Hi. This is Tanya [Domi 00:00:04]. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world. Anne Applebaum is a columnist for the Washington Post and a Pulitzer Prize winning historian. She is also professor of practice at the London School of Economics Institute of Global Affairs, where she runs Arena, a program on disinformation and 21st century propaganda. Formerly a member of the Washington Post Editorial Board, she has also worked as the foreign and deputy editor of the Spectator Magazine in London, as the political editor of the Evening Standard, and as a columnist at Slate, and at several British newspapers, including the Daily and Sunday Telegraphs. From 1988 through 1991, she covered the collapse of communism as the Warsaw correspondent of the Economist magazine and the Independent newspaper.

Her newest book, Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine, was published in October 2017. As the world tilts towards a rise in illiberalism, and authoritarianism, there is no one more qualified to speak about these troubling dynamics than Anne Applebaum, a renowned commentator on global affairs and a book author who has written extensively about the fault lines between the east and the west. Welcome to the Thought Project, Anne Applebaum.

Thank you.

Incredibly delightful to have you here today. It's the week after a terrible episode in New Zealand. I'm going to ask a question, sort of an open question. Could you have imagined this current state of global relations, and the state of democracies looking back 30 years to that exhilarating moment when the Berlin Wall came down, bringing the Iron Curtain down ultimately.

Of course you have to start by remembering that when the Iron Curtain came down, we had no idea what would happen next, and we didn't know that what would come next would be democracy. That was actually a longer term project, to see that it happened, but I take your broader point, which is that... Much of what was built in the 1990s, some built successfully, some at great cost, and so on, but much of what was built in the 1990s is absolutely now under siege, and it's under siege in different ways, from the revival of authoritarianism to the, a new information system, which in a number of different ways is making it difficult to have democratic debates in the way that we used to. Some of the weaknesses of Western democracies themselves, both economic and political, are suddenly coming to the fore, so yes, we're having been at a kind of global high, 10 or 15 years ago, when we had more, there were more democracies around the world than ever before in history.

When it felt like more and more were joining that group, we're certainly now... We're now certainly moving the other direction.
Tanya Domi: I do think that your point about we didn't really know how it was going to go is a fair point, when the wall came down, but the shocking return of rhetorical fascism, and perhaps even acts that could ultimately be judged fascistic is now occurring at this moment. Also, the really tenuous relationship between United States and Europe, most protracted example would be the really almost hostile relationship with Germany between Trump and Merkel. These events, quite frankly, I couldn't have imagined even 10 years ago. I have done a lot of democracy development work myself, so I've spent a lot of time in eastern Europe, in southeastern Europe, and I think your point about disinformation, this seems to be Mr. Putin's really art, that he is now really leveraging, not only in a place like Ukraine, but also in the US elections in 2016.

Anne Applebaum: Yes, so just to unpack that a little, yes, I've been following the Russian use of disinformation for some years, actually going back to before, well before 2016. It was interesting. A colleague of mine and I wrote a, were part of a group that wrote a big paper on Russian disinformation that was published in 2015, and we took it around Washington. We went to the Hill, and we went to the State Department, and we showed it to people, and we had discussions about it, and we said, "You know, look, this is a really big problem. We see that they're organized." You could already see then trolling campaigns, and the use of bots, and artificial amplification of stories, and so on. You could see how it was working, and it was working together with corruption and other tools, and we sort of took it around Washington. People were interested, and they said, "Well, that seems like it's a very bad problem for Slovenia, and we're terribly sorry, and maybe we can allocate some money in the next defense budget to think about it a little bit."

But nobody really saw this as a kind of central problem, that authoritarian rhetoric, and authoritarian regimes would be kind of acting inside our political systems, using our tools, using Facebook, that we invented, and using in effect our tolerance for free speech to try and manipulate our politics, but that's what happened. You could... I saw it very early in the 2016 campaign. I saw how Russian... I follow Sputnik, and I follow RT, and the sort of, even just the mainstream. This isn't the clandestine stuff. This is the open stuff.

Tanya Domi: This is the open access. Yeah.

Anne Applebaum: I could see what was going on, and how it was mirroring the Trump campaign, and I started writing about it very early, and I was very, very careful how I wrote about it, because I didn't want to sound like a crazy person.

