

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversation with Anne Applebaum

Filmed June 13, 2024

BILL KRISTOL:

Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to *Conversations*. I'm very pleased to be joined today for the third time, I guess, by Anne Applebaum, preeminent chronicler of all things Soviet, Russian, Ukrainian, European and American now, in terms of authoritarianism here as well. So unfortunately, the authoritarian beat has turned out to be a very good beat to be on Anne, so.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Unfortunately, yes.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, but you've done a great job with it. Your book, *Autocracy, Inc.* is coming out in about a month, and we'll talk about that some, but we've had two conversations about Ukraine right at the beginning of the war—a month in—and then a year in, we're now two years plus in. Let's begin with that and then get to Europe and then the broader questions. Where do we stand in Ukraine?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

So it's a complicated picture to describe because there actually, instead of one war, there are now three wars. There is the Land War, which is the thing you read about the most. And in the Land War, Ukraine is very much still on the defensive. It's true that the Russian attempt to push towards Kharkiv has mostly stopped. The Ukrainians, thanks really to the last-minute arrival of US aid, the Ukrainians have been able to stop the Russians, so they have not succeeded in taking huge amounts of territory, but they did make some gains while Congress was stalling. But they've stopped it, but they're not moving forward and it looks muddled, although there are people who are trying to find a way out of that. But that's a separate story. There's a second war, which is taking place in the Black Sea, and this is mostly Ukrainians using long-range missiles, drones, to attack Crimea and targets in and around Crimea.

And they're hitting airfield and they're hitting air defense and they've hit enough ships so that the Russian Black Sea Fleet is mostly moved away from Ukraine, which has allowed Ukrainian shipping to resume normally. It looks like the Ukrainians are trying to make Crimea unviable so that it would be difficult to live there. It's already much harder to get goods in and out of there. Crimea was functioning for a lot of the war as a kind of aircraft carrier stuck to the bottom of Ukraine. It was where all the Russian equipment was. It was where actually all the prisoners, where a lot of prisons for Ukrainian soldiers were, and it's now—they're trying to weaken it and cut it off and that's the kind of second battlefield.

And then there's a third thing happening, which is very hard to understand because we don't really have any good reporting on it. And this is almost like a long-range duel. So there's the Russians trying to hit Ukrainian power plants, Ukrainian infrastructure, and

basically the Ukrainians trying to hit Russian infrastructure and especially Russian oil refining capacity. And it looks like they've— depending on who you read and who you believe, something between 7 and 10% of Russian oil refining capacity is down. So it's almost like there are these three spheres of the war. And Ukraine is doing not so well in the first, much better in the second and the third is a kind of ongoing duel. I mean, one of the interesting things is there's now a real arms race there. What's happening on the battleground in Ukraine is now so far ahead of anything the US army has ever done in terms of the use of drones and electronic warfare that I hope, I mean, I'm sure everybody in the Pentagon is paying attention. I don't mean to be annoying, but I mean isn't a kind of war that we have fought, and it's at the cutting edge of technology. The whole battlefield is visible.

You can see everything because of drones, and there's a contest between whose electronic warfare can ban who else's drones and other guided capabilities. And that's what's going on now. And there's enormous amount of research and innovation happening on the Ukrainian side, but there's also some happening on the Russian side. And so we're now in this kind of duel moment. The US aid has come through, it's begun to get to the battlefield. It's still, some of it seems to be weirdly slow for reasons that I am not able to understand. But Ukraine has recovered from the very low point of three or so months ago when they didn't have the prospects of war aid and they were really beginning to lose ground. So I would say on the ground, that's where we are.

BILL KRISTOL:

I suppose for all these reasons, including the new uses of technology or the new technologies, it's a little unpredictable actually, if things might break in one direction or another, but I guess, am I right that the safer prediction or assumption is not huge changes in the balance of power or balance of forces on the ground over the next several months?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

So people are thinking that not much will change this year. The key event, of course, is the US election in November, and it's possible that different decisions will be made depending on who wins that. And then most think that by next year, the cost to the Russian economy, which is being paid in other ways too, will begin to become high enough that Putin will have to start thinking about how long he wants to keep this going. The Ukrainians will keep it going because they don't have a choice. So as far as they're concerned, it's an existential war. I mean, they have to fight because when they lose territory, the territory becomes Russian. The people living on it are put in concentration camps. I mean, there's a horrific story that came out in the FT, in the *Financial Times* in the last few days, describing how the Russian plan to kidnap Ukrainian children, bring them to Russia, Russify them and put them up for adoption, was actually created before the war.

