



Theories on Prigozhin's death, BRICS summit and F16 fighter jets

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Zain Raza (ZR): Welcome back and thank you for joining us today for another episode of The Source; I'm your host, Zain Raza. Today, we'll be talking to Dimitris Lascaris about his recent political activities and the latest developments around the war in Ukraine. Dimitri Lascaris is an independent journalist and a lawyer who specializes in class actions, human rights and international law. In 2020 he ran for the Green Party leadership in Canada finishing second. Dimitri, welcome back.

Dimitri Lascaris (DL): Always a pleasure to talk to you, Zain. Thank you for having me.

ZR: From the 12th to the 15th of August, you traveled to Sweden and Norway to participate in the Gaza Freedom Flotilla. Then you spent some time in Warsaw and in eastern Poland in order to examine the impact of the Ukraine war on Poland. Could you first introduce these initiatives, talk about the purpose and share your observations.

DL: Well, the Freedom Flotilla began in 2010. It began as a collection of ships, the most important of which was the Mavi Marmara that tried to break the blockade of Gaza, which had been going on for a number of years and has created truly appalling conditions in that densely populated enclave. And it was simply delivering humanitarian supplies. There was absolutely no threat whatsoever to Israeli security. The vessels were seized in international waters and what constituted flagrant acts of piracy. And actually a number of passengers, I believe the number was ten on the Mavi Marmara, one of whom was a joint Turkish American citizen, were killed by Israeli commandos. And there was never any accountability for that. I was not a participant at that point in time. Since then, to the credit of the organizers – I mean, they've shown immense courage in the face of what happened in 2010 – they have organized nine other expeditions, I'm sorry, five other expeditions. So it's six in total; this year was the sixth. And on each occasion, the vessels were either carrying no supplies whatsoever and were simply trying to breach the blockade peacefully or they were carrying

humanitarian supplies. And on each occasion, they were seized forcibly in international waters by Israeli forces. The boats were confiscated, necessitating the purchase of new boats every time that they embark on a mission. Personal belongings of the passengers were confiscated. People were forced to go into Israel, detained for a number of days and then deported. This year's mission will be completed in 2024. So I was on the lake from Gothenburg in Sweden to Oslo in Norway. The boat has now been put in winter storage and it will try again to break the blockade of Gaza next summer.

ZR: Also, talk about your trip to Poland.

DL: So Poland I spent five days there. I'd never been there before. I started with two days in Warsaw. Then I went to Lublin, which is near the border with Ukraine. And then I went closer to the border of Ukraine in a Polish town called Chelm, which is just a few kilometers from the border. And then I drove up and southward along the border, literally within one or two kilometers of the border, to see what the conditions were like. And what I was really struck by, Zain, is there was absolutely no evidence whatsoever of a war happening on Poland's border. Except for one thing, which I'm going to come back to. I didn't encounter any Ukrainian refugees, any person, at least as far as I could tell, any person speaking Ukrainian. I didn't see any Ukrainian flags. I see lots of Ukrainian flags in Canada, but I saw absolutely none in Warsaw, Lublin or in Chelm. I saw no military assets. The only indication that there was a war going on right next to Poland was that the border checkpoint between Chelm and an Ukrainian town, that name I can't pronounce, there were over 420 vehicles – I counted them – cargo trucks lined up over a distance exceeding about ten kilometers, waiting to get into Ukraine from Poland. And I mean, they were just basically stopped dead in their tracks. There were no trucks coming in, as far as I could tell, but this long cascade of trucks. And it really kind of highlighted for me the extent to which Ukraine has become dependent upon support from the West. Those trucks were carrying everything from vehicles to farm supplies, you know, to industrial equipment. And a lot of them were simply covered and I couldn't tell what the cargo was. It might have been military or not. But what was most striking for me was the complete absence of any evidence that there was a war going on. I don't know what to make of that, but it's not what I expected.

