Republican and Democrat, have been captured by these really nefarious forces embodied in figures like Victoria Nuland. Victoria Nuland works in the Biden administration, who used to be Dick Cheney's Chief Foreign Policy Adviser. In the State Department Blinken is another one. These people have long advocated this very aggressive posture. And I think it comes from the fact that China is overtaking the United States in terms of an economic powerhouse. And the US just can't let go of this, you know, kind of divine right they feel they have for global hegemony. And the only instrument they have left to try and exercise that hegemony is the military, which is why you see provocations in the South China Sea; why you see the, you know, alliance with Taiwan. I mean it's really a dangerous situation and they're very cavalier about the fact that they are challenging nuclear states. I mean, Robert Kagan, who was one of these Neocons, just wrote a piece in I think it was Foreign Affairs saying, Well, don't worry, Putin won't use the bomb. It's just - you know, they're Dr. Strangelove. They've been with us for a very long time. I dealt with them all the way back in Central America in the 80s because I covered the war in El Salvador. Kagan was working with Elliott Abrams in the State Department, and their whole job was to discredit everything we as reporters were reporting in countries like Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua or anywhere else. And it's a non-reality based belief system. It's a very simplistic, almost childish view of the world. Everybody they fight is the new Hitler, whether it's Saddam Hussein or Putin. You know, any kind of diplomacy is the Munich moment of appeasement [from 1938]. But of course, they stay where they are and they have the power they have because they're funded by the arms industry, all their think tanks, and that's why they're always on TV. I mean, on the Middle East, I have far more experience than they do in the Middle East. So as I said, I spent seven years there as a reporter. But, and I'm culturally and linguistically historically literate, I also know war far better than they do. But because I don't parrot back the dominant narrative, voices like mine are shut out.

TH: Do you see Russia surpassing the United States in the Western world after this conflict comes to an end? Because if we look at the sanctions that have been placed on Russia, they have really backfired. And this especially happened when Russian President Vladimir Putin

made the decision to sell Russian gas against rubles. This really increased the value of the ruble against the US dollar and also the euro. So what are the implications looking ahead when it comes to the economy?

CH: Well, the Russian economy isn't that strong. It's rich in natural resources, but it's not rich in manufacturing. What you've done is build an alliance with China. Now, which again, the entire Cold War effort by the West was to avoid an alliance with China and Russia to maintain that Sino-Soviet split. So ironically, what they've done, I think that's why figures like Kissinger have been so critical of what's happening in Ukraine, is, you built an alliance. You built an alliance with a country like Russia, which is rich in natural resources, which China needs, and then China, which is now rapidly becoming the dominant manufacturing centre in the globe. We also mentioned India. I mean, India is also buying oil from Russia. I mean, all sorts of states are just not playing the game. So, yes, in that sense, it has backfired. I think what I find so distressing and they've been quite upfront about it, is that the sanctions are really up one in ten and that's to remove Putin. That's it. And they're going to punish Russia in their ideas to get rid of Putin. Well, it didn't work too well in Venezuela. Juan Guaidó, who they still, you know, ridiculously call the president. So I don't know if it's going to work. I don't think it's going to work. And there's no going back. I mean, it's very hard, given the kind of rhetoric and the kind of policies that have been implemented against Russia to ever rebuild a relationship. But what you're seeing is the acceleration of a multi-polar world. Of course, the death blow and China and Russia are acutely aware of this, is destroying the SWIFT system. Because the dollar is the reserve currency largely and because the international transfer of money is through SWIFT and the US controls it, this inflates the value of the dollar. If SWIFT can be replaced and the dollar is no longer the reserve currency, and of course we've seen that move forward with the use of the rubles and not just in, I think Hungary and other countries are all paying in rubles, isn't Germany, I think? Isn't there some kind of strange bank agreement or where technically they're really paying in rubles? So and that's the death blow of the American empire. And you go back to the 1950s and you look at what happened when the pound sterling was dropped as the world's reserve currency, not only does the currency decline in value significantly, but then nobody wants US treasury bonds. And the American empire is funded on debt. All its wars are funded on debt. And that would see a massive contraction of the American empire, 800 military bases abroad. You just can't sustain it. And so I think that if you want to be kind of very cynical about it in terms of perpetuating the US and Germany, the policies that they have carried out towards Russia and towards China, you know, China is kind of next on the target list, has actually weakened and is weakening the American empire.