And the FT actually found advertisements, I mean essentially offering Ukrainian children up for adoption inside Russia. So they will lose their children, they will lose their identity, they will lose their way of life. They'll probably lose their businesses because Russia nationalizes whatever businesses it finds in occupied territory. So for them, an occupation is the imposition of a totalitarian regime, and they can't live there, it will be the end. So they will keep fighting. And for Russia, it remains a war of choice. I mean, it remains something they don't have to do. It's a war that's being fought largely now for the sake of Putin's ego and for both his belief in some recreation of some kind of Russian Empire, but also it's his battle against the idea of democracy

and the idea that a country like Ukraine can choose what kind of government it wants to have.

And so there could come a point when he doesn't want to do it anymore. I mean, there's another additional piece of this, which is this war is over when the Russians leave, and it doesn't matter why they leave, they can leave because they lost a battle. They can leave because they are tired. They can leave for economic reasons. And one of the things that's actually happening as we're speaking is that the G7 is meeting, and at the G7, there are going to be a number of things announced. Some have already been leaked, that will increase pressure on Russia. So there will be money that was Russian assets that were frozen at the beginning of the war. The interest from those assets is going to be used essentially to give \$50 billion to Ukraine. Also, there's new sanctions on not just Russian companies, but companies that are enabling Russian companies to get around sanctions, especially concerning the rebuilding of their military industrial complex. And so their economic pressure is being tightened as well.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, it seems like there's some kind of financial or banking crisis actually in Russia the last 24, 48 hours with the people waiting on lock, can't get their money out of the banks and so forth because of the new sanctions, I think.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Yeah, a whole new list of banks has been sanctioned. Any financial institutions that enable the Russians to get around export controls, and this is not just Russian banks, by the way, any of those are now sanctioned as well. So this is a sort of huge wave of secondary sanctions, which is exactly the thing that people have been saying have been missing. I mean, we've seen now the way around sanctions has gone via third countries, via Turkey, via Georgia, via Kazakhstan, by Kyrgyzstan. And of course, the Chinese have been sending components, chips, all kinds of equipment and machine tools that the Russians need to build weapons have also been coming from China, and I think the US is now sanctioning that trade as well. And it will at least have a ripple effect. I mean, I think the hope is not that we can shut it down completely, but that we can weaken it, we can make it more difficult, we can make it more expensive.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think the net effect of what you've said is really important— that everyone assumes, based on history back to Napoleon, The Russians can outlast anyone. They've got more people, obviously, and they're in Ukrainian territory, so they can just sit there and so forth. But actually, it's not clear that they can actually simply outlast Ukraine. You say it's a world necessity for Ukraine, and things could change in Russia in terms of either Putin or in terms of the economy. And there are other things, and people tend to, I think here, don't you think much too much to assume that Russia's the one that's got just the endless lasting staying power and that it's Ukraine?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

The Russians do lose wars, yeah. I mean, they lost the war in Afghanistan. They withdrew. They lost the Russo-Japanese War. I mean, they essentially lost World War I. They lose wars. I mean, it's not at all unheard of. And there are different kinds of pressure being brought to bear on them. I mean, another thing that often comes up is people say, why don't the Ukrainians negotiate? And an important point here is that at the moment, the Russians don't want to negotiate. So there is no other path right now.

So there isn't anyone... I imagine we could put pressure on the Ukrainians to convince them to negotiate. I mean, we have a lot of leverage on them, but they have no one to negotiate with. I don't think the Russians are negotiating about anything until they have concluded that they can't win.

And so whatever kind of pressure we can put in them to convince them that we can't win, that we're there forever, that we're not going to abandon the Ukrainians, whatever. I mean, and of course the big wild card here is Trump. We don't really know what he would do if he won. He's given lots of pretty negative hints, and the Russians may be waiting for him to win or hoping he'll win. And presumably they're going to try and help him win in various ways in order to... And maybe they think then they can get some kind of better deal. I don't know, but that's what I assume.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, that's a huge one, we'll come back to that in a minute. But so when you dig into any of these issues, whether it's Russia, Ukraine, Europe, which we'll get to in a second too, or autocracy around the world, Trump is kind of a central figure. But bracketing that for Trump for a second, am I right to think that all and all the sort of, let's call it diplomatic/political situation in Europe, and I guess now here in a way, after the package has gone through, isn't as bad as one might have feared a year ago in terms of for Ukraine, that we could all complain about different things European countries aren't doing and hesitations and stuff. But at the end of the day, most of the countries are more solid maybe than we might've thought they would be two years ago. Am I too optimistic about that?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