Tanya Domi: An alarmist. Yeah.

Anne Applebaum: Or a conspiracy theorist, but in retrospect, a lot of this was very obvious very early on, that there was a close relationship.
Tanya Domi: Yes. I think Washington should have been prepared for this, because as early as 2007, Russia was hacking Estonia. In 2008, they hacked Georgia, and then of course they hacked the 2014 Ukrainian elections, and I even saw an article in Christian Science Monitor saying, "Well, the US elections are next year. Could they be attacked?" It seems like in retrospect, that they really weren't prepared for it.

Anne Applebaum: No, nobody was prepared for it, and even I... It was 2014, it wasn't so much... There wasn't an election. It was the what happened, the invasion of Ukraine was accompanied by this just extraordinary...

Tanya Domi: Disinformation.

Anne Applebaum: ... Disinformation campaign, PR campaign, working on multiple levels in many different countries, using all different kinds of tools that suddenly we all realized were there. I thought, well, some of this is succeeding. It succeeds because of weak systems, and it probably wouldn't work in a really big democracy, because people would call it out, and they would be... In fact, the US system turned out... It's not so much democracy, but the information infrastructure turned out to be much easier to manipulate than even I had understood, but yes, you're right that the Russian tools, which is a combination of disinformation meaning calculated, planned campaigns, artificially amplified using tools like bots, and trolls, and so on, that plus the use of corruption, plus combining that sometimes with foreign policy, we started using the expression this time hybrid war, hybrid campaigns.

That they had been working on this, and inventing it, and thinking about how to do it for a long time, and as you say, they'd done it in Estonia. In 2007, they, and this was a combination of cyber war plus information war. They had done it in Georgia in 2008, and this was cyber war, information war, and real war. They actually invaded Georgia, and then they did it again in Ukraine during the invasion of Crimea, and so we had seen that they were capable of doing this, but the idea that they would then focus these tools on the United States, I think people were surprised by, you're right.

Tanya Domi: Yes, and we will see how much is reported to the American public. The Hill is investigating these issues, and also Mueller's report is anticipated, and it remains to be seen how much we're going to know.

Anne Applebaum: Yes. I've been told, just as an aside, to be very careful, because Mueller's report may not be what we expect it to be. In other words, it may not be a kind of narrative story about what happened. It may be something much more fragmented, and he may feel very limited by what he's... By the legal structure of what he is and isn't allowed to do. It might be quite dissatisfying, but we'll see. We could be released in the next five minutes, or in the next five months [inaudible 00:10:07].
Tanya Domi: True. While the Democrats are carrying out investigations across many committees, so but yet, the next election is not that far away, so it may not even be well really understood before the next election.

Anne Applebaum: No. Some of what the Russians were able to do in 2016, for example, the creation of... Remember, they were using several different... There were several different things they did. One was an advertising campaign. One was the creation of fake Facebook pages, and kind of fake groups around them that were designed both to promote... We now understand how this works, both to promote anti-immigration groups in Idaho, and at the same time, Black Lives Matter groups elsewhere that were designed to suppress the vote, and persuade people not to vote, not to come out and vote for Hillary Clinton. We know they were... We now understand that they were doing this, and these were fake sites, and they were created in St. Petersburg by people who Mueller has actually identified, and we now know the names of the GRU agents who did this. He's already issued those indictments, so we now understand that technique. That might be harder now, because Facebook is now more careful than it was before, and these companies are now taking down sites.

Tanya Domi: Fake accounts.

Anne Applebaum: Sites that are mislead, that are based on, that lie about where they come from, and what they are. The rules are evolving all the time, but they're more conscious of doing this now than they used to be. The trouble is, of course, that tactics of misinformation also evolve constantly, so one of the tactics now is that is the creation of real looking fake news sites that look like they're providing real information, but really aren't. There can be sometimes hundreds and thousands of them, and they... In aggregate, they're an attempt to alter algorithms that they produce, certain kinds of information all at the same time that will... Again, people are onto this, and it may be... There may be ways of disabling it, and people are much more aware now than they were before, but yeah. There will be new ways to do it. There will be new attempts, and of course, the most important point is that a lot of these tactics, the Russians invented or perfected.

