



Alexander Görlach on Threats to Liberal Democracy

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Alexander Görlach. CREDIT: Amanda Ghanoni

Alexander Görlach, Stephanie Sy

STEPHANIE SY: Welcome to Ethics Matter. I'm Stephanie Sy. We're discussing the rise of far-right populist movements in Europe today with Alexander Görlach. We are also discussing what he calls the "threats to liberal democracy."

Alexander founded a debate magazine called [The European](#) and was editor-in-chief there until

last year. He is now a visiting scholar at [Harvard Center for European Studies](#).

Alexander, welcome to the Carnegie Council studios here in New York.

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: Thanks, Stephanie, for having me.

STEPHANIE SY: A lot of the issues that you have researched throughout your career came to the fore with the [Brexit vote](#) and the [U.S. presidential election in 2016](#). Do you view the outcomes in these democratic exercises as threats to liberal democracy?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: On a general note, the outcome, let's say, of the Brexit referendum, but also to another extent but still the same general pattern, are based on lies. So if you look into the promises that the Brexit campaigners in England made, one of them was that they would pay the money that would go to Brussels into the National Health Fund, which did not take place after that. [Nigel Farage](#) after the day of the Brexit referendum said, "Oh, no. You must have misinterpreted me."

These major elections happened on the basis of wrong and false arguments. We are still finding this in terms of Brexit, but also in this country in the debate about [alternative facts](#) and [fake news](#) and all that. So these sorts of techniques to overcome the voters' will through extensive lies are of course a threat to liberal democracy.

STEPHANIE SY: What you're saying is that lies and the "alternative facts," as [Kellyanne Conway](#), one of President [Trump](#)'s spokespersons has described it as, are the threat to liberal democracy?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: At this time we face plenty. But just because you mentioned these two elections, I would say they are a negative hallmark because you can see—you know, you always keep saying, "Oh, politicians may lie about this or that or they may not give you the full picture." Or, let's say, the German system, where I'm from, is a parliamentary one, where several parties form the government, so of course every party has to give in, so you never get 100 percent of what one party would have campaigned for.

But this is a totally new dimension, where you have already polarized societies where this or that lie may just tip the result over the edge, like 48 to 52 in the Brexit referendum. You can totally see that it was a tiny margin by which this existential decision for the United Kingdom was made.

STEPHANIE SY: Let's talk about that and what happened in the United States. President Trump won the Electoral College but he lost the popular vote by some 3 million votes to [Hillary Clinton](#). That did raise the question of other aspects of the U.S. [constitutional](#) system. Do you think that the system undermined itself in some ways?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: I think this debate you guys are having—it is not the first time you've talked about this, that the popular vote and Electoral College do not match. If you would ever

want to fix that, you would have to, of course, do this before an election and not afterward.

The debate about this is: Can democracy overcome itself by its own means, as in elections? Being from Germany, it is always easy to see that this can happen, because [Adolf Hitler](#) did not attain power by a military coup or whatever; he was [elected](#), and he was elected on an agenda and on a program, which after it unfolded and got more [cruel and violent](#) than he may have campaigned for, but still, of course, there is always the threat that democratic people do not want to be governed by democracy anymore.

I have a dear colleague at Harvard, [Yascha Mounk](#), who did [research](#) on that. You do surveys, and you ask people, more or less indirectly, to figure out how fond they are of liberal democracy. They get sentences to sign and say "yes" or "no." His and his colleagues' findings were that the approval rates of liberal democracy shrink in Western societies, so that people may prefer to live in a secure environment more than in a free one.

So we are at a time where the measures of liberal democracy are newly negotiated, newly discussed, or undermined by people like Farage in England.

STEPHANIE SY: Some people call these "illiberal democracies." Is that a phrase that describes the phenomenon that we're seeing in the United States, illiberal democracies—in other words, leaders with, some would say, authoritarian tendencies elected in a free and fair election by the people?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: This is even going back to [Plato](#) and the question of what a fair, just, and wise form of government would be.

Of course, an illiberal democracy is a democracy that you can imagine does not have all the features of liberalism that we embrace today. However, the history of how democracy unfolded, especially after the horrors of the [Shoah](#) and the [Second World War](#), is we designed our modern democracies as liberal in the sense that you would watch out and look out for minorities, that you would strive to be better and to include more minorities; and to understand that the society as a whole is not a monolith, it is a heterogenic sort of entity. People like Mr. [Erdoğan](#) in Turkey or Mr. [Putin](#) in Russia, but also the new right-wing movements we will surely be talking about, they leave the impression behind as societies that are not like this.