No, actually, I mean, with the important exception of Hungary, all of the European countries remain aligned behind Ukraine. I mean, some have more or less capabilities, but there has been an understanding. And I think the majority, I can't speak to every single country in Europe. I haven't looked at 27 different sets of opinion polls. But I know that overall support for Ukraine remains. I mean, of course people are tired of the war, just like everybody's tired. The Ukrainians are tired of the war. But there is also an understanding, I mean, especially in the frontline states, which I would include Eastern Europe and Scandinavia, there's an understanding that it still— for them, it's also existential that we need to win the war for our own safety. But I think even in Germany, the majority of people understand that. A lot of people understand it even in France and Italy, which are further away. The British absolutely understand it.

So I'm kind of less worried right now despite the European elections, which I'm sure you want to talk about. I mean, despite that, I'm not worried at this second about some big, huge split in the alliance provoked by Europe.

BILL KRISTOL:

So we have a November problem perhaps with Trump and a problem already. I think in terms of the shadow he's casting and people have to calculate that he has a whatever, 40, 50% chance of winning. And that affects government's own calculations, including Putin's, as you said. But, what—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Yeah, no, I mean, Europeans are certainly... I mean, I know there are plans in lots of countries. There's a conversation about what we do if Trump wins. And I think even the coming NATO summit in the summer there will put into place some institutional

structures that will be designed to help Ukraine, like a civilian NATO presence in Ukraine and a kind of pipeline for weapons and training and so on that will be put in place so that it can outlast even a Trump presidency. I mean, that's the idea.

BILL KRISTOL:

Tough though, I think. The US is so much at the center of it.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Tough, I agree. No, no, it's tough. Not going to deny that.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, no, I mean this is where... So European elections, I don't know, some people say dramatic move to the right. Others say—you've, I think written—much more complicated. Some people even point out that most countries not that much of a move to the right. But, as you say, without going through necessarily all 27 countries, give us a general sense of the voting last weekend and also maybe what the big takeaways are in terms of implications for the future.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

So to be clear, I mean the European parliamentary elections, which are very, very badly understood in the Anglophone world are... it's like the World Cup for politics nerds. There's 27 countries, each country has five or six parties center right, center left, far right, far left, green, liberal, whatever. And of course, American and British newspapers in particular, the British also never really understood the European Parliament even when they were in it and they really don't get it now, they all want one headline. And on Monday after the Sunday vote, the headline was, Victory for the Far-Right. And although it's true that in France, the far-right, Marine Le Pen's party got 30%, which counts as a victory in that system. And although the Alliance for Germany, the AFD did very well in Germany, although less well than expected, that kind of... However, almost everywhere else... I mean I think it did well in Austria too, sorry. But almost everywhere else, they either underperformed, they did worse than expected. Anyway, they certainly didn't win. So whether you look at Spain, whether you look at Poland—

BILL KRISTOL:

They being the far-right parties.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

The far-right, yeah. So far-right did very badly in Scandinavia, less than expected in Spain. And actually the center-left revived itself in several places. I mean, this is really in the weeds, but Slovakia, which is a country where there's a sort of wacky populist government, that ruling party lost these elections actually and the center-left did better. In Poland the current ruling party, which is a center-right party defeated the far-right former ruling party for the first time in 10 years. So there was pretty mixed picture.

I mean, I think what happened really on Monday was that the French somehow clogged all the attention because Marine Le Pen's far-right party got, as I said, that 30%, which was—

BILL KRISTOL:

And Macron dissolving Parliament puts the exclamation point on it—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

And I was just going to say, exactly, and then Macron decided to use the moment to call everybody's bluff and to announce a national election. So to be clear, European parliamentary elections are for the European Parliament, which is a thing that sits in Brussels, and it doesn't usually affect national governments. So you're not voting for your own prime minister, you're voting for the European Parliament, which is more important than you think it is. But nevertheless.

What Macron decided to do was call everybody's bluff because he reckons that many people use the EU elections as a kind of protest vote, and people vote for all kinds of parties they don't vote for nationally. So he's guessing, first of all, that people won't vote in the same numbers for Le Pen if it's to make her prime minister. Secondly, he's guessing that there's a slightly different voting process. Votes are counted differently in national elections, which doesn't favor her as much. And thirdly, even if he's wrong and she wins and her party is the largest party, which again wouldn't be a majority, they'd still need to be in a coalition and so on, he's the president for the next three years. And in France, the president controls foreign and defense policy and is perfectly capable of making the prime minister's life miserable. I mean, he can make it very difficult for her to do anything, even if she wins.

