Rough Transcript of Interview of Nicolai Petro on the “Peace Today” Podcast

Host: Hello and welcome at this new broadcast of our podcast peace today where we talk with people from all over the world who are contributing in their own way to a more peaceful world. And these people are highly necessary in a moment where our world is on fire in many places from Gaza to Sudan and of course the big war in Ukraine. And today I'm very happy I may I can um introduce to our audience Nikolai Petro who is um a professor of political science in University of Rhode Island and is also a fellow at the Institute for Peace and Diplomacy in Washington. Is if that's still the case, Mr. Petra.

Petro: Yes.

Host: Yes. So, it's very relevant your expertise and um the first question I'd like to ask you is how do you read the current policy of Donald Trump? Um it seems for an outsider that he's flip-flopping, going left, going right, the one hand trying seemingly approving strikes deep into Russia and on the other hand um meeting Putin in Alaska and maybe soon in in Hungary. So what do you make of his policy? It doesn't seem very straightforward.

Petro: Yes, I was tempted to interrupt you and say what policy at the very beginning. Yeah. But no, I think um we're only observing what's happening on the stage. We don't know what happens when the when the actors how they're preparing what the director is saying to the to the actors who how the how all this is being affected by changes in the scenery and last minute changes all this. But we don't we can only judge from a distance but many people have commented and it makes sense given what we are seeing that Trump has no commitment to a strategy. He has he has no strategy with respect to Ukraine. He might have one with respect to Russia, but it's not clear to me exactly what it is. But I don't think Ukraine is that important to him, which is why he feels comfortable disengaging the United States from Ukraine and with comments like, "Well, you want to fight? Go ahead and fight. We're not interested in fighting." Europe. Well, , we are no longer wish to support the war. However, if you want to support the war and you want to buy our weapons, they're for sale. Uh, so these are statements of a person who is not terribly concerned with the issues of the war. That seems clear to me. He's focused on short term results rather than long-term strategy. And I think . . .

Host: And is that a good thing in this case or is that maybe a dangerous thing because Yeah.

Petro: You were going to explain why. Uh yeah, I won’t interrupt you.

Host: Well, um it may it may it may force of course Russia can think well with this president we can we can actually talk because he's not that attached to the goals of the previous administration but it can also seem very unpredictable. So it can also force Russia to take the most um let's say severe um conclusions and go for the most let's say um secure option which is to you know just to be sure they they you know they they they don't misinterpret Donald Trump what he actually wants.

Petro: Well, I think that Russia's policy in Ukraine and Ukraine's policy also in this war are not reactive. They do have a strategy. . And Putin has not changed this strategy since the beginning of the war and he has restated it on a number of times and it includes the points that he makes as necessary conditions for ending the war which are well there's broad more broadly speaking ending the conflict. And once the conflict is ended then the war also will end. And that's important in the context of should we be pursuing ceasefire or should we be pursuing an actual peace settlement?

Host: Yeah. So by conflict you mean the more the root causes behind the war.

Petro: Well it why did we go to war in the first place? Why is there this this conflict that led to a war rather than relations that could not possibly lead to war? Uh so um and Russia's focusing on resolving the conflict which it sees not only one of the major areas but not the only one is the issue of NATO eastward expansion. My colleague John Mirshimer very clearly states that that is the reason maybe the main reason certainly for this conflict NATO's eastward expansion which Russia sees as a security threat and I agree that as an external factor that is the primary external factor but I always add to that the internal factors that led to the conflict which are also ones that Russia correctly or incorrectly appropriately or not is nevertheless very much concerned with and sees as part of the broader conflict. And here we are talking about the rights of Russophile Ukrainians. I use the term Russophile because we're not only talking about Russian speakers. It's too simplistic to talk about those who speak Russian and those who don't because most Ukrainians, the vast majority speak both Russian and Ukrainian equally and they may have certain preferences and the use of one language or the other comes up in different circumstances. But the problem arises when the state says in contravention of article 10 of its own constitution that Russian language has no rights and has no place in Ukraine when the numbers here will differ because it's part of the narrative conflict that is been going on and is now intensified. The number of such speakers at the very minimum if one includes all of the 1991 borders of Ukraine is no less than a third. But then again, there are many surveys taken which try to get around the issue of awkwardness. Sort of like when you stick a microphone in someone's face and ask them officially which language do you prefer? Many people are not sure how their answers will be taken. So sociologists have developed a number of interesting tricks to figure this out. One is survey. They say well we have here a survey on credit card usage and we have it in two languages. Which would you prefer? And then the person chooses themselves. Uh another one is offering multiple languages typically English, Ukrainian, Russian on automatic teller machine, bankomats, where you get money and no one's watching. You're supposed to be keeping everything secret your pin code etc. And what percentage of people choose in that condition Russian versus Ukrainian? It's interesting both those cases the ones with the survey distributed and the use of counter machines 80% of people across Ukraine use Russian. So added to the official survey statistics which come around 30 to 40% we get a sense that it's a very important component of modern Ukrainian identity. The ability or the the usage of Russian and of Russian culture. And we can also sort of indirectly see that from the opposition that the increasing restrictions and limitations that the government seeks to impose on the on all public usage of Russia, including fines, public fines for fines for public usage, the

use the institution and expansion of the authority of the language ombudsman to impose fines and things like that. So there is this large constituency of people I call Russophile those who have a “philia”, have an attraction for love of Russian, see it as natural for themselves even though they may also think of themselves as Ukrainian. Yeah. Uh I don't you know Canadians speak English the vast majority they speak English and French some of them but it's natural for them to use English. Imagine prohibiting the use of English in Canada because it limits or somehow restricts and suppresses the rights of the French speaking Canadian. This is a situation we sort of have in Ukraine

Host: and you named this sort of language war as sort of an internal let's say a deep cause of the war which is outside of the geopolitics and more directly between Russia and Ukraine

Host: Right and it's again it's one aspect of the larger conflict in which Ukrainians who are just like other people they don't typically spend every day asking themselves, who am I? Where must I plant my flag? Should I be speaking this language today? Should I be speaking that language? How do I you this is all very uncomfortable, very unnatural? And um however the state has for decades now the Ukrainian state since its independence heightened attention to this aspect. Uh we can discuss why later, but there's an internal debate and some factions within Ukrainian society see it as an imperative of national security to eradicate Russian consciousness from Ukraine's consciousness and only then will the country be secured no matter what happens outside. Everything else adds to that. But the greatest danger for Ukrainian nationalism is that percentage of the population. They see it that percentage of the population that clings to their Russian identity even though they profess loyalty to the Ukrainian state.