If you look into all major Western societies in the last 10-15 years, after [9/11](#), they have come up with surveys and debates about "who are we?"—What does it mean to be French, what does it mean to be German, what does it mean to be English? It always alludes to a thing that to me does not exist, to proclaim a society as a monolith—so "all are white and Christian," which if you go to the streets of New York, you see that is not the case.

STEPHANIE SY: Is that something that the far-right movements in Europe have in common with

what is called the "[alt-right](#)" movement in the United States, that feature of white Christianity?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: Actually, it is very interesting, because the approach to society and what a society will stand for—even though we are all referred to as "the West," there is a difference between how Western Europe faces that or sees that or the United States. The main difference is how we approach history, how we understand history.

The French philosopher [Jean Baudrillard](#) wrote the book [America](#), and he pointed to this in his chapter which is called "America"—I am almost quoting him here—saying that America is a constant utopia. This is what this country was designed upon: You live always in the future present so you do not care so much about the past.

He would say that when the settlers came from East to West, they came into landscapes that were vast and big, if you look into the model of an American city, whether it be like, let's say, Dallas or Houston rather than New York. So you have the vastness and the spread-out country where he would refer to that history the settlers brought with them from Europe has vanished and spread out within the territory.

Whereas in Europe, whenever you debate something today, it always refers to the past. When we now debate these right-wing movements, we discuss a lot about what happened in the 1930s, in the last century; is this the rise of a new Hitler, yes or no? Obviously it is not, because there is 70-80 years in between. But still we make references to history. This country is not burdened with or does not care so much about this historical framework as Europeans would naturally do.

Why I say that is that, yes, it seems from the outside to be similar, but I would say that historic memory in Europe is a different one than in this country.

STEPHANIE SY: But the issues overlap in many cases—anti-globalization sentiment in the United States also reflected in the Brexit vote and in the rise of far-right movements in other countries, including Germany and France, the anti-immigration sentiment that comes from that; and some of the cultural values seem to overlap in the movements as well.

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: The overall subject to keep the West together is neither followed by [Theresa May](#) in England nor by President Trump. He congratulated the people of the United Kingdom on Brexit. This is congratulating Europe on breaking up or being on the verge of breaking up. This is contradicting the policy of 70 years of U.S. presidents. This led us through the [Cold War](#). We were an entity as "the West." This is for me utterly stunning, that you now have a [U.S. administration](#) that is not really bothered if Europe stands or not.

STEPHANIE SY: What does that mean? What impact does that have, for the European Union to not have the support of the American government in the whole experiment?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: This puts everything upside-down that we know about the West. So when

you say, "Okay, let's just follow that argument and say the right-wingers and the populists of all sorts in the West want the same"—the destabilization of "the West" does not play in the favor of the United States in total or of any European country.

We have seen so many successes in this multilateralism in the last 70 years. So you contradict. You know what happened, what the successes were in the past, and now you come up with an agenda that would totally destroy this order. This poses this general threat to liberal democracy.

STEPHANIE SY: Let me parse out what you just said. The "successes of multilateralism"—and I assume you're referring to that in a foreign policy sphere—and the stability of Europe, surely since World War II, because of that multilateral world order. But what about the individual workers in the Rust Belt, or in the equivalent of the Rust Belt in Europe, who feel they have lost out to globalization and multilateralism?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: I'd say actually we do not know if they would be even worse off if we would not have formed a unity to face globalization. Of course, you now think about and dream about a world like in the mid-18th or 19th century, but reality is what is the case, and now we have the means of transportation and communication to create and uphold a global economic order.

Since authority and legitimate rule are still confined within the nation-state, there are things that a nation-state can work on—let's say the social welfare of its inhabitants—but it is not in total and full control of trade, let's say, or how finances go, how money goes throughout the—

STEPHANIE SY: So you're saying some of these far-right movements, which are anti-European Union, often for economic reasons—the austerity measures that have been unpopular in Germany—are not grounded in current realities?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: What these right-wingers say is, "Okay, we lost our sovereignty to the European Union." Basically that is not true. Every law that comes from Brussels is to be ratified in national parliaments. There is a European Parliament.

You can always improve democratic institutions and the participatory means of the populace or the citizens of all the Member States. But it is not the case that Germany, France, or England—especially Madame [Le Pen](#) in France says that, and Mr. Farage after the Brexit vote said, "Now this is our independence day." This is totally false. It is not true.

These are claims on which you oppose multilateralism, on which you oppose globalization, because you say, "It has taken away sovereignty from us."