It was a gamble, but it was a more controlled gamble than it looks.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think psychologically, the effects, don't you think of a Le Pen party governing even only in domestic policy and not all of domestic policy in France would be a pretty... It's France, that would be a pretty big deal. I mean, it would...

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

It would be a big deal. So that people understand. I mean, her party, it was originally her father's party and it does kind of ideologically descend from Vichy, and it was historically an anti-liberal, essentially an anti-democratic party. So there is a normal center in France, or usually there is, it's kind of in bad shape right now. But the far right was against the Republic. It was against the idea of liberal democracy historically, and that was why it was so dangerous. And then it also was originally her father was openly anti-Semitic, she dropped that and became anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim. Much more recently though, she's really tried to recast her image. She's tried to make herself seem like a kind of nice grandmother who only has the interest of the French people at heart, and she looks even more soft-focused photographs and stuff like that. We haven't talked about Italy was kind of an exception. Hungary is an exception, which we can talk about if you want, but—

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, say more.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Giorgia Meloni, whose party also descends from it is the post-fascist party, it was Mussolini's party, then it changed its name several times. She did something very similar. She recast it as a party of working families. Neither Le Pen nor Meloni are now anti-European. They're not anti-NATO, at least not openly or aggressively. They talk about keeping France, inside institutions, so they are—

BILL KRISTOL:

And Meloni's been good on Ukraine, right?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Meloni's been very good on Ukraine. I mean, again, a little bit like Le Pen. I wonder if push came to shove if Trump were president said, right, we're not helping any Ukraine anymore. She might jump on that bandwagon too. But for a variety of domestic reasons, she wants to seem centrist, so she wants to be photographed with the other leaders of the Western world. Actually, the G7 is in Italy this week, and she wants to be seen as a kind of normal centrist leader of part of the western alliance because that's very good for her at home. One of her rivals, another Italian, far-right party, the Salvini's party has been much more pro-Russian, probably took money from Russia and has been much more anti-Ukraine. So she's separated herself from them by doing this.

I mean, she may well wind up being the prime minister who follows the autocratic path by putting pressure on the judiciary and on the media and so on. I mean, there's some uglier stories coming from inside Italy, but it's true that to the outside world she has stayed very much within the traditional European institutions and the transatlantic Alliance.

BILL KRISTOL:

It is striking when you talk about Italy, which or other places too, or even Le Pen and if she's in a coalition and now the center right party says they're willing to be in a coalition with her or some of them, but others aren't. And I mean, one doesn't know whether to think this is bad, they're normalizing pretty nasty authoritarianism and stuff that's barely beneath the surface, and that's making progress by being in alliance in some cases with more traditional democratic parties. Or the opposite, they're sort of being detained and domesticated and they have unsavory roots and maybe still some of those instincts. But at the end of the day, they kind of become part of the broader democratic alliance. I mean, this is where authoritarianism isn't always totally black or totally white, right? It's complicated.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

It's complicated in each of these countries. Each of these parties is— I'm being very general, so each of these parties is slightly different history.

BILL KRISTOL:

No, no. It's good.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

They have a different history and maybe their different judgments are going to be made. I mean, it seems to me, for example, the German far right is so clearly a partial creation of Russia. I mean, so many of their MPs have links to Russia. They're clearly supported by and backed by Russian-aligned propagandists online. You can pretty much see what they're doing. I mean, the Le Pen's party is more complicated. It's actually been part of the French political scene for 50 years. It's not like it's something totally new. And they're almost like part of the establishment. They've been around for so long. So there's some nuances and differences between—

BILL KRISTOL:

I guess I would say, which of these do you think is truer, or maybe, obviously they both could be true, that we should be worried by just increasing Russian penetration, increasing authoritarianism, increasing normalization of all that. Or in some ways, the system is kind of handling some of this and people want to, as you said about in Italy, they want to be respectable. So there's a sort of a bit of a counterforce as well. I don't know, what...

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

So I mean, I do think it's the case that the European Union, and to some extent NATO, although the EU is more important, has a centralizing effect that seems to affect everybody. And I think that's good.