Host: Oh yeah, that's super interesting and I'd like to ask more about it. And first like in in terms of um um context, how how unique is it for a state to sort of prohibit a certain language? And also um yeah, how does Russia see it then as a role as its role in I mean how how legitimate do you see then Russia's intervention in this conflict?

Petro: So, um I haven't done the analysis of all the domestic legislation that exists on language usage. I think it's fair to say in answer to the first part of your question. I think it's fair to say that this the norm of EU legislation and of the legislation in countries of the European Union emphasizes the rights of individuals to use the language of their choice. There may be state languages. There may be official languages. But those but that legal status is well I cannot think of an example where that legal status is legally used to suppress the identity of a minority. The linguistic usage of the minority or its identity.

Host: How far how far does it actually go in daily life the the sort of um barriers for Russian speakers to use their own language?

Petro: So, , the law stipulates the mandatory use of the , state language, the state language in all public venues. in all public venues. It also stipulates the right, it creates a right for Ukrainian citizens on an individual basis to insist in public services on the use of the state language if the

person offering the service is using another language. So I go in to buy a loaf of bread and the salesperson speaks to me says hello in Russian and I say I have the right to say please use the state language. At this point, the law says the conflict can be resolved by shifting to the state language or it can be resolved if both parties agree that they are comfortable with an alternative. However, if they're not, then the aggrieved party using the state language can notify the local language ombudsman office who can initiate an investigation and if the norms of the language law are found to have been violated in this case, then a fine will be imposed, a monetary fine. This happens commonly. We hear about these cases are very common. I mean that how many times do people go into stores and buy bread? Hundreds of thousands probably. Um but um most people don't want conflict. So they find a way around it um or or don't you know push the issue. However, we the internet is also full of examples of people who get so upset that they film a scandal. So, for example, a bus driver listening to music, public bus driver listening to music, a Russian song, someone in the bus complains. He says, "Get off the bus. you're a pain in my backside." And then this is all filmed and it all goes over the internet with people going yes, people going no, and the language ombudsman getting involved. So there's there's all these examples. The point being we don't know how much it is but the very way the issue is is for has been formulated leads to conflict there there is it it is a a conflict-driven construction that the state has created not a conflict-resolving construction at all. Um and and that's dumb. That that's just dumb for for the for the benefit of society. You want a peaceful society. You want a harmonious society. This goes the other way. The second part of your question, I forgotten.

Host: I will come to that later. But um what I was wondering is um what role did it play? Wasn't it also part of the the Minsk agreements to guarantee the rights of minorities inside Ukraine including their use of language?

Petro: No, not not exactly. So the Minsk agreements, Minsk 1, which was superseded by Minsk 2, spoke about the rights of Russian of people in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions to use the Russian language. Minsk 2 folded that idea, without stipulating it as such, into the idea of regional autonomy. So the idea would be that to make it easier for the Ukrainian state to integrate these regions back into Ukraine, which was the entire purpose of the Minsk accords, to allow for greater regional autonomy for those regions and along the lines that had existed since 1995. Yeah. Uh with in Crimea which was designated in the Ukrainian constitution as an autonomous region. Yeah. So all that Donetsk and Lugansk were actually asking for ultimately was the same status in the Ukrainian constitution. Now, there's a bit of a a tricky subtext here because, both in Crimea and presumably this would have also been the case in Donetsk and Lugansk, they pushed the boundaries of this autonomy as far as possible. So, the autonomous republic of Crimea um insisted on its republican status, which was unique. It insisted for a while and got away with for a couple of years having um an autonomous legislature, a president of the republic, and it constantly tried to emphasize the supremacy of its own legislation on its own territory. So Ukrainian laws are fine for the things that we do on a federal level, but locally our laws should take priority. This is not an unusual construction for a federal system. Ukraine is not a federal system and federalism is considered a treasonous concept in Ukraine because it could lead to exactly the kind of things that happen in Canada and Switzerland and other places

which is not a unitary state with one identity, one language and one will and for Ukrainian nationalists that's the dream that I'm virtually citing verbatim the language used by the first language ombudsman of Ukraine Tetyana Monakhova. The dream was always a monolithic state and a monolithic people. But that's the problem is we're trying to create a monolith out of a country which is really a tapestry. And it's a tapestry that does not just include Russians. It includes thousands, tens of thousands if not more Poles, Hungarians, just to to name just a few, Romanians, Bulgarians in the western portions of Ukraine and Russians speakers and Russified Ukrainians in the east and south and in smaller numbers throughout the country. All of this is problematic.

Host: Yeah. So the second part of my question then comes like if this wasn't really specifically part of the Minsk agreements, how does Russia use it as a legitimizing their military interventions?

Petro: Yes. So I was very I did an article in the form Journal of International Law on the international doctrine of R2P right to protect. . Right to protect.

Mh So used by the US in Libya and NATO.

Petro: Well yes but it is obviously two things that one can say. one is it is evolving and secondly it is controversial. In other words, it is a theory. It is a legal theory rather than I would say a legal doctrine. Um and its limits are unclear. So, on the one hand, one extreme you could say R2P involves um I am a I have a large military power. I am a large military power. I can easily at minimal cost effectively deploy forces to protect or prevent the genocide of this population over there that is under immediate threat of extinction. And I therefore without going all the through the rigamarole of international approval and UN security council and endless meaningless sessions I have the ability to save lives and I should do so because the threat of extinction is immediate and I do so and I do so under the doctrine of right to protect. Okay, that's one more or less clear example. But unfortunately, having asserted the principle, we now get into the details of what is worth protecting and at what cost. So, for example, in the case that Russia, what Russia sees in Ukraine is cultural genocide. In other words, the systematic attempt over a long period of time drawn out, slowly being imposed, the extermination of the Russian language and therefore of Russian cultural identity among Ukrainians. Um in the course of which over, and at the same time that this is occurring many people would argue that the government is doing so legitimately. In other words the government is a legitimately elected government in Ukraine and because the majority let's say 60% say “yes” that's what we want we want our language to be the language over there in those regions in the minority regions. Democracy strictly speaking, simplistically would be the will of the majority over the minority, right? The tyranny of the majority. Yes, you could you could argue that. . So in that context, how legitimate is the concern expressed? And secondly, what are the appropriate things that let's say you were concerned about the rights of minorities culturally not their physical inter extermination but their cultural identity which is a valid consideration under some interpretations of the definition of genocide. It's not only physical, it's also cultural identity, language and other things. How legitimate is it and what can be done to do it? Um, so Russia