STEPHANIE SY: What about the [Schengen borders](#) and the fact that [Viktor Orbán](#), who has aligned himself with and was one of the first European leaders to endorse Donald Trump, believes that sovereignty was at issue when it came to the [migrant crisis](#), that the Schengen

borders dictated that they had to open these borders to migrants that were coming from Greece and through the Balkans route, and he asserted Hungarian sovereignty. Isn't that an example of that tension between the nation-state and sovereignty and the rules of the European Union?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: Sure. The [Dublin Regulation](#), which is the foundation of how we take in refugees and how we distribute them within the European Union, has been flawed from the very beginning because you have coastline states, like let's say Italy, and they face a lot of influx from Northern Africa. And then some European countries would say, "Oh, yes, you just keep these refugees to yourself." And then they say, "Oh, but we have this treaty."

So then the routes changed, and the [Syrian conflict](#) broke, and then the refugees came through the Balkan route, which they would enter through other countries. So you could have seen—and I would totally agree with that—that Europe has not come up with a constant strategy of how to deal with global migration, be it from Northern Africa—and we can argue Morocco and Tunisia are stable, but in the aftermath of the [Arab Spring](#) they are all weak and at the verge of collapse. So we are surrounded by regions that have failed states or about-to-fail states. Europe should have come up with a strategy of how to combat that, how to work on that, and they did not.

Another thing about the Eastern European countries, like Slovenia, Hungary, and Poland—even though I am not an expert on those—it is interesting. They reinvigorate their national narrative through culture, language, and religion. They are more explicitly hostile toward Muslims than, let's say, Germans because they say: "No. They are not Christians, and we have no mosques here, and we are not going to build any, so we will just keep these refugees out."

This is again also a very historic sort of argument that you may not buy into in America, saying, "We were for 1,500 years Christian so why do we now take in people?" This country is totally founded on another ideal of religion and the place of religion in public life, as compared to many European countries. Whereas I have always argued that Christianity is our civil religion, where, even though you don't go to church, you resemble that heritage, and you see it all over the place with churches and castles and whatever.

STEPHANIE SY: I think a lot of Americans would—and I think more than 50 percent of this country identifies as Christian—so not to say that isn't a part of—

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: Sure. But it is religiously, these people are really believers; whereas you find in Europe it is cultural Christianity. So this is why I say it is a civil religion. Therefore, it is easier to overcome as an argument against refugees.

STEPHANIE SY: That is a paradox to me. [Angela Merkel](#), who has taken what a lot of people would I think consider a moral stand on the welcoming of refugees, and even economic migrants, in Germany, welcoming 1 million of these migrants, is a Christian and she is the daughter of a [pastor](#). And yet, what you're saying is those countries whose national identity is most aligned

with Christianity are the ones that are shutting their borders to refugees.

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: In fact. But also, Angela Merkel never said that she took in refugees on a Christian argument. This is always like it is supposed to be, and I think it is also true to a certain extent. But Merkel would always say: "Okay, we have the [Geneva Conventions](#). We are somehow obliged to do that because we signed it. Also, in policy making"—as we say, "ethics matter"—"politics is nothing without ethics."

But coming back to what you were saying, the sociologist [Elias Canetti](#) wrote a fascinating book, [Crowds and Power](#), in the 1960s, in the last century, to generally explain how Hitler and totalitarianism could come to power and rise. He said something about the mobilization through religion in Europe, because religion has always been a trigger—and we see it today again—to rally people against others. He said, "You cannot do this in Europe through Christianity anymore because people have lost their faith in the afterlife."

I am quite sure he is right about this, because I identify as Christian because this is my culture which I grew up in. But if we now talk about angels and virgins and whatever, it is just kind of a different story.

So you have people in Europe—of course they are true believers in that sense, and I do not want to argue about whether or not that is a good thing—it is just like saying the approach to religion in Europe is a more historic one, as I tried to point out the differences between both our countries or hemispheres. So you would have an argument that you say you are a cultural Christian and not a real believer in that sense.

But the heritage of the [Enlightenment](#) was restricted by this. It was like: "Okay, what religion can provide, in terms of morals and to make humans better, that is so welcome, and that is what I should do. Whatever is liturgy and dogma and all that, we don't care about that."

STEPHANIE SY: Right, "Get rid of that stuff and focus on the morality."

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: Germany is more like a Protestant—the South is very Catholic, but the North, which has been the strong bed of religious power over a long time, is very Protestant. So you have an ethical appeal. You would always say—and I would always argue—"Since we have been Christians for 1,500 years, at least in name, this should be displayed somehow by how we act. Because otherwise, our ethical principles need other bases, or we cannot define ourselves or proclaim ourselves being Christian nations."