BILL KRISTOL:

Centralizing as in political sense?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Politically centralizing, sorry, not administratively centralizing. I mean, people complain about that too, but that's less than people think. And also the threat of Russia, which has made some people genuinely afraid of that war, has pushed people together in a way. So I don't want to make a judgment yet about either about Meloni or, I mean, Le Pen has said very ugly things in the past and was very clearly pro-Russian in the past, and very clearly, by the way, very anti-American. The French have this thing about Anglo-American capitalism and how it's destroying their country kind of thing. She was very clear about disliking Americans, disliking the British, wanting a France of closed borders and cut off from the world.

She's, again, moderated a lot of that rhetoric. I'm not convinced that she's dropped it altogether, but in each one of these cases, I think the real judgment is not about even what they say, it's what they do. And if they become autocratic parties, if they begin to assault institutions of the state when they're in power, that's really the moment to ring alarm bells.

I mean, Viktor Orbán's party in Hungary was not originally a far right party. It was a liberal party, and then it kind of slowly drifted. And then what made it dangerous wasn't its stated ideology, but its behavior. It just began to behave like... I mean, if you look at what Orbán did in Hungary and what Hugo Chávez did in Venezuela, there are a lot of similarities. It was about capturing the institutions of the state and manipulating them and so on. I mean, Hungary is quite a poor country, and maybe Orbán now needs Russian and Chinese money to keep it going. I mean, he did a lot of damage.

BILL KRISTOL:

Russia and China can make some of these things happen or encourage them to happen or reward people who make them happen—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Yeah, so this is—

BILL KRISTOL:

...and also cause crises or, again, help cause crises, migration crises, or other things that would have strengthened those forces, right?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Yeah, that's a really interesting piece of the story, actually. So yes, you're right. And this is one of the themes of my book that's coming out in July. I mean, so Russia and China and increasingly Iran and others now do cooperate both in terms of the kind of propaganda they put out or support all across Europe as well as North America and the rest of the world. But they also have cooperated in causing crises. And you're right, there have been a number of provoked migrant crises.

So I mean, I actually think the war in Syria was partly designed to send refugees to Europe, more recently on the Polish border and as well as Finnish border, and it's happened in some of the Baltic states too. We've seen what look like organized groups of migrants who have been brought to the border for this purpose, who then try to run across the border in order to scare border guards or create a scene or create a trigger or a political crisis. I mean, I'm saying it looks like it's deliberately created, but actually there's no doubt about it. I mean, these are politically created migrant crises.

And actually in Poland very recently, a migrant stabbed a border guard and killed him. And that also looks like part of a game designed to create a provocation and a crisis. So Russia is now openly looking for ways to manipulate the European debate to increase and encourage extremism and anger and division and so on. So yes, the Russians play a role in... Even those far-right parties that have tried to style themselves as more centrist, I mean, there's no question, some of them are benefiting from Russian propaganda and Russian, I would call, political sabotage.

BILL KRISTOL:

And that seems more, I mean, they've always used economic power, and the Chinese obviously have been doing this for quite a while. But well talk about what you talk about in the book. I mean, the degree to which these dictators now are much more self-conscious— or well, don't want to put words in your mouth, but are they more self-consciously and more aggressively, you might almost say, pushing authoritarianism and autocracy around the world?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Absolutely. I mean, the interesting thing is we're talking about countries that do not share ideology. So communist China, nationalist Russia, theocratic Iran, Bolivarian socialist, Venezuela, whatever North Korea is, these aren't countries that share an ideology or meet in some secret room where they design things. It's not like a James Bond movie. But they do share a common interest. And the common interest is undermining us, and us, I mean America, Europe, the liberal world, the democratic world, both because their own oppositions, whether it's the Hong Kong democracy movement, or whether it's the Navalny movement in Russia, or whether it's the women's movement in Iran, are inspired by and use democratic language.

And they use the language of freedom and liberty and rights and rule of law. And they need to undermine that language in order to keep in power domestically and because chaos and uncertainty offer them business opportunities in the Western world. So a lot of these are very, very rich people. That makes them also, by the way, very different from autocrats of the previous century. They're very wealthy. Their friends are very wealthy. They like having places to hide their money in Europe. They like to have friends inside European politics who can make sure they're still able to buy whatever it is, houses in France or on Lake Como.