says, well, that consideration in addition to the security threat from NATO's expansion is enough to justify our intervention. So, it's both considerations. And my disagreement, it's not even an argument, with John Mearsheimer, is that he's only looking at the external and I'm saying you've still got the domestic problem. It's going to get, it's going to persist. It may even get worse depending on how the conflict is resolved, the military conflict is resolved. We still have the issue of what to do to defend, if you want to defend, which is a big question. Does any European government actually, except maybe Hungary, want to defend the rights of its minorities of minority speakers and minority identities in Ukraine? It's not clear to me that that there are such governments.

Host: So in your judgment maybe regardless of the the way it was being done but through um you know inter military intervention but how legitimate is the position to say that there was some sort of cultural genocide going on? It seems like a very heavy um accusation. I mean, how how do you see Russia's if you say this was equally important for Russia for the as a as a root cause to to attack Ukraine? How legitimate is this position of Russia? How do you what's your judgment? I mean, maybe you don't want to judge, but I don't know.

Petro: No, I don't. Yes. Judge not lest you be judged. It's one of the most important one of the best phrases in the Bible to think about when conducting international relations.

Host: Was this merely an argument to to sort of um justify or was there something at the core of this argument?

Petro: So I I don't think it is an expediency argument. I actually think it is an argument of substantial weight for Russia. So that's important in terms of understanding the position of Russia analytically correctly. In other words, Russia is concerned about two components. The entire conflict and the conflict consists of two components. One is an external security component and the other is the cultural component for Russia. Now, um I may, I should maybe preface my remarks by saying I think that Russia's intervention militarily was illegal because that is the current status of international law. There is no consensus on the right to protect. So the right to protect is always illegal under international law. We may turn it, but international law doesn't mean very much and it is typically interpreted in whatever way a government wants to interpret it. So that's just the way it is. But there is clearly no consensus on that. Unlike sanctions, for example, sanctions are illegal under international law. And because there's UN stipulations on how sanctions are become legitimate under international law and that is through the endorsement by the UN security council. Everything else is just you going you going and doing whatever it wants regardless of standing international law. But that's not the case in the right to protect. So Russia feels it should have it needs to be involved um and to defend these rights because um is it legitimate? Is there a policy I think what you're asking is there a state policy to um to get rid of Russian identity, Russian, no let's call it this way identity is too strong word Russian affinity in um in Ukraine or Russophile identity in Ukraine . Yes. I I don't see how anyone could argue that that is not the case. . Now going from back to 1991 to the present, it has not been either a consistent policy or when it was the policy of the executive branch of the president, it was not consistently applied or emphasized. However, the way that it is

phrased in Ukrainian in Ukrainian discourse is very telling and this is the way it is phrased um mostly by critics like Alexey Arestovich [also, “Oleksii” or “Oleksiy”], is the former presidential adviser who is now in opposition to the Zelensky regime but it is widely accepted as the appropriate phrasing by supporters of the regime as well. So, as has put it, the project of making Ukraine anti-Russia, the anti-Russia is has led to this conflict. So if the external geopolitical conflict causing a security threat to Russia led to this war because of geopolitical reasons, then the internal decisions and strategy that led to this conflict has been and continues to be the state project to make Ukraine into anti-Russia. Anything that Russia does, we are the opposite and we represent the opposite. And the weakness, let me just finish this one point is that the weakness of this says Arestovich is that it is not only a part of Ukraine's current identity. It is the whole of Ukraine's current identity. And as a result, there is no depth to it. There is no indigenous, there is no, it's hard to understand what is Ukrainian about anti-Russia. It's there's no we're not relying on anything in Ukrainian history except resistance. There's no there's no literature that is to be recognized except resistance literature. I mean it is such a narrow focus of a definition I should say of what Ukraine is that it impoverishes the state to such a degree that um it it turns it into a mannequin into into an empty shell and he says that no country can thrive and survive without on such a narrow identity. We have to return to the broader historical and cultural identity of

Host: more inclusive and more more um yeah more respect of the divergent origin

Petro: Not for the sake of diversity but for the sake of completeness, for the sake of restoring our complete historical identity. This is very much like a person who's lost their memory and is then told well the only thing you know let's say they had a family, they were a professor, they did a lot of things and they say, well all we can tell from you right now is that you didn't like to fly so we're not going to tell you anything more because you know we don't want to get you to think about all these other things in your family things but just focus on the fact that you don't like to fly and that you that that's not going to be satisfying life or satisfying identity according to people like Arestovich.

Host: So um of course you can understand now the invasion has taken place and there are there people dying every day at the hands of Russians that this has become sort of the exclusive state identity. But you say this this has taken place way before already.

Petro: Yes.

Host: And so where do the roots of this sort of Ukrainian identity as equals let's say being anti-Russian, where does that come from is my first question and maybe the follow-up question is in what way isn't that also being sort of um you can also see this as coming from outside. So you see this as an internal you you frame it as an internal problem coming from roots deep within Ukrainian society. But in what way was this were these roots also not nourished specifically and on purpose by outside forces geopolitical forces US and and and maybe the UK etc.