STEPHANIE SY: Again, going back to the rise of these far-right movements, what is the role of ethics and morality and these historical ideals of Enlightenment? Where do they fall on the platforms of these new far-right parties?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: I think, and this plays into what I said about religion and what I said

about culture already—and this is part of the argument—we see a total lack of empathy. You get the argument, "We have to see the refugee crisis through our eyes and not through the eyes of the refugees." This is the most heartless thing I have ever heard. If people walk thousands of miles to just find a safe haven and to escape a war, if you are a Christian or even a slightly ethical, informed person, you should have enough empathy to understand that no one does this because he or she likes it. It is not a fun tour. It is highly risky, and you risk your life and the life of your family. You see in all these debates it narrows down to such simple principles. Sometimes I think that half of the population has lost completely the empathy about that.

This does not restrain us from talking about how to integrate migrants, and it is not always easy. But the main and counterpoint in ethics is to inform and help people to be empathetic with other people and the destiny of other people.

STEPHANIE SY: How do the arguments for national security and protecting borders fall into that empathy lens? President Trump has said over and over again at the beginning of his administration that his actions are based on the priority to secure citizens of this country and that migrants and refugees and even legal immigrants somehow present a threat to that.

Is that a policy without empathy necessarily? Is there a tension between being an empathetic citizen who believes in [Kantian](#) virtues—you know, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"—is there a tension between that and national security?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: Again, we cannot take in all the refugees of the world. It also cannot be the goal of all policies to just really de-locate people from the places they came from. Rather, people, I would say, in most of the cases want to stay in the places they grew up in. If you ask certain Syrian refugees, they did not come for fun. Again, that is what I am saying. Okay, some of them will end up staying in Germany forever, and we will have a relation to Syria due to that conflict. But the vast majority of them, I am quite sure, would love to return at the earliest hour possible.

I guess these two are not really related in the first place, because national security is always an issue.

I will give you one thing: In my opinion, Angela Merkel made one major mistake after she took in the refugees. She went on a national TV show and she was asked by the host if she would be able to draw a line of how many refugees she would take into the country. She said, "Oh, well, by law I cannot do this because whoever enters European soil and wants asylum"—okay. But then she said something, when she was asked about the borders, which was widely interpreted as, "Well, I don't know if we still can in our days protect our borders."

People then went wild. If you have to say what really triggered or was the tipping point where the public idea about taking in refugees, which was very popular at the beginning in Germany,

shifted, it was that. I think that was her major mistake, to leave that impression behind.

She did it in a general argument about migration these days and people just knocking at our doors. But maybe that was the daughter of a pastor talking and not the commander-in-chief. So that was something where people were like, "Oh my god, what did she just say?" That was the problem in terms of Germany taking in the refugees.

STEPHANIE SY: You've written about Chancellor Merkel's moral vision. In an essay you wrote about how the ethics of philosopher Kant—essentially doing unto others as you would have them do unto you—have run up against more utilitarian arguments, specifically in Britain.

How has globalization played into that "us versus them" sentiment in these far-right movements?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: It is also a source of why so many migrants move, is that now, through modern communication, television, and the Internet, you see how people live in other places. So you have an unrest, an upheaval, in that sense, like people realize what a miserable state their country may be in.

But you also find when you stay in your country, you and your lifestyle, your religion, your set of beliefs, it is also at least challenged by learning there are others. I grew up in a village in the middle of nowhere in Germany, where we were predominantly Catholic. You know somewhere out there are others, but they are not on the TV or through the Internet, only at your table every day.

So globalization poses, of course, a challenge to how we identify ourselves, because our neighbor, also in the [Biblical](#) sense, is not just the person next door. You realize the neighbor is everybody.

I always like to refer to [Apollo 8](#) and the [Earthrise](#) photo. I don't know if you remember that, the [astronauts](#) who took the first photo of planet Earth from outer space. This photo sparked a lot in the peace movement and environmental movement in the 1960s and thereafter, because you could then argue it was the first time that we realized, "Okay, we really live all on the same planet, and our races, religions, or whatever may really not make the difference if we want to maintain this planet and want to live together on this planet."

STEPHANIE SY: Is there a generational divide, as far as who views the world from the Earthrise perspective versus who views it from the "let's protect ourselves and close our borders" perspective and not share these values with the rest of the world?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: Sure. No, I hear that, and I get that. Let's say about the environment, there is no place on Earth that people would not have to worry about this.

Most certainly, you realize that you still have to inform yourself. You have to read on a daily basis. You need to be interested even in topics that you may not have thought of. Our education systems are also not quite fit to tackle that. You go to school, and then you leave school, and then

the teachers say, "Now you've learned everything that you need," and it is not the case.