And so they have an interest in shaping the debate inside the liberal democracies in ways that benefit them. And increasingly, they've concluded that what benefits them is

the rise of illiberal, disruptive and radical parties, because when that happens, the Western world or the democratic world loses its sense of community and solidarity. It loses its ability to make group decisions. If we're divided by radical politics in different countries, then we're not very good at standing up to them. And they very much see this as a war, as a competition, as a conflict, even if we don't. So I would say most people who live in New York or Paris or Madrid don't really think about Putin in the morning, and they don't really care about him, and they don't think they're in competition with him. But he thinks he's in competition with them. Somebody quoted to me, this may be a made-up Lenin quote, it may not be real quote, "You may not be interested in the dialectic, but the dialectic is interested in you." I mean, it's—

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, there are versions of that quote. You may not be interested in war, I think Trotsky truly said it.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Maybe Trotsky said it.

BILL KRISTOL:

"You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you," or something like that.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Right, exactly.

BILL KRISTOL:

There are different versions of this. Yeah, yeah.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Some version of that. And that's still true today. You might not care about them, and you don't really care what goes on inside Russia or inside China, but they care about you and they care about your society. And they're looking at ways to manipulate the political debate, to compete with us in different spheres around the world, whether it's in Africa or in Asia or in Latin America, or whether it's economically. And they care about it and they think about it as a contest and a competition against us and our language and our ideas. And so it is getting to be time for us to understand that we are in a competition even if we don't want to be there.

BILL KRISTOL:

So how are we doing on that? *Autocracy, Inc.* is pretty self-conscious now and pretty well organized, I guess, as these things go. "Liberal Democracy Inc.?" How is Liberal Democracy Inc. doing?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

The coalition that was created around Ukraine is a kind of start. We're beginning to think at least in terms of military competition. What we don't yet have is a clear idea either about information policy, about how... We've allowed social media, and especially TikTok, by the way, to divide our populations. We haven't thought about how to, and I'm not talking about censoring it, I'm talking about how algorithms are regulated and so on. We haven't tackled that. We also haven't really tackled

kleptocracy and the ways in which our financial system and institutions are used to hide money and enable the leaders of the autocratic world to steal money from their nations and enrich themselves. And I think in both of those two areas, we could do a lot better. A lot better.

BILL KRISTOL:

And in terms of public awareness, public opinion, public leadership in the democracies?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

It varies a little from country to country. I think in the US it's still pretty low. I mean, Biden has tried to talk about democracy and autocracy, but I don't think in a very convincing way. It's more than just, well, let me just back up and say part of the difficulty is that it's not like there are these two geographic blocks and there's a Berlin Wall that divides them. In fact, there are different actors on both sides, and we have autocratic actors inside the United States, and there are democratic actors inside Russia. And you have to think of it more, it's not a Cold War. I actually very much dislike this Cold War 2.0 language.

BILL KRISTOL:

I totally agree with you on this.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

I completely dislike it.

BILL KRISTOL:

It's very misleading.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

It's very misleading. It's not about just lining up all our ducks on one side and shooting at the other side. It's not going to be like that. A lot of fighting the war is going to be about internal reform, making our system more resilient, and doing so together with other allies in Europe, in Asia, and even working with democratic movements in other places, in Russia, in Iran and China and so on. And so beginning to think like that, I think we're still really just at the beginning.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah, I saw a couple of very impressive young people—youngish people, young by my standards—from Georgia, the country of Georgia, yesterday, here in Washington. They're dissidents, they're in the opposition. They're trying to help [inaudible] those rallies that we've seen there. And it seems to me that they're getting very little help and support from the US government, much less than they should, but also even from civil society and pro-democracy organizations even, in the US, which we're just not used to. We're used to dealing with dissidents in a few countries. Obviously China, very famous, Russia, but we're not used to routinely understanding that we have a big interest in Georgia, which is a small country, but which was the canary in the mine, obviously in 2008, and kind of remains, I think, important in all kinds of ways in addition to just the moral case they have.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Well, Georgia is the kind—

BILL KRISTOL:

So I mean, it's just interesting to me when they give their account of meeting with people even in think tanks and in NGOs and sympathetic people, I mean, still, there's not a sense of, yes, it's not as big a front as Ukraine, obviously, but that's another front in the war. As you say, it's not geographical, quite. The government has moved in the last X number of years in Georgia itself, sort of to the other side, right? Anyway, it just struck me as—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Actually, what happened in Georgia is not unlike what happened in Hungary. I mean, you had a political party, and in their case, it involves a single oligarch who owns, I can't remember the number, but something like a fifth or a quarter of the economy is what he's worth, who have successfully captured the state. They manipulate elections, they manipulate the media, and he is essentially the oligarch. Ivanishvili is essentially pro-Russian. And so via him, the Russians have sought to control what goes on in Georgia. And Georgia, for example, has been a state through which a lot of this sanctions-breaking trade has flowed. It's one of the states. And actually the Georgia model, I think is what Putin had hoped to achieve in Ukraine, was to have essentially a pro-Russian oligarch in charge of the country. That's what Yanukovich was. If you can remember back in 2014, he was the president at the time of the Maidan Revolution. And that was their idea, that they would control it via these proxy figures. And they have successfully done that in Georgia, even though some enormous majority of Georgians want the Russians out and they don't want Russian influence in their country. But, through again, manipulation control and the use of money in politics, they've managed to buy a lot of people off. But, you're right. There are now front lines everywhere, inside Georgia, inside Ukraine, but also inside most European countries.