Petro: There are no true civil wars that are entirely internal. All civil wars are an opportunity for rival powers to make changes in the geopolitical landscape to their advantage. My argument has always been, if Ukraine were at peace with itself, it would actually be far more secure against this sort of external meddling. The opportunity arises for external meddling precisely from the conflict within where society is divided and one group says, how can we get our group to become the dominant one. Hello America or hello Austria or Britain or wherever, you know, come help us and we'll be your friend. And the other side says, "Yes, Russia, we love you. Come in, help us." And um that's exactly unfortunately what happens because very few politicians worry about the consequences of what they're doing hoping for a quick resolution that will get their group on top and then get rid of the other group. But here's the thing, as I argue in my book, *The Tragedy of Ukraine*, this is a historical conflict with deep roots. Deep being several decades going back at least as far as the mid 19th century. And so that's long enough to have a substantial track record. At that time, the mid-19th century, well, I should say before that, the term Ukraine, the word itself, which means "at the border," came into literary usage in Ukrainian documents around the late 17th early 18th century. The famous Orlyk constitution of the late 17th century uses the term Ukrainian and Malorus, "Little Russia," an equal number of times, I think 11 or 12 times each, "Ukraine" designating the territory roughly that we're talking about and the people living on them are "Little Russians," "Malorus". "Little Russian," by the way this is not of common knowledge, refers to a term coming from the Greek meaning "heartland." So there's "Magna", greater Greece, and the Greek heartland which is the true core. In English historiography there was a similar terminology used by anti-imperialists in the early 19th century who call themselves little Englanders. In other words, we want to safeguard and protect true English identity which is in England proper. And the more we expand outward, the less we are true to our core identity. And -

Host: So very interesting. I never knew that was the etymology of "Little." Yeah.

Petro: And "Little" here means the heartland of Rus. And the heartland of Rus is Kiev. Kiev, as the monk Nestor wrote in his chronicles, is the mother of Rus, of the cities of Rus. I'm going to make probably an error that a lot of people make in common conversation. So, I want to warn against what the problem with this is right now. the proto-state, the protoculture that incorporates modern day Belarus great Russia Velikiy Rus, and Ukrainians, was not Russian, should not be referred to as Russian because there's too much confusion with modern day Russia. It is Rus. So Rus is the chronicler's term dating back before even the 10th century designating the populations and the tribes that go down the river network into the Dneper to the to the Black Sea. So um we are talking about the mother of the cities of Rus and this territorial cultural agglomeration extending from south of Kiev to the north to the um Gulf of Finland exists as more or less becomes a unitary cultural entity um early on and a unitary political entity around the 16th century, by the by the early 16th century. About a century later an important incident occurs with, in the historical conflict between the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth which rivaled the Muscovite Kingdom at the time for supremacy in Eastern Europe which would dominate the Catholic Polish Lithuanians or the Orthodox Muscovites. Um the borderlands between them, "at the border," was the right bank of the we call it in discourse in popular discourse we call it the right bank even though when we look at it at a map on a map

it's the left of the because the river flows south. So when you're flowing along the river, the right bank is the part closer to Poland. Okay. So that including and up to Kiev becomes um a a place of con conflict. Gradually people known as “Cossacks” (“Kazaks”) settle on the left bank and establish a permanent settlement. It eventually becomes a permanent settlement in the area now known as Zaporozhia or Zaparia in Ukrainian, one of the regions that Russia has now claimed as its own. But the heartland there is where the Cossack Hetmanate was established. a loose affiliation of various Cossack communities which when they needed to, when they wanted to, would gather together to say okay how do we preserve our independence from the Tsar from the Sultan and from the Polish king and if we can't who do we side with to maintain our own maximum independence, autonomy or independence, if possible. And in 1654, the Hetman of the Cossacks, Bohdan Khmelnytsky, signs a treaty of union with the Tsar of Russia. It's a very complicated story. I'll summarize it to say that interpretations of what was agreed to begin to differ substantially and is are used by subsequent historians to say, “No, Ukraine has always wanted independence as shown by this treaty,” which even though it was one of um recognizing I should say one recognizing the sovereignty of the Tsar of Muski in these Cossack lands nevertheless guaranteed a number of privileges for the Kazaks. And so when these privileges were lost over time as the Russian Empire expanded into these territories southward to the Black Sea, nevertheless um it should be understood as essentially the removal of these rights invalidates the treaty and automatically restores Cossack independence by Kazak then we mean Ukraine today. So even though it's not technically

Host: not a historical link really to say both

Petro: yeah everybody's fudging a little bit Russ is not Russia Kazaks are Ukrainians and all this sort of stuff. M so um on the other hand the state oriented historians of the Russian Empire . that particular school says no the the text is clear everything that was done afterwards was done with the blessing of subsequent Kazak hetmans, certain rights were removed, others were granted and um the process unfolded naturally as it did with all the territorial expansions in the 18th and 19th centuries. So that's basically where we have the origins of the conflict. By 1850, 1860, actually 1864 we have the celebration of 300 16 18 200 years sorry 200 years of the treaty Bohdan Khmelnytsky's treaty and um a debate arises among historians in the Russian an empire about what it meant. And out of that, not entirely out of that, but following on the heels of that, an intellectual movement arises in Ukraine in or in southern the southern part of the Russian Empire that matches the nationalist discourse that was erupting throughout Austro-Hungary, in Poland, in Hungary, in Germany at the time, which was not a unified state, um in the duchy of Finland anyway all over Europe.

Host: all over Europe the nationalist movement

Petro: arise the the nationalist spring it's called. So Ukraine joined in that had was part of that Ukrainian stories were part of that and that feeds upon itself and it leads eventually to political parties. Now we have to remember that at the time there were two empires with substantial Ukrainian populations. We'll call them Ukrainian even though they thought of themselves in