We all live longer and live in a more interconnected world. In my parents' generation, they went to college or to high school or whatever, then they learned a profession, and that was it. They were under the illusion, you have to say, that this sufficed for a whole work life.

I guess this is something that people realize, and we all have to realize, that it is like, "Okay, you have a set of beliefs, and with this set you just make it through 80 years." That is also, I think, an identity threat because many people also like to live in this comfy zone and they have the right to do so.

STEPHANIE SY: What you just said reminded me of an accusation that I've heard against the liberal elites of this country. That is this accusation that there is a cosmopolitan elitism that underlies a lot of the arguments that you've made for open societies and more open borders and more empathetic attitudes toward migrants. How would you respond to that accusation that this maybe isn't grounded in reality?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: I hear that. Again, to what I said earlier, I think the problem is not that there is a traveling, well-informed global elite who goes to Stanford or Harvard or whatever.

I think the problem is now that everybody is confronted with this sort of lifestyle or other lifestyles and say, "Why do I have to care? I live in this village here, and I just want to live in peace." But it is "unto you." You see it every day.

You may also see repercussions. You mentioned the Rust Belt. Then you sit in your village and you have to inform yourself because you just want to know what's going on.

Again, in the Brexit case, if you are a fisherman in Wales, you do not read The Guardian for a second opinion. You are a citizen, and you are entitled to the right that the politicians you elected do not lie to you. If I were now in Wales and would realize that my whole livelihood was founded or based on funding and subsidies given by the European Union that you just voted to get out of because Mr. Farage campaigned for that, I can totally understand that on this side people just do not understand and know what to believe in.

The other side is like, "Okay, I hear this." We are traveling a lot. You were a correspondent in Asia. I am from Germany; I am now at Harvard. I see this. But I think we also have to be confident about this sort of lifestyle and not be ashamed of that because everyone who did that—I worked hard to get into Harvard and you worked hard to have your career. It is nothing that you necessarily have to hide.

STEPHANIE SY: You and I certainly were not born with silver spoons in our mouths and didn't start as global elites. I am the daughter of immigrants to this country.

That brings me actually to your personal story, because in some ways I think of your story. You were the son of Turkish migrants to Germany. You were adopted as a baby, so you did not know your biological parents. But you're obviously a success in your field. Were you a product of European values that are now under threat?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: I'd say so. It is very interesting what you bring up. I spend a great amount of time, a big chunk of my time, talking and researching about identities. To me it was always interesting to learn—I grew up in this family as you described, and I was a baby when I was adopted, so this was normal to me. This was my identity, this village, we drink Riesling, and we are Catholic, and we celebrate carnival. It is like a totally normal setup. But then, when you are told you are adopted, you realize every day of my life could have been totally different if you had been adopted by another family.

It opens a door into understanding how relative these claims of identity are. Even if I had been adopted by a couple from the neighbor village, which was predominantly Protestant, I would have been a Protestant kid.

STEPHANIE SY: And what would it have meant if you were raised by your Turkish parents?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: Exactly.

STEPHANIE SY: I know you wrote about this in an [essay](#), how big a difference it would have made for you to have kept your Turkish name given to you at birth versus Alexander Görlach, a very German name.

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: This is interesting. I love the German language, so I studied literature and did a Ph.D. in linguistics. I was very eager in learning about religion and philosophy, so I guess actually the language and the culture through religion is the door into society.

Since I had a German name and I was an altar boy and all this stuff, I blended in and nobody realized my skin was a bit darker than all of the others, because identity-wise I was one of them. It is very interesting how these mechanisms work.

If you would send two or three migrants to my village—which we had; we also had later Turkish and Arab refugees, and also Russian Germans—when the numbers are small, people react to that in a positive way, because then you say, "Okay, it's just a few of them, but it's all us. This is the majority. Let's just integrate them and invite them to the village party." Which happened.

But what happens today is you do not know how many migrants are on their way, how many are coming, and the right-wing movements exploit that. They have no idea, no intention to educate people about the good means of migration and what it means for an economy; and also what it means to be a good human person, to take in people who flee a damn war.

STEPHANIE SY: It seems like in this conversation you are really interested in the information war aspect—the "fake news" it has been called—the way different political parties are using information and the tools of the Internet and social media to their best advantage. It seems like you really believe that that is a huge part of the phenomenon of the rise of far-right-wing movements, both here and in Europe.

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: What I see in terms of media that you may have as a service, is it provides the reality that a certain amount of people in this country or in other countries may like to live in. That does not mean that this is the real reality. This is the same for liberals; this is the same for conservatives.

However, in Germany we have newspapers that were right-leaning, like conservatives, and we have left-leaning papers, and you would know about this. You would also learn, and have learned, how a social democrat views the world and how a liberal views the world. It was part of the discourse and part of the understanding of public utterances what these are supposed to mean, in which framework they happen.