TH: One thing that we have seen recently, which is quite unusual, is Finland and Sweden sharing their plans to potentially join NATO. Is this perhaps because neutrality is no longer an option?

CH: I mean, neutrality should be the option. I mean, Ukraine should be a neutral country. That would make sense in a geopolitical world. Russia has every reason, because of historical trauma, to want countries on its border to be neutral. It was invaded three times in the 20th century, World War One, of course, and then in World War Two. It was two times in the 20th and then go back to the 19th with Napoleon; so three times, sorry. So there is historical trauma there, which is legitimate. And that is the great tragedy. I mean, what people forget is that Ukraine had already become a de facto NATO country, given that, I think we had 150 military advisers in there. They were already getting significant arms before this flood of arms came in. And that's the tragedy. It was unnecessary. And it was not only unnecessary, but for those of us who worked in Eastern Europe, it was completely predictable. And it shouldn't have happened. I mean, the real tragedy, if you go back to 1989 again, is that Gorbachev, Yeltsin and I think in the early years of Putin, they really wanted to build a kind of security alliance with Europe and the United States. They did not want to be antagonistic. That era was over. But of course, if you are a militarist in the United States, you need an enemy. And if you don't have one, you'll create one. And that's kind of what happened.

TH: I do want to go back to a discussion on sanctions, which have historically been really harmful to the people in these countries who have been placed under these sanctions. It's really an act of war. But as I mentioned earlier, the sanctions coming from the EU placed on Russia have come to the detriment of citizens within these European countries. And in Germany in particular, the price of gas and the cost to heat one's house come the winter could be extremely high. This is going to have a really negative effect on the citizens within the Eurozone. So isn't it true, though, that the governments, say the German government in particular, has a duty to the German people who will unfortunately be impacted by these sanctions? And why implement these sanctions just to please the United States?

CH: Well, we know what the United States is trying to do. You can't talk about war if you don't talk about markets. And the United States wants Europe to buy its oil and natural gas, at prices which are going to be far higher than Russia. That's what's going on. And that's probably what will happen. And if the German people have to pay higher costs for energy because they're buying it from the United States, that is very good for the United States, which is why they did it.

TH: Is this a sustainable model to follow?

CH: No. We're flirting with nuclear holocaust. It's absolutely insane. And it's as if the world is being ruled by Dr. Strangelove. It's nuts. There's an article I wrote, you can go to chrishedges.substack.com, there's several articles on Ukraine in the war, but there's one called The Pimps of War. I've dealt with these people my entire career, starting in El Salvador, going through the Middle East, I covered the war in Yugoslavia, I was in Sarajevo during the war. I've dealt with them. I know these people. I actually know them personally. And they are

very, very dangerous. And unfortunately, they dominate the political centres of power in both of the two ruling parties, including the Biden White House.

TH: Before we close out today, are there any last thoughts that you want to leave us with or are there any words of encouragement that you have for those listening right now who are deeply concerned of the state of our world and who are also deeply concerned about the state of the free press and Julian Assange's freedom?

CH: Well, any pressure is going to come from the streets at this point. It's clear the global ruling elites are in lockstep in terms of cementing into place a kind of global corporate totalitarianism. There's no daylight between them. And they're not capable of reform. They have no interest in reform. And so it is going to, as I saw in Eastern Europe, it is going to require us to use the only power we have, which is the power of numbers. I'm a strong supporter of Extinction Rebellion and in fact, have taken part in Extinction Rebellion protests. We have to begin to disrupt the system with the numbers that we have, because that's the only way we're going to create the kind of pressure to prevent the slide into a kind of new form of corporate totalitarianism.

TH: Very well said. Chris Hedges, thank you.

CH: Sure. Thank you.

TH: Of course, thank you. And I want to thank you all for watching this episode of The Source with Chris Hedges. To not miss any other episodes of The Source, please make sure that you are subscribed to acTVism Munich's YouTube, Rumble and Telegram channels. And please consider donating to our organisation as we are free from any corporate or governmental influence and really rely on your support to keep us going. So once again, thank you for watching this episode of The Source, I'm Taylor Hudak with acTVism Munich and I'll see you all next time.

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