many cases as Malorus. That's not neither here nor there. Just for simplicity sake, we'll call them Ukrainians. And one was in Ukraine itself today or southern the southern part of the Russian Russian Empire. The other was Austro-Hungary and the regions of western Ukraine - Bukovina, [unclear], Lvov, [and] Volyn - were part of the of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. subsequently became some of them part of Poland, part of part of Hungary, but they were therefore also part of the Austro-Hungarian Parliament. And in the Austro-Hungarian Parliament over time, by the end of the 19th century, they formed parties. the first independence party, not independence but party representing the interests of Ukrainians as a constituency in the AustroHungarian Empire was the Russian Ukrainian Democratic Party. Um, and so these two phrases, Russ, Ukraine, were often used interchangeably to identify the region and its people who also included a number of smaller minorities called [illegible] and others. Yeah. If you if you know anything, I lived for a long time. I grew up in Italy. The amount of regionalism there is mindboggling and the task of unifying the country was very difficult. Mati said we have created Italy now we have to create the Italians. Yeah. The Ukrainians had a had a similar problem. Yeah. We have people we had a prospective projected territory. Now we have to suffuse that territory and the people in it with a consciousness of their own national identity. Probably the same for a lot of people, Hungarians, Poles, I don't know. It just wasn't a priority until the 19th until the end of the 19th century and early 20th century. So um and it became a nationalist task. And in the process of this, of course, we had the competing imperial agendas of the Russian government, the Russian Empire, which said no minorities. There are no minorities. Whatever is being spoken there is bad Russian. So we want to standardize the language which means getting rid of local dialects as much as possible and impose standardization. Again looking at this very issue not from a 21st century lens but from a 19th century perspective we see France doing the same thing. We see Germany doing the same things in other words and Italy doing the same thing. In other words, the task was to promote as they sort of the liberal interpretation of these restrictions was how do you get rights? By becoming part of the national identity. You can't be part of the national identity as a Milan speaking only Milanese. you know, you what? You're just going to be a small minority drifting without having a voice in the greater popular national discourse. So that's why we need to emphasize national identity and a consistency of national identity. Yeah. So that was that um and so the imperial agenda was that for Russia for Austro-Hungary it was how do we weaken our eastern rival and their efforts to as we see it in Austra-Hungary separate these regions from our control by appealing to their national identity by giving them a membership in a larger imperial community which is Russia. And so both sides used psychological warfare and propaganda before in anticipation of World War I and then during World War I to promote in some cases national identity at the expense of the other empire when it was seen to weaken the other empire and to suppress it in their own homelands. As fate would have it, the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed at that moment. And I think this is one of the greatest and most fascinating historical ironies, the opportunity that was afforded for the emergence of Ukraine, which Ukrainian national leaders and intellectuals had been fighting for, for at least half a century here. We are a people. We need our own nation occurred at the same time that the Polish national identity was being reconstituted. And much of the territory that was that needed to be allocated had to either go to a new if it was to go to a new nation. The Poles claimed it as a third of their identity and Ukrainians claimed it as part of their identity. We're talking about the regions of western Ukraine, what are called western

Ukraine today or eastern Kresy, the eastern regions as they're known in Polish history as the Versailles treaty decided the great powers decided to create as the to redress what they believed was the greater historical injustice which was the partition of Poland. So they said there will be a Poland which meant for them there will be no Ukraine. As I put it in my book, two siblings were coming down the birth canal. Only one could survive in the aftermath of World War I and it turned out to be Poland.

Host: And why was that choice made at that point and not to give Ukraine separately?

Petro: Nobody really understood in the west even less than today. And today it's hard enough what exactly Ukraine was. I mean let's remember that Poland had been a state for a long time. Poland had adopted Catholicism in 966. Poland was the foremost of many European crusades along the Baltic states. You know, Poland was a recognized historical entity. Yeah. For centuries before Ukraine had been. Ukrainian identity came into the consciousness of Western intellectuals even to the minimal extent that it did only at the end of the 19th century. Simply there wasn't enough time for people to say yes these are indeed a different people. Yeah. Um because at the time and this is fair to we just have to admit that the fact that um while in some intellectuals and political leaders in Ukraine insisted on the usage of the term Ukrainian . to define the country and its people and their aspirations. The term Malorus or Little Rus people, Little Rus, was equally commonly used by especially by people there were in the process of creating the first Rada the first national council of Ukraine um in in the aftermath of World War one. There were four decrees, four universal - as they called them - issues. None but the last actually stressed the need for Ukrainian independence. The first was let's have a confederation. We want greater recognition. We want identity. We want this. Then it became more of an insistence on partnership. We need to be recognized as our own people but we want to be part of a larger democratic Russia federate. What exactly does membership mean? what sort of you know all of these things were left very vague because it was assumed that if people were asked were if votes were a vote was taken and said do you want to separate from Russia that vote would lose well you know that was not something that people could imagine at the time um but the very last one actually did stipulate independence the they did assert the independence of Ukraine. But that came to nought when um the after when the civil war in Russia ended. Uh the west did not support as it would not support in World War II and you could I suppose debate whether it's really supporting Ukrainian independence even now truly. Um but u so um the west sort of turned its back on Ukraine. the existence of a Ukrainian state and as a result it was folded into the new Russian socialist. No, it was folded into the USSR as its own Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic with the exception of the four western regions which went to Poland until the Molive Ribbon dropped back when Russia took them back. The Soviet Union should say took them back.

Host: But, so you have explained we started you started your super interesting and very very relevant expose about Ukrainian identity and its roots. We started it by Arestovich and saying that he that the Russian that the Ukrainian identity had evolved into anti-Russian identity. And so all of what you said is is super interesting, but it doesn't yet explain why Ukrainian identity has has become so much an anti-Russian project.

Petro: Well, so to the degree that it has, it is an intellectual's project, not a popular project. I would I would suggest I'm leaving out now the period of the war because the war attitudes are an anomaly that that shows that that um is distinct from the historical pattern of how Ukrainians the average current war you mean? Yeah. I'm sorry the current war that's going on. Yeah. . I mean, we have a survey taken in July of 2021 in Ukraine in response to Putin's at the time very bold statement that Russians and Ukrainians are one people. He said it on national television. So surveyors in Ukraine July 2021 asked the question Putin has said Russians and Ukrainians are one people. Do you agree or disagree? And we all well I mean anyone who follows Ukraine knows the answer to that because it was a very scandalous result. 41% nationwide said they agreed with Putin's statement, two thirds in the eastern regions of Ukraine. So east of the so-called Russophone, Russophile regions of Ukraine agreed with that statement. Now that doesn't that only it's a superficial interpretation. We don't know what they meant by that. All that sort of stuff is hard to figure out and needs to be fleshed out further. But it is telling that if someone just comes up to you, it's like Germans and Austrians. I don't know, you know, I I don't see a big difference. So I grew a part of my life also in Germany. My mother lives in Germany all her life and I was there last week as my and um you know I say well you know sometimes I kid my Austrian friends and I say what's written on how important is German identity to you? I said well no no we we're just Austrians we're our own people. And I said, "Really?" Because first of all, there is no Austrian language. And secondly, if you look at the state opera in Vienna, there's a saying on the there's a a big it's a very ornate building. It says on the front, it thanks the great German writers who have given us our cultural inheritance. So I say, you know, it it's nice, you know, but essentially all you are is a political placeholder. Your culture is entirely German essentially. Anyway, it's just a little fun I have at their expense.

Host: Yeah. But um so in when did this come to pass? When did this anti-Russia come to pass?