So it was always informed that, "Yeah, okay, he says that because he is a social democrat, or he says that because he is a Christian conservative."

This living in a silo, where you get just the commodity news that you want to, is a rather recent phenomenon. It may have been triggered in first place by this commodity sort of thought that you realize the media is under threat, so you also need to inform people in ways or with content that they really click and read because otherwise you don't get revenues. So maybe that is one way by which this all started.

You had players like Russia or Breitbart News, that are really into that by propaganda and by their means to really foster this need or wish for being provided with a reality.

STEPHANIE SY: That brings me to something else, which is who benefits from liberal democracies undermining themselves or being undermined by outside forces, such as [Russian cyber-hacking](#)? Don't authoritarian governments benefit from that? Aren't they the beneficiaries?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: Totally. It is totally clear why Mr. Erdoğan does it, like in the Russian model, and why Mr. Putin did this in the first place.

It is totally unclear what the current administration is up to because that is so—I don't know if we are seeing a coup or whatever people may think about, but it is totally contradictory to what American foreign policy, or even American domestic policy, was ever about.

But you can see this in Russia or Turkey, where you have a government that takes over and kills civil society, kills independent media, kills artists and also academia. You don't let your scientists travel. You also make choices through party affiliation about academic careers and stuff.

We have all seen this in Germany. So this is something maybe a bit odd. But sometimes people raise their finger and say, "Well, we have been there, done that; not so good, not so cool."

STEPHANIE SY: Lessons from history unlearned.

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: Russia started that. Mr. Erdoğan in Turkey took it up completely. It is the same rule book. The nationalistically informed, religiously informed narrative of the country—like saying, "We are Sunni Muslims and this is what Turks are," or "We are Russian Orthodox and this is what Russians are, and we repel homosexuality in Russia," or we repel whatever they do in Turkey, the Kurds or whatever. You just need and create this enemy. This is what Russia and Turkey do and, of course, are such autocrats.

Since I spoke about interconnectivity in this world today, you cannot live by this when people may see there is liberal democracy in Europe where people have rights that they do not have. Mr. Putin and his government, it was reportedly widely, have shown big interest in disrupting our liberal orders.

STEPHANIE SY: Leaders of the far-right movements in Europe, as well as President Trump here, seem to revere Vladimir Putin. Why do they revere him and respect him and not Erdoğan? Is it because Erdoğan is a Muslim?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: That is an interesting question. I just think Erdoğan is the copy of Putin, so you just take the original rather than the copy. He invented that.

Though, on a side note, Mr. Erdoğan, you could argue, was the first European leader in our sphere who ran a campaign on this rhetoric, saying, "I represent the 'black Turks'"—as he called it, like Anatolia, like the religious, the down-to-Earth people—"against the 'white Turks,'" which are the [Kemalist](#) elite. He [won his first campaign](#) on this rhetoric.

STEPHANIE SY: On a similar anti-elitist message.

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: Exactly. Back then we did not realize this. Back then we said, "Oh, this is like the stance if the moderate Muslims" or "that could work somehow." But that is just a side note.

STEPHANIE SY: To the question of why far-right movements have such reverence for President Putin.

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: You could hear that with Donald Trump always referring to, "Oh, he gets the job done." [Hillary Clinton](#) in the [campaign](#) saying, "Oh, I didn't get that job done because I had a [Republican president](#) who just opposed that." So obviously a liberal democracy lives by these sort of consensuses. You do not get through with all you want.

So what they revere is, "Oh, we have this strong person and he gets done all the things that he wants." But, yes, he gets that done because he kills the opposition, or there are people killed who are opposition politicians or journalists. So how does he govern or how is this country run? It is run on fear, and it is run like I just said: you have no political opposition and you have no critical media. Do you really want this? Coming back to what I said about the findings of my friend Yasha, there is a rising—

STEPHANIE SY: Is that what the movement wants?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: There is a rising number of people who subscribe rather to the security sort of thing.

STEPHANIE SY: There has been too much freedom; is that the argument?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: No. There is too much freedom for the others. We cannot allow the foreigner to move freely; we cannot allow the Muslim coming to our Christian land. It is always on the others.

But again, German history shows that before the first Muslim gets deported, or the first Jew got deported in Hitler's Germany, you had to—the German word is *gleichschaltung* (connection)—you have to "similarize" everything that is an utterance of civil society: shut down independent media, shut down independent unions, silence religious groups, back in the day, the churches, and kill the independent press.