ZR: Let's switch gears here and focus on the most recent developments surrounding the war in Ukraine, most notable being the recent plane crash and death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Wagner private mercenary company that supports Russia's war in Ukraine. In it's 24th of August segment Germany's leading primetime news channel, The Tagesschau, stated and let me quote them here, quote, "There are some indications that point to a retaliatory action on the orders of President Putin against mercenary chief, Prigozhin." Later in the same segment, the Tagesschau takes it a step further by claiming, quote, "In fact, several of Putin's opponents have already died under unexplained circumstances or have narrowly escaped him, such as poisoned Kremlin critic Navalny". Although the Western media widely covered the theory that Prigozhin was assassinated by President Putin as he had to fight inside a rebellion

against him in June, the underreported other theories, for example, that is that could have been due to a technical fault or even a false flag operation initiated by Ukraine or Western governments to divide the Russian government and undermine its military operation. When it came to the bombing of the Nord Stream pipeline, Western media and politicians spoke quite openly about a Russian false flag operation that was intended to sow discord between Western countries and their relations with Ukraine. What is your assessment of Prigozhin's death and the reaction of the Western media?

DL: I'll start my answer to your question by highlighting the importance of the Nord Stream example which you mentioned, Zain. In the case of Nord Stream, people like myself, many others, principally Sy Hersh, who has a far greater journalistic record than just about anybody in the English speaking world, essentially engaged in the kind of logical analysis that the West is now engaging in with respect to the killing of Prigozhin; if, in fact, he was killed and this wasn't an accident. Which is to say they're saying who had the motive and who had the opportunity. Now, it's quite interesting to me that they're readily prepared to use that kind of logical analysis with respect to the killing of Prigozhin if he was killed. But they resisted fiercely employing that same analysis in the case of Nord Stream. And in the case of Nord Stream, not only was the United States government, the government that had the greatest motive to destroy Nord Stream and the best capacity to do so, but Biden himself had stood up besides Olaf Scholz and had said to the media that if Russia invaded Ukraine, they were going to bring an end to Nord Stream. Let's imagine if Putin had said before the mutiny engineered by Prigozhin as leader of Wagner, if, you know, Yevgeny Prigozhin betrays me, I'm going to bring an end to Yevgeny Prigozhin. Would anybody have doubted for one second that Putin was behind this killing? So I just want to highlight that. Now, the thing about applying the same reasoning in this case to Prigozhin is it's not quite analogous to Nord Stream because in the case of Prigozhin, there were many people, many people who wanted that man dead and many people who had the power to order his killing or somehow orchestrate his killing. The Ukrainian government, which has shown itself entirely willing to engineer assassinations on Russian soil, probably had more motive than anybody to kill Prigozhin. The Defense Minister Shoigu, who obviously runs the Russian military, was vilified and accused of the worst things by Prigozhin before his death. There are probably very powerful people and wealthy people in Africa who want Prigozhin dead because as the head of Wagner, he pursued missions or his organization pursued missions that were contrary to their interests. And of course, they're the Americans. They wanted Prigozhin dead, I'm sure. So I'm not saying that it couldn't have been Vladimir Putin. Of course, that is a completely plausible theory. It may have been. But there are others who also had both the motive and the power to do it. And the other thing I'll say about Prigozhin's death is that this happened in circumstances which weren't really advantageous to Vladimir Putin. He died during the BRICS summit. And this was a major distraction to what was, as others have noted, a huge diplomatic success for the Russian Federation. By any reasonable measure, considering the attempts to isolate Russia. And in addition, why would Putin have ordered his murder on Russian soil when he could have almost certainly orchestrated his killing in