These are not high tech, difficult operations, or very, very expensive, and so they're... The distinction now between what's Russian and what's domestic, whether it's in the United States, or in Germany, or anywhere else, is often negligible. I think there's now going to be a much more difficult kind of legal, and moral, and political decisions to be made about domestic misinformation. If it's coming from inside our own system, and if it's Americans who are creating these fake... It's not so much fake sites. It's kind of fake...

Tanya Domi: Campaigns.

Anne Applebaum: ... Campaigns, fake ecosystems, really. If it's Americans doing that, it's going to be much more difficult to stop it.
Tanya Domi: No, I think you're right. I think Putin is... I think he's a good tactician, and it was... It's a cheap investment that had an incredible payoff, probably the biggest take down by the Russians ever.

Anne Applebaum: Yeah. Remember, it wasn't just disinformation. They had a corrupt, or anyway, they had a financial relationship with Trump, and with the Trump company, going back many decades.

Tanya Domi: This isn't... No, this isn't just one thing. Of course.

Anne Applebaum: Yeah, and it wasn't just disinformation, and also you have to... It's always important to remember that what they are... What they've been good at, not just in the US, but elsewhere, is betting, placing bets on unexpected people, or on... Anyway, using existing political divide, so they didn't invent the contingency that elected Trump. They didn't.

Tanya Domi: Oh. Absolutely. Yeah.

Anne Applebaum: They just pushed... It's them trying to push him in. It's the same, for example, in France. They didn't invent Marine Le Pen, who's the French far right leader, who they very openly backed. [crosstalk 00:14:31]

Tanya Domi: They see cleavages, and they jump into that cleavage.

Anne Applebaum: They see cleavage, exactly.

Tanya Domi: ... And exploit it.

Anne Applebaum: Exactly. That's what they do, and they're not the only ones doing it, and now there are lots of people doing it, and people... It's not... I wouldn't say this is a Russian, solely Russian operations. There are other actors, but yeah. It's true that this is something that we have not contended with in a long time, and we had some version of this during the Cold War, in a much different era, with a different platform. Different platforms, and different kind of news cycle, but the surprise of the last decade has been the return of authoritarianism in an international form, and authoritarian rhetoric designed to undermine democracy. Of course, it's not just an American problem. It's a problem all across the world, in fact, and the use of new forms of media to do that. No, I don't think we were kind of intellectually prepared for a new version of authoritarianism to challenge democracy in very basic ways. That is what we've seen recently.

Tanya Domi: Yes. Speaking of which, just last week, there was this major terrorism attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 50 people who were engaged in prayer in two different mosques. There's been a lot of conjecture and writing about who influenced the terrorist, including white nationalism, but you just wrote a piece on radicalism, and why do we care just about one or two different approaches
to it. In fact, this has been breaking in the Balkans that this perpetrator was actually listening to Serbian Chetnik music on the way to the mosques, that was idolizing [inaudible 00:16:32], who just incidentally will face judgment this coming week in the Hague, and that's sort of been played, sort of been dismissed by US papers. It's been picked up more in Europe, in the Balkans. Even in Turkey they've been covering it. Talk about this radicalisms that you wrote about recently, and how this may be sort of looked at through one or two lenses, but we really need to open our brains up to more broader interpretations of how radicalism actually occurs.

Anne Applebaum: Online radicalization, which is what it looks like this, the killer in New Zealand had gone through, is something that... I wouldn't say that it's, we fully understand it, and science can solve it, or anything like that, but it is something that we know a lot about, and what is striking about what we're sometimes calling white nationalism, or white supremacism, and which in Europe is often called the identitarian movement, is how much it, in some ways, is beginning to resemble jihadism, is that it's a kind of mish mash of international ideas. Anybody can tap into it in different places. There is an audience for it online, and there are kind of stages that you can go through in order to get to it. In other words, there is a kind of generally accessible world of what they call the alt-right, or even milder versions of it, where people make racist jokes online, and teenagers click on them 'cause they're funny, and sometimes genuinely funny, and where people poke fun at the pompocity of mainstream culture, and you can-

Tanya Domi: Political...