Petro: Well, again, the independence project, the project for the creation of a Ukrainian state, whether or not it was supported up until 1991 is a little bit we don't know the answer to that because it failed. It failed in the aftermath of World War I in the Versailles treaty and it failed when the Ukrainian insurgent army allied itself with um Hitler's armies hoping to gain at least autonomy perhaps even independence in retrospect. We can't really say. But in any case, they allied with the losing side in World War II and therefore were considered unacceptable by the international community at the time. Today however not immediately since 1991 but since 1991 um in 1991 a unique set of circumstances arose that allowed for the creation of a Ukrainian state. Did Ukrainians want a Ukrainian state? Well, on the one hand, yes, because they voted for it. On the other hand, we know from surveys conducted before, during, and after the events of 1991, when you ask them, okay, what did the in what is an independent Ukraine mean for you? And they would say things like, well, what it means is that we will be that our finances will no longer be sent to the central office in Moscow and we will get all of this money for ourselves. And as Leonid Kravchuk, the person we elected president, told us within a decade we would be richer than France because all of this money would be ours. That's what independence means for me. And they said, "Well, it means that obviously I'm not going to have any problems at the borders going to visit my uncle or my aunt in Russia because that would be stupid. I mean, we're

one. We're a family." Uh, well, don't you think that countries should have Well, yes, they should have border controls, but not for people as close as, you know, Ukraine and Russians. So again, it was supposed to be and this is confirmed by specific questions on the issue of should there be free border passage between the two countries which there was for a number of years after independence. This was always a popular idea and it was very with great, it was very late that true border controls were introduced. So up until 2014, I would say um the idea of creating a Ukraine that was anti-Russia was not popular. It was just not popular. The popular alternative was let's have Ukraine be meaningful. I mean we've got our own country now. Don't you think more people should be speaking Ukrainian? Yeah. I think for my children my We live in Ukraine now, not in Russia. I think it makes sense to teach. I'm not going to learn Ukrainian, but my children should learn Ukrainian in school. Okay. And that's fair. And there should be a state language, a unifying language. Well, obviously everybody should speak whatever they're comfortable with. But it's a good idea for the purposes of the country to if we're going to have a state, we should have that state have um some core identity and it should be Ukrainian. And we can all agree on such things that you know, let's have an official language. Yeah. Um and um and we should all be proud of the fact that we have we are an independent state because Russia, you know, Russia's expansionist, Russia's autocratic, Russia, you know, and we don't need to be. We are we're the better if you want to compare us to Russia at I remember sort of the 90s, the early 2000s, the the comparison is all in our favor because yes, we're the liberal Russians. We're the free. We're like Russians, but we're free and we're independent and we don't like violence and we don't have suppression and things like that. That was the unifying core of Ukrainian independence, of Ukraine identity, not the suppression of alternative identities. However, um a big impulse toward the but there was always a minority view in Ukrainian politics which I'll dub nationalists just I'll just call them the nationalists with an electoral base in the far west a solid enough electoral base they would get their um candidates elected in the west the around the party at the time was called Svoboda freedom which argued that um Ukraine would never be free would never be itself unless it cut itself off from everything Russian any dependence on Russia any cultural identity and anything Russian at all and that begins to form the basis of well then what are we Because so much of our identity comes out of a common history. Well, if we cut off that history, it becomes difficult to organically connect a Ukrainian history. It it doesn't go back that far. And so you begin to create and I know we might get into this artificial bridges to going back to Kiev to Anov Kiev to Olga to the princess Olga and others as being Ukrainian and you know it wasn't Rou it was we'll call it Ukraina Rou so that you know that even at that time when there was no one ever knew knew that the word didn't exist at the time. Nevertheless, in their minds and their souls, they were thinking about Ukraine and that's why it came about later.

Host: So you say this is all after 2014. This

Petro: No, it exists. It goes back to 1930s. Some of it. So in the aftermath of World War I when the first great political, military, intellectual effort to create a Ukrainian state failed. The generation that lived through that began to ask themselves why did we fail everything? We had the people, we had the intellectual, we had a military, we were fighting, we had proto institute. We were how were we worse than Hungary, than Poland, than any of these countries? Why?

Why us? And the answer that they came to was the answer that came to many right-wing and fascist parties in the 1930s: because we were betrayed. We were betrayed by external forces who had their own agenda. But we were also betrayed from within by people who weren't entirely committed to the Ukrainian idea because of . . . and then there's all sorts of explanations, blood, history, religion, the Jews, the Poles, the Russians, the you know, everybody is at fault. And when you begin to look around you, oh look, there's a Jew, there's a Pole, yeah, they say they're with us, but, really, would maybe without them this whole thing, we would have had our state. And so in the 1930s, a nationalist literature arises that emphasized - and this is not at all unique - all countries in Europe, Holland, Norway, England had its versions of nationalist literature that said we are we would be we are weak. We would be stronger. We would have our place in the sun. We will be able to defend ourselves against all enemies and have a better life for all our people if we got rid of the foreign element among us. Okay, that makes sense to a lot of people and they say, "Yeah, let's try that." And you know, that becomes the core of the nationalist movement intellectually speaking. And um Ukraine had its own ideologues at the time who were rediscovered by Ukrainian nationalists in Ukraine, began to be published by the nationalist movement in Ukraine after 1991 and I wouldn't say ***they were like*** yes, Dmytro [Ivanovych] Dontsov, you know, revealed to us the need for a super Ukrainian to be you know totally convinced of his rightness and to squash all dissent including to not weaken the bloodline. True Ukrainians for Ukraine for Ukrainians. I wouldn't say that was popular at first. But then but then as the message began to be diffused in a population which after 1991 and up to the present has been shrinking. 52 million at the collapse of the Soviet Union, 35 maybe 40, closer probably to 35 by the beginning of the current war already. Um and never re never reached the level of economic development that it even had in 1991, a consistent decline with brief spurts, but that always again fell. Why? Why is this happening to us? Ukrainians ask. Why are we again being denied what is rightfully ours? All we want is a nation of our own to have to ourselves. And who's to blame? Well, Dontsov had an answer in the 1930s and it makes a lot of sense. Populist answers are very common and have an easy time being this diffused and disseminated. Now, these people again were not electorally popular in Ukraine up until 2014. at most I think in 20 I'm not going to mention I'm not going to get the actual electoral date right but in the early 2010s, after 2012 I think, when Svoboda was elected for the first time the first the right-wing party by Oleh Tyahnybok was elected to parliament it never got more than 10% % of the votes in parliament. But, they formed a pole and they became visible, they became part of the national discourse. And when the events of 2014, first of all of 2004, that was the first big conflict when we know that the official narrative is that Viktor Yushchenko, the liberal, the the pro-western Ukrainian candidate, triumphed over the attempts by his rival Yanukovych to steal the election. However, from the perspective of the other camp, and remember, however you count the votes, they're basically 50/50. Half the country voted one way, half the country voted the other. But when the results were reversed from the initial election, not surprisingly at all, the people in eastern Ukraine said this was stolen. For better or for worse, they won the next round of elections. But that didn't satisfy the westerners, the western Ukrainians, who insisted in 2014 that Yanukovic be removed from office. That's the Maidan, the um revolution of dignity in 2013, which I witnessed firsthand in Odessa, the whole unfolding of events from that regional perspective where I was from August of 2013 till May of 2014. And that reversal of fortunes was even more obviously illegal because it was literally a change of