Africa, far from Russian soil? Why would he do that? It just doesn't make a lot of sense. At the end of the day, I think what we should do is entertain the hypothesis that Putin was behind it, examine other hypotheses and wait until more evidence emerges. One other thing I want to say is I think you mentioned the 2016 election. You know, time and again they've blamed the Russian government for all kinds of things that have gone wrong both inside and outside of Russia. They said that, you know, Putin engineered the victory of Trump. We all know that that was basically a hoax. It was a concoction of the Hillary Clinton campaign and the FBI and the intelligence officials were in cahoots to try to spread that lie. They said that Putin's government was behind those two missiles that left Ukrainian airspace, entered Poland airspace in November of last year, and killed two Polish farmers. Within 48 hours, they retracted that allegation and said that, in fact, it was the Ukrainian military that had fired them. So again and again, we've seen allegations advanced against Vladimir Putin's government and they later turned out to be untrue. So I just caution people, let's see how the evidence unfolds before we come to any definitive conclusions here.

ZR: Let us look at some military developments. The US recently agreed to supply Ukraine with F-16 fighter jets that would be provided by Norway, Sweden and Denmark. According to the Pentagon, the US will begin flight training for Ukraine pilots on F-16 fighter jets in October. The training will begin after the pilots receive English language training in September. In your opinion, is this a sign of desperation on the part of the West since it has provided so many advanced weapons in the past that it promised would make a decisive impact in Ukraine's counter-offensive? Or do you think it miscalculated or was too cautious and the F16 jets and other weapons are now needed to counter and match Russia's military?

DL: I preface my answer by pointing out again, as I have in prior discussions I've had with you, that I'm not a military expert, but I listen very carefully to military experts on both sides of this debate and also try to apply my own common sense, as we all should. And first of all, I think there is a terrible need on the side of the Ukrainian military for increased air combat power. The Russian air force is basically dominating the airspace right now. And this is creating an enormous problem for the so-called counter offensive, the Ukrainian military, which has accomplished very little at very high cost over the last two and a half months. So the question, though, is, is this going to be enough, the number of F-16s they're talking about? Is this the right type of air combat power, given the current sophistication of the Russian air defense systems and Russian fighter jets? And is it soon enough? Is it going to happen soon enough? I think there's a real question about whether the Ukrainian military can survive in any meaningful form until those F-16s are delivered. There are indications that it is approaching a point of collapse because of the enormous casualties it has sustained. And secondly, these are relatively old, even though they were spectacular combat aircraft for their time, they're relatively old and not particularly well equipped to deal with the sophistication of Russia's current air defense systems. And the number of them, frankly, is going to be, I think, far too few in order to level the playing field between the Russian air force and the Ukrainian air force. Finally, the other thing we should all bear in mind, the Russian

government has said very clearly that it considers these F-16s to be capable of delivering nuclear tipped missiles and it will treat them as such. I think that that's a very ominous statement. And given the fact that this war is not going well at all for Ukraine, it's unfolding into a catastrophe for Ukraine, given that these F-16s are not likely to change the complexion of the war meaningfully and given the threat level that this poses to us all, given the Russian government's attitude towards these particular aircraft, I think it makes no sense whatsoever to be providing the F-16s to the Ukrainian government. I'll say it again until I'm blue in the face, what makes the most sense for the Ukrainian government and for the West is for us all to sit down on the table and hammer out a compromise with the Russian Federation.

ZR: According to the working group of public broadcasters in Germany called ARD, 52% of Germans are against the delivery of Taurus cruise missiles that the German government is currently considering sending to Ukraine. 36% are in favor of the delivery, while 12% are undecided. In the US, a more general poll on Ukraine was conducted by CNN that showed that 55% of Americans are of the opinion that the US Congress should not authorize additional funding to support Ukraine, as opposed to 45% who say funding should continue. What is the significance of these polls, in your opinion, and do you think public opinion in the West towards supporting Ukraine is slowly shifting?