Again, the AFD, this is the German far right party, is clearly a pro-Russian party. It's funded in different ways by the Russians and helped in different ways by the Russians. And so, that's another front in this conflict inside German politics. There's a version of it in the United States. There's clearly outcomes that Russia would prefer in US elections, and it will try to do things to enable those to come about. And that's part of the conflict. We don't like to see it that way. We think of our political system being sovereign and outsiders don't get a say in our elections and so on. But, that's not how they see it. And I'm not saying that they will always succeed, but they will certainly try, as they tried in 2016. I'm sure they tried again in 2020, less successfully. But, they will continue to try, even if we don't care whether they're trying.

BILL KRISTOL:

And we like to see ourselves as not just sovereign, but exceptional and sort of immune almost to these fights that we see in other countries. We recognize what's happening. But, here it's sort of, well, this is America. We have the Republicans and the Democrats, and this one slightly wacky guy Trump. But, come on, it's nothing like these other countries. But maybe we should close with this topic, which you addressed in the book and you've addressed in so many other writings too. I mean, what about that though? What about the US?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

So, if you look across the spectrum, if you look at last week's European elections, there is no elected political figure in a European parliament who is as radical and as extreme as Donald Trump. And there were a lot of newspaper—

BILL KRISTOL:

Elected leader. Elected—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Elected. There are crazy people everywhere as but as an elected leaders there aren't any who have assaulted their parliament, their congress, who openly use violent language when they talk about their enemies, who talk about abusing the justice system and using it for retribution, who describe themselves in that as victims of a mysterious elite. Maybe some of the far right use this kind of victim language, because that's one of the ways in which they get people to identify with them. But, there's no one who does it with so extremist—

Also, there's nobody as incoherent as Trump. A number of my colleagues have been focused on a speech he gave a few days ago in which he talked about sharks. Are you familiar with the shark speech? He made a speech in which there was a whole long section about sharks and electricity in the water. And something about MIT and would you rather die from electrocution, or from a... It was complete gibberish. On and on. And on and on. I can't think of anybody in the western world, in the democratic world who talks in that completely incoherent ranting and rambling way. And that's not even the dangerous stuff that he does.

BILL KRISTOL:

But, I think it helps him in a weird way. It's like he's and interesting and amusing— He can seem to be goofy and maybe too goofy to be president, one might say. But, others will say, "Well, but he thought... he still knows what he's doing. He's a business guy." But, it makes him seem less dangerous, less threatening. I don't actually like it when all of our friends spend too much time making fun of him for all this stuff. I'm not saying he's doing this purposely and it's a brilliant four-dimensional chess thing, but it sort of conceals the true, as you say, the really sustained and pretty systematic threat to the rule of law, the institutions, the norms that he's perfectly happy to carry out and pretty conscious that he's carrying out. Right?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

He's pretty conscious. And a really telling thing was said to me recently by a Russian journalist I know who's now in exile, who said to me that in the Kremlin ... And this will take a minute to explain, okay? In the Kremlin, they talk about Trump as the American Gorbachev, by which they don't mean leader of the free democracy and blah. Blah. Blah. They mean he's the person who will take the system down, because in the Kremlin, the current Kremlin, they remember Gorbachev as the person who destroyed the Soviet Union.

And so now, they're betting that Trump will be the person who destroys the United States, whether he makes it ungovernable, whether he assaults the institution, so that they no longer function, whether he creates so much division and chaos that the US can't have a foreign policy anymore. That's what they want, and that's what they're hoping he will do. And again, I don't want to be conspiratorial about how much power they have. They don't run US elections, but they will try to influence the outcome however they can, because they think he will weaken the country ultimately. And, by

the way, from what we know, the Chinese are only just beginning to experiment in this world. From what we know the Chinese agree. So, he's the candidate of the authoritarian world, not because he'll make America stronger, but ultimately because they think he'll make America weaker.