This is the fluid on which you can then pen out and run out all the bad things, so to speak, like deporting Muslims, Mexicans, or whatever. You will not see this in this country until Mr. Trump or this administration, Mr. [Bannon](#) or whoever, has completely shut down the credibility of media. As long as there is independent media and media that reports on that, you will not see families being apart, like kids staying here and parents deported to Mexico.

STEPHANIE SY: So you sound optimistic about the prospects for liberal democracy in this country.

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: The argument here, or the bet here, for the United States is about how firm and adamant the checks and balances that are embodied and enshrined in the Constitution stand.

You could argue, "Okay, this new [Supreme Court judge](#) is very, very conservative, but any other Republican president would have put in such a person"—maybe, maybe not—"Every Republican president would have repealed Planned Parenthood, because that is a thing that conservatives do." There was an outrage about what Mr. Trump did there. But you have to think another Republican would have done similar things.

The outrage here is that Mr. Trump obviously lives in a parallel universe when it comes to facts.

The whole [inauguration crowd thing](#) is insane—how many people were there, and how to make references to that in calls to foreign leaders. It sounds insanely strange to me.

But you have seen that when they came up with this so-called "[Muslim ban](#)," that the still-independent juridical branch of liberal democracy worked and said, "This is not going to work out."

STEPHANIE SY: What about in Europe? What are the prospects for the European Union looking ahead?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: We will be seeing elections in [France](#) and in [Germany](#). I would not try to predict anything, because when we predicted Brexit it happened differently, and the prediction about the outcome of the last U.S. election.

STEPHANIE SY: The polls were all wrong.

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: People who tend to vote for that do not tend—it is not that we all got everything wrong, but it is like when people make a decision for radical parties, they do not tell this in any survey, so you do not really know.

There is a chance that Madame Le Pen will become president of France. This would mean the end of the European Union as we know it. It would maybe also mean the end of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Well, France was not always part of NATO, so maybe not.

STEPHANIE SY: Let's take that apart. If that outcome were to happen and France were to go the way of the UK and leave the European Union, or make moves toward that, what would that mean for European security?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: The point is that what we created is a common sphere of trade and free movement of goods and persons. We created a bigger space where we can combat better the challenges coming from China or India.

The same goes for security and all other measures. If you are a country in the mountains, like Switzerland or Austria, you don't have a navy. But if you are a country with a sea, you don't have the people who work as soldiers in the mountains. So you have huge potential—and we did this on a regular basis where the secret services worked together. I think working together could always be a surplus for security because what we all share is knowledge and you can make better use of it.

STEPHANIE SY: My understanding of the European Union experiment is that it really went beyond what you're talking about, international cooperation in the economic and intelligence or security spheres, that there was an acknowledgement of shared morality, that the EU was a moral entity. Is that dead?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: It is interesting that you say that. This "never again" narrative after the Second World War, and the Shoah triggered this—I think you need these shocking moments, unfortunately, to come up with something that tries to outshine this cruelty. I think the European Union, in fact, was founded on this "never again" after the Second World War and the Shoah. Actually, I think the whole Western project runs on that. Having said that, all of our global institutions today run on that, subconsciously or consciously—also the United Nations runs on that—we do not want to have a repetition of genocides, like what the Nazis did to the Jews. That is something totally right. That has been a moral narrative.

The other side of that coin was also that through upholding such order we also guarantee welfare of the people. This has been true for a long time. But it is not true these days, let's say, in Spain or Italy, where you have half of the young cohort unemployed. These people may not start the next genocide, but they may question the whole authority or the legitimization of the European Union as this sort of entity.

But you are totally right. I would say that the moral imperative of the European Union needs to be reinvigorated, especially now that the Second World War is more than 70 years passed by. So you have to still go on informing that the whole need of the enterprise is not to have a lean administration; it is about preventing nations who went to war for centuries again and again from not doing this again.

If that means that a tiny country and a big country share the same amount of seats and the same voice and by this you create a huge administration, so be it. When we were all enlightened and inspired by humanism, and all Christians, we fought the most horrible wars. So obviously this did not work out in terms of identity to prevent us from doing evils to us.

But now, for the last 70 years—and this is why I am quite staunch about that it is good that the [European Union received the Nobel Peace Prize](#)—this entity, for better or worse, in administration, with whatever downsides it may have, has established an order in which nations that went to war over religion and borders and ethnicity and whatever stopped that. This happened through a shared set of values.

STEPHANIE SY: But is that order under threat now?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: It is totally. Nobody wants a war, obviously, and nobody when you ask wants to have a genocide, obviously. So I think somehow this discourse has been detached. That is something that maybe we—what you said referred as a global elite—if you run within a system, let's say you are a politician in the European Union, you are confronted with that narrative every day of your work, and if you are a fisherman in Wales, you are not. So maybe that again leads back to educational and inspirational talks that you need to give if you are a professor or a politician, because you cannot expect that a fisherman in Wales reads The Guardian just to get another opinion.