government without an election, simply the removal of Yanukovich through the the supporters of the Maidan will say through the popular uprising of the people, the opponents of the Maidan would say through the violent coup orchestrated by external forces manipulating the people. Okay. So, whichever interpretation you want, and then Yanukovich is removed and we have we have a new government of dubious legitimacy. Well, um again, Putin, and I have to view it this way. I'm sorry. Putin does Ukraine a great favor by recognizing the legitimacy of the elections of May 2014 and [of] Poroshenko. He [Putin] says, well, you know, this obviously stinks, but Ukraine's our neighbor. We have to get along. We have to deal with Poroshenko. And who is Poroshenko? How does he sell himself to the people? Candidate of peace. I can go to Moscow and solve this issue in eastern Ukraine in a matter of hours. This is exactly what he says.

Host: Trump and he says, you know, who who is . .

Petro: You seem to have frozen. I'm sorry.

Host: No, I said just like Trump promised all sorts of things to resolve in a in a in a short . . .

Petro: Well and Zelensky and every successful political candidate in Ukraine starts off as a peace candidate. That's what gets them elected. But they do afterwards well, we can see. But the way you get votes in Ukraine is to be a peace candidate. Poroshenko was a peace candidate and then he changed his tune. what he launched first and foremost what he called the anti-terrorist operation in 2018 that becomes, three years later he redefines the anti-terrorist operation in eastern Ukraine to be an invasion of Russia, in retrospect, and after that um no more Minsk 2, we are rebuilding the Ukrainian army for a final efforts to liberate the regions of Donbas and Lugansk which, and Crimea obviously is folded into that, which um have been separated from us by Russian intervention. And since that is the narrative that Ukrainians hear every day since 2014, it is a popular narrative and it is an understandable narrative because they're being shown pictures of Russian what whether called Russian forces. Russia denies it, but anyway, the West supports it. And so what was previously limited, this anti-Russia project, limited to intellectuals becomes develops a broader political base in the country. The interesting thing to think about now because Arestovich and others have talked about this and there are differing opinions, very different opinions in Ukraine about this. What happens afterwards? What happens after the fighting ends? Will the anti-Russia, the military, let's have military confrontation with Russia temporarily suspended? That's my political platform, not peace. My political agenda is not peace with Russia. It is, prepare for revenge when we're ready for it and to attack to regain our territories and our people. How popular will that be after the end of the war? And here opinions differ very much. Some contemporary analysts, and I think Arestovich is one of them but not the only one, will say that's going to be after the war ends. A very unpopular position because, not that people don't want the territories back and they feel it's an injustice, they just feel tired of war and anybody who goes up and says I'm for war they will say shut up and go away. That's one view. The other view is that, “no, people are so angry and will continue to be so angry and will teach their children and their children's children to continue to be so angry that um it will bleed, it will be a blood feud forever, and that's what people will vote for.” We'll see. I I find the latter view historically implausible. But who’s to say?

Host: It depends on Yeah. Also propaganda, I'm afraid, who's going to who's going to be more vocal.

Petro: Yeah. And here's what's going to happen because it's already happening. . Um people who don't want to be in a state that fights forever will leave. They'll just become Germans. They will raise, they will move, they'll bring take their children to Holland, to Switzerland, to wherever they can find a residency and will forget about . . .

Host: it's already happening. It's already happening.

Petro: It's happening been happening. It's been happening for longer than there's been a military conflict for you with with Russia. And so one thing we don't talk about enough, it was pretty obvious at the beginning of the conflict before 2022. So from for the first part of the conflict 14 to 22 and then afterwards as well. Many people make the choice to flee to Russia. I mean if that that's obviously so much easier culturally. You just, you know, you go somewhere else, you have language barriers, you have all sorts of issues. . You may say, well, my kids will handle it. . I can deal with it. . And that's where I think my future lies. But many people to make life easier for themselves say, "Hello, Russia. Um, that's where we're going." And we know that the figures are in the millions who have gone to Russia, not including the people who have become Russian citizens in Donetsk, Lugansk.

Host: So, Mr. Petro, you've explained so well and so clearly all of these causes and all of these sentiments and how this identity was built into Ukrainian society. Um, it has begun way longer than I expected. Maybe I'm going to cut up the video in two parts. I'll see. But

Petro: One seems to be a long distance history and . . .

Host: I know but but still I have two questions and maybe and that's that's all then and hope we can answer relatively shortly. Um and one is you know when you say state these things nowadays in the current political climate and maybe it's worse in Europe than in in the US because we are for some reason which is unclear to me the EU is clinging so much to continue this war and so therefore also clinging to the propaganda efforts and the narratives that are um that are relevant in this war. So um I personally had the experience of being interviewed in a national newspaper and stating some of the facts that you've just mentioned that you know this is this is has deep roots and that you know before the this whole this war escalated there was sort of a 50/50 um percentage pro and against the sort of more alignment with Russia whether or Europe etc and all these lines are being attacked as being Russian propaganda. So what whatever you say, if you talk about language, if you talk about national about history, about about sort of alignments of Ukraine here and there and if you talk about the polls, which which which which preferences are are prevalent among the Ukraine, if you say something that sort of seems that there is an internal conflict in Ukraine and it is not it's not it's not a monolith that has chosen to be democratically chosen to be anti-Russian, etc. If you mention those kind of things, you will be blamed for being propagandists. So I wonder just if you can answer to that

question like how do you deal do you get those criticism and how do you deal with it? And as a final final question is okay now we've seen and you've explained this

Petro: I answer that question first but one I go on I'm trying to answer several questions so one at a time. So war is synonymous with propaganda. . You can't have one without the other. . So the solution that the state has, the state is interested in propagating point of view on a war that it supports if it supports the war. The simplest solution and the one that affects most alternative commentators is they don't get invited. Their voice just doesn't exist. Now, if they do get invited, I personally have very rarely had a problem. I don't know why, but one thing is that if they say, "Well, that's not true historically," I know the history and I can tell them.