BILL KRISTOL:

No. That's so important. And again, even if Russia and China aren't very effective in their interventions and their meddling, and people don't like to think about this in America, but it turns out there's a lot of domestic support for that. Even—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Huge.

BILL KRISTOL:

It's not just—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Oh, no. No. No. And that's actually how they operate. They operate in conjunction with domestic actors, some of whom use very similar authoritarian language, who also talk about the weakness and decline and degeneracy of democracy. And the cleanliness and stability of dictatorship. You can hear that in the American political debate. And that's not necessarily Russian influence, that's Americans talking like Russians.

BILL KRISTOL:

I think some of it is also influencing them, even the Christian nationalism stuff and all that. I wonder if Putin... He didn't need us to teach him about that given Russian history and European history and history in general. But, the degree to which you can appropriate these religious traditions and symbols and hijack it, or distort it as a supporting populist authoritarian nationalism. I don't know.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

No. No. This was a kind of co-invention. The American far-right and Putin together invented this idea of some kind of pure white Christian state. In the case of Russia, to be clear, it's absurd. It's not a white, Christian country, it's actually a multinational state. It's some very large percentage, maybe as high as 10 or 12%, Muslim. It's very high divorce rate. Nobody goes to church. Nobody's read the Bible. It's very much not a Christian state. And yet Putin uses this language, both somewhat for internal reasons, but also for external reasons to appeal to the American far right, to appeal to some dictatorships in Africa and elsewhere, also who use this kind of language of traditionalism or traditional culture as a way of dividing the public and fending off people who want to talk about transparency in the rule of law.

BILL KRISTOL:

And those CPAC conferences in Budapest, they're goofy and ridiculous in so many ways. But, it turns out that the coordination across national lines of the autocrats is really... And not just the people in power, but the thinkers and the publicists and the propagandists and the money. I guess I underestimated that for quite a while. But, I think it's really makes them much more powerful. And certainly it makes you more powerful—you and I remember this from the past too, Thatcher and Reagan—makes you more powerful internally if there's external reinforcement for your... you know,

“this is not just happening here. This is happening elsewhere. This is a reform movement that’s all around the world. It’s not just us, little Hungary. It’s these big places. And here’s a famous American TV star. Tucker Carlson is showing up here.” And I used to mock that and think, who cares if Tucker Carlson is showing up in Budapest? I really underestimated that. But, anyway.

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

No. No. For Orban, it’s very important. It shows I’m not isolated. I’m surrounded by friends. And even though, of course, he is isolated. Inside Europe he’s an outcast. But, if Tucker Carlson comes there, he can say, “Well, look how many friends I have.” So, it’s very—

BILL KRISTOL:

And they go to Mar-a-Lago, and it’s all ludicrous in a certain way. But again, if you’re looking at it’s like—

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

No. No. It’s really important for him politically to have the American far right talking about how great he is, because it helps him domestically.

BILL KRISTOL:

So, obviously people should read you in *The Atlantic* and elsewhere, but *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World*, that comes out what, in a month? But, it can be pre-ordered. I noticed it could be pre-ordered on Amazon. So-

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

You can pre-order it on Amazon. You can pre-order the audio book, which I have just finished recording. So—

BILL KRISTOL:

How was that?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

You can hear me reading my—

BILL KRISTOL:

I’ve never done that. Is it fun or is it hard?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

Of course the horrible thing is, as you’re reading it, you say, “Oh, God! That’s a terrible sentence. Why didn’t I say this?” So, there’s a frustration about reading it aloud that makes you feel, I wish I’d written the whole thing differently. But, it takes a few days. It’s a short book, I’ll say that. So, it didn’t take me that long to read it out loud. It’s a book designed, if you’re flying from the East Coast to the West coast, you can probably read it on the way. So, it’s that length book.

BILL KRISTOL:

Okay. Well, after this conversation, I hope more people are compelled to read this book, because it's important. Honestly, it is the challenge, I think. Don't you think of our time really here?

ANNE APPLEBAUM:

I do. I think it's the central challenge of our time. I think it's one that hasn't been fully articulated and understood. I think fighting it is a very nuanced and difficult and requires us to think a lot, not just about foreign policy, but about domestic policy and how we approach social media platforms and the financial sector. It really requires some rethinking of a lot of the ways that we do things.

BILL KRISTOL:

Yeah. That's important. Anne Applebaum, thank you for joining me today. And thank you all for joining us on *Conversations*.