DL: I think it's shifting quite dramatically; these numbers that you cite. Remember that these figures are being generated in a media environment that is extraordinarily biased towards Ukraine, NATO and the Biden administration. So despite the fact, I mean if people were getting their information from, let's say, acTVism Munich and other independent media outlets that are presenting a balanced picture, one can imagine how high the levels of opposition would be even in this slanted, biased, pro Ukraine media environment. Majorities are emerging in important jurisdictions in the West opposed to the further arming of Ukraine. What I think is inevitable is that the public's appetite right across Ukraine and by the way, I saw a poll recently in Poland which showed that the level of support for Ukraine had dropped precipitously. Still, it's nearly half the population, but even in Poland, which has taken perhaps the most pro Ukraine stance of any NATO member country. So the question is, how are the Western governments – this was an inevitable outcome, you can only conceal and bury the truth for so long – how are Western governments going to respond? And of course, principally the US government, which is really driving the bus on this. And I think what we're seeing on the part of the Biden administration and it's being reflected in reporting by The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN is an understanding that this is not a war that can be won, certainly not anytime soon, but a real dread of anything happening between now and the 2024 election, which would enable empower the Republicans to say that this was a fool's errand. So I think what the Biden administration is going to do, no matter what the polling numbers show, is try to just sustain the war, even if only at a relatively reduced level of intensity so that it can see plausibly in the 2024 election that it ain't over yet. And that there is a real prospect of Ukraine ultimately emerging victorious. The problem with this strategy, which is completely selfish and politically motivated, is that it's profoundly contrary

to the interests of the Ukrainian people. People are dying in order to sustain a war that cannot be won. And if there is any humanity in the Biden administration, they'll put the interests of the Ukrainian people before the electoral prospects of Joe Biden.

ZR: The BRICS economic bloc, which you mentioned in this interview already, concluded a historic three day summit in South Africa in late August. BRICS formed in 2009, currently represents about 40% of the world's population and 25% of global GDP. The group received over 40 applications and announced that six countries would join the group in 2024 that include Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Argentina, Egypt and Ethiopia. The Tagesschau, Germany's prime primetime news channel mentioned the basic facts surrounding the BRICS meeting, but failed to mention the underlying reasons why this economic bloc even exists and continues to grow 14 years later. Could you talk about the significance of the recent BRICS meeting and its reasons for its continued expansion?

DL: I think that when we talk about BRICS, it's really important to be cognizant of the fact that the members of the BRICS organization have an extraordinarily diverse set of political systems, political beliefs, cultural settings, and historical experience. So, for example, you have the Communist Party of China, you know, on the one hand, and at the same time you have the government of Brazil, which is a secular government, a left leaning government, but certainly not one that characterizes itself as communist. And then you have the Russian Federation, which is what I would call a system of state capitalism and very much committed to the orthodox religion. And now you're seeing Saudi Arabia, which is a fundamentalist Muslim country, and also Iran, a fundamentalist Muslim government, I should say— although of the Shiite persuasion. And you see Argentina coming in. So the diversity, the political, cultural, linguistic, historical and economic diversity of this bloc is truly extraordinary. What is it that binds them? Why are they coming together? I think the one thing that is the source of the greatest cohesion is a desire to bring to an end the era of US/Western hegemony. They're fed up and they understand that in isolation they can't resist Western domination. But together, they most certainly can. For all of the reasons that you identified, the economic power, the resources, the natural resources at their disposal, control over, you know, certain important infrastructural assets around the world, including the Belt and Road Initiative. So I think that this is a harbinger of the death of the era of Western/US domination. And the fact that so many countries are rushing to join BRICS – and I've even seen reports that European countries like Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are having serious discussions about applying for entry into the BRICS. This is really a momentous development, one that I think is going to be reverberating around the world for years to come. And it's frankly awesome to behold. I don't think that the formation of the BRICS by any means is a panacea. I don't think it's going to solve all our problems or necessarily, even most of our problems. But if the model of multipolarity, which this organization has championed, replaces the one of hegemony, unipolar hegemony, that will be a very positive step forward for humanity, in my opinion. And there'll be a lot of work left to be done, to be sure. But that will have been a great step forward.

ZR: Dimitri Lascaris, independent journalist and lawyer, thank you so much for your time today.

DL: Thank you, Zain.

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