STEPHANIE SY: Taking a larger geopolitical look at what we're talking about, after the Cold War, as you know, the West attempted to impose its own model of liberal democracy on the world—specifically, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East one might point to. Do you think that part of what we're seeing is a backlash to that?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: I think it is, especially in regard to the Muslim world, which is a very diverse place, from Nigeria to Pakistan and beyond. We see in this hemisphere a struggle with modernity and a struggle with religious authority and the authority of the [Quran](#) with the findings of science.

We have "been there, done that" also in Europe and also in this country. You have still a large population who believes the Bible rather than [Darwin](#). I don't want to ridicule that. But you see how modernization pushes the identities that people may have. So you see especially the Muslim world being in an upheaval today because of this modernization furor. I am not sure how much this is related to the ideas of liberal democracy, rather from under the implementation of it in the [Iraq War](#), which has been widely condemned. I think that didn't help to promote this—

STEPHANIE SY: What now with NATO expansion and Russia, the dissemination and pushing of liberal ideas when it comes to Eastern Europe and the way that is perceived by Putin in Russia?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: The narratives run wildly here because it is not clear who said when that there will now be further eastern expansion of NATO. Obviously, there are several versions of this narrative.

I am not sure how to answer that because I am not an expert on Russia and how liberal order or liberal values have ever prevailed in this country—but obviously not really. So I could not answer that on a full note.

Also, NATO as a military unit is not related to what we talked about regarding the expansion of values.

However, you have seen people in Poland being keen to enter the Western hemisphere, not trying to be still under Russian influence. You also see that in [Ukraine](#), but Ukraine is divided, where the West is leaning toward the West. Also with language and religion and stuff, it is different in Ukraine, if I am not wrongly informed. It is the countries that are on the border between these two blocs.

However, I think you see in all these countries a striving interest in liberal values.

STEPHANIE SY: If you accept that it was the actual values of liberal democracy—free speech, an open Internet, and open societies—that in some ways enable the rise of far-right movements, are we in a catch-22, or is there a remedy to that?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: Let's look at the Arab Spring. What triggered that? You say, "Oh, there's social media." But actually it was a [guy](#) in Sidi Bouzid who did not have enough to eat, and this [sparked](#) the whole thing that came about. This was widely reported through cable and satellite TV.

So sometimes when you see the reasons for upheavals—and you spoke about the Rust Belt and people who feel disenfranchised and who really do not have enough to live on—I think that is still the ground on which these movements grow. They may be fostered and accelerated through these means we have today. But obviously, it is not only media and the Internet that makes this happen. You additionally have to have a bad intention and disseminating wrong and false news via these channels.

So I would not say that these technological developments we have made per se lead into a quicker rise of each or whatever sort. This is to me a matter of fact, that you can see the spark of many right movements where electoral successes—let's say the Brexit vote—ran on misinformation and false information which was given intentionally.

STEPHANIE SY: How can journalists and academics respond to remedy some of these problems with false news and false information?

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: If you quote the Bible, "We give testimony to truth." Here's the thing: Today what a fact is is under threat. Back in the days, until a few years ago, the question was what a fact meant. It is paramount for liberal democracy that you do not have one interpretation only. So how we combat climate change is something different than to say, "Oh, it ain't gonna happen." So I think there is a certain futility for societies in that if you have vital debates about what facts mean.

But today we really have to reinforce or reinvigorate just the love for facts, to just say: "Okay, this is what we know; this is the data we have. What can we make out of it in terms of policy, but also in terms of business and in terms of societal process?"

I guess academics and journalists should not get tired over that, but really stick to the point that a fact is something that is measurable, that is like running after, let's say, [Newton's paradigm](#)—if you can do it a few times, it is more likely to be true than not—and if there is something like a so-called whatever "[massacre](#)" that the Trump administration came up with in their first weeks when they were in power, then you say, "Okay, this never took place."

You also have to call a lie a lie. That is also something I think that, if you look into the strategies of Mr. Putin or Mr. Erdoğan or whatever, you tire people with your version of reality, and at some point they will not say, "Oh, that's utterly false." They will just say, "I don't care."

That is actually the strategy to calm and silence the people and just make them feel fatigued

about it. This is something we academics and journalists have to kick in and say, "No, no, this is not going to happen."

STEPHANIE SY: Alexander Görlach, thank you so much for your insights.

ALEXANDER GÖRLACH: Thank you.

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