Host: It's very hard to go against that in your case. Yeah.

Petro: Yeah. This was we knew this to be true at the time it was written which was 20 years ago which had nothing to do with the current context. So um you what should I would offer some a small bit of advice to your listeners. How do I know how do I what can I trust in terms of information? Well, first of all, as I I'll tell them the same thing that I tell my students. Don't trust anyone. Be skeptical of everything. Now, how can I mitigate my skepticism? What is likely to be what are the indicators that something is likely to be true versus pure propaganda. There are some pretty obvious indicators and they're true not only in this case they're true for all of the news that you read about anything. One, is it in the interests of the media which has an editorial stance that you can figure out in the case of individual media? Is it in their interest to say this? Have they said anything like this before? This is an unusual position. Listen to it for this for this particular outlet. Secondly, if your sources are all telling you the same thing, that's not a reason to be to feel satisfied. That's a reason to be worried because um information and narratives are the easiest thing to disseminate. And the way you build credibility is not to do your own research in the media. is to say well the New York Times said so the New York Times quotes the Guardian and the Guardian quotes the Washington Post and Washington Post translates cites the Washington Post which again sites the New York Times. So it's a it's a circle of people who are all agreeing with each other and that's never good for critical thinking. So if you want to but it's not hard now as it used to be before the internet to get out of this bubble. We have English language, just to take the English language, English language sources in the third world which are just as authoritative. Asia Times, , Malaysia Straits Times, South African newspapers, Indian newspapers. These are all major outlets with their own correspondents. Some of them, let's grant that they may be promoting the views of their governments. Fine, at least it's a different point of view which is articulated in the same way. and as professionally as the professional versions of the narrative that are provided in the west. So you have that that's more of a level playing field where you can see, okay one side says this with this evidence and the other side gives me a different perspective with different evidence. I tell my students all the time don't believe what I say. I am simply giving you alternative facts. What you do with the facts. You may say, "Well, it's not important that you know you have a good point. I acknowledge your point, but it's just not as important as this other point which goes against you." And that's a judgment that only each an individual can make. You have to decide among all the facts which is the most important for you to make an evaluation. That's all. But I always,

if I see a narrative that is closed, I always ask what is missing? What data is missing? And I always look for data. And I never evaluate a um a statement or a position unless I have I actually I see an actual quote. So, Lavrov said quote this this this Trump said this boom quote and verify the quote because it is all too common today to misstate mistranslate in the support of the a war narrative. No, not all narratives are war narratives but war narratives are well funded. They are better funded than peace narratives. Yes. And that's just that has always been the case. There's I would say, you know, take comfort, listeners. There's nothing new under the sun. This war is as awful as every war has ever been. And like every war, we will have to see it to the end. And at the end we will be sorry for all the things that happened and discover many of the things that happened.

Host: So exactly and and so what I wanted to ask as a very last question like regarding this internal dynamics of Ukraine and the way this this antagonism within the Ukrainian population um has been brought about and with Russia and etc. So how should this come to a close? We can talk about the geopolitical factors and how Russia and the US should um come to the table and discuss their differences etc. But within Ukraine, how can it be how can this come to a final close which is peaceful?

Petro: Yeah. Well, I have proposed I'm not the only one, but I think there is much benefit would be much benefit to Ukraine for looking at the historical examples of truth and reconciliation commissions. These commissions of which there have been more than 50 around the world have helped not so much to end the military conflict. That's a separate issue and there are specific negotiations regarding military placement deployments and things like that that allow us to reach ceasefires and the termination of military hostilities. But what is needed after that and not only after but perhaps even during that is a dialogue between the parties in conflict within the country itself. In the case of Ukraine, the truth and reconciliation commissions should ask the same questions that they ask in the case of the civil conflict in South Africa, Guatemala, and Spain. These are three analogies, three historical precedents that I discuss in my book, *The Tragedy of Ukraine*, and why they would be helpful for Ukraine. Because in each case um not in each case but in some cases um the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission becomes a an aspect of the actual negotiations for peace. Sometimes it is set up afterwards to heal the conflict in society. And that's what we need. We need a framework to establish a dialogue, a respected legitimate dialogue between the parties in conflict, in this case, Russophile Ukrainians and um Russophobic Ukrainians or the anti-Russian Ukrainians. Both of these parties will continue to exist and have millions of votes in future elections. And they need to develop not a competitive framework in which one side feels it must exterminate the other for the sake of Ukraine, but that for the sake of Ukraine, they must overcome their differences and develop a common unifying framework. Focus on what unifies Ukrainians amongst themselves rather than what on what divides them. In order to do that, you need to listen. And this is what truth and reconciliation commissions do so well. You need to listen to the grievances of the other side and to say, "I hear what you're saying. I hear how I, I didn't want to, but I understand that you felt, you know, um upset and you felt denied rights by my actions. And I don't want to do that. I want to include you in the national discourse." Unfortunately, there are groups against that very concept in Ukraine today and they argue the legitimacy of

their position that we cannot talk to any Russian speakers even who are Ukrainian citizens um who want to retain their identity um because they are a threat to the nation. Um unfortunately there are too many of those and um we need to start a process through which there can be a dialogue among Ukrainians um where their safety, their concerns and their interests for a common Ukraine are privileged over the divisiveness that exists today.

Host: Thank you very much. Um, Professor Petro, it was truly an an honor to listen to you and to to profit from your wide range of knowledge and wisdom in this issue and it's highly appreciated. Thank you so much for this interview and I hope to um maybe get you on later to because there's so much to talk about and you you reflect so so well on these things. Thank you. Thank you very much for this interview.

Petro: Thank you.