Anne Applebaum: Political correctness, and so on, and so people who are 18 think that's funny, and so... You can then get from there to various online personalities who then propagate, and sometimes very light, and one of the characterizations, or one of the typical things about it is it's often... The mode of speech is ironic, and parodic, so they say ironic things, and it's never quite clear whether they really mean it or not. You could sometimes say very shocking things, as part of a joke. That's one of the... Through this, through finding this funny, you can watch more of it. You can be led into more extreme versions of it. You can go off the mainstream platforms, and you can wind up first in Reddit, and then on 4chan, or 8chan. Then you can end up on [inaudible 00:19:34]. There are these more extreme versions of it that you can get led into, and slowly, until after a while, this is what you're reading, this is what you're seeing. You can curate your world so this is what you see all the time, and then you become part of a kind of radical online community. You speak to its members all the time. You begin to feel that you're part of some kind of special world.
You have special information. You have a kind of diagonal relationship to mainstream culture where you're laughing at it all the time, and making fun of people who are, who believe these pious things about racism, and so on. You can be... This is what radicalization is, and this is not that different from how jihad radicalization works. They're also kind of...

Tanya Domi: Online. Yeah.

Anne Applebaum: ... Entryway gates. You come in in a normal way, and maybe you come from a conservative Muslim family, and that's normal, but then you get led in to increasingly more violent, and more extreme versions of it, until finally you're surrounded by that, and that's what you're speaking to and dealing with. The killer in New Zealand, one of the oddities about him was first of all, he was signaling all kinds of things, both in the video he used as you mentioned by using the Serbian music, that was kind of music to kill Muslims by.

Tanya Domi: That's right. It was used by the Serb militia during the Bosnian war.

Anne Applebaum: Right, and then he, in his manifesto, some of what he was doing seems to be have been, again, ironic and joking. Some of the people... For example, he made a reference to Trump, which may or may not have been serious. It may have been, maybe he really is inspired by Trump at some level. Maybe he threw that in to kind of create... He knew that what he was doing would create hysteria, and would create a political argument. Maybe he wants to make that political argument more bitter, and angry, and he wants to create a backlash, and a reaction, so that may have been one of the reasons he mentioned it. Some of the... Some of what he was doing was an attempt to divide, and anger, and polarize people, and that is of course also what jihadi terrorism is meant to do as well. The idea of Jihadi terrorism is that we bring down the West. They want to bring down the West. They want to destroy Western civilization. They want to make us argue, and so on, and create this backlash.

This white identitarian terrorism is the same thing. His idea is that he wants to create a civil war, so that these corrupt diverse Western societies are destroyed, and some truer, better, purer civilization can arise. All that sounds pretty nuts, but there is a community of people online who believe it, just as there is a community of people online who believe that we can resurrect the ancient Caliphate, and create a medieval Muslim state, of true believers. In their essence, they're quite similar, and the way radicalization works in both cases is also quite similar.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, and it seems like... There's a lot to be learned from each one of these incidents, and we'll see what comes out in New Zealand. They will be sharing things probably quietly, among intelligence communities.

Anne Applebaum: Right. Right, but actually I would say, one of the point of your earlier question, sorry, which I didn't answer, is that until now, we have not treated this
identitarianism, this white nationalism, we haven't treated it with the same seriousness that we treat Jihadi radicalism. We haven't looked at its sources. We haven't sought to take down the kind of gateway websites. We haven't tried to identify the people. We haven't thought about counter-radicalization strategies. We have a little bit, actually. There are groups in Europe who do that, and they're in the US as well, but we haven't... It hasn't been the same kind of political issue obviously here that Jihadi terrorism has been until now.

Tanya Domi: Right, and in the US, the FBI has indicated that the biggest threat domestically is in fact from these white supremacist groups. The Center for the Southern Law Poverty Project, they tracked these groups that are hate groups, and there's a lot of militias in the United States that are armed, and Trump, when he is confronted with it, he basically just sort of just misses it.

Anne Applebaum: Yeah, well, these are going to kind of intellectually more difficult for us to deal with because they're domestic. It's not like you can identify the foreigners and throw them out, and this is a... Yes, it is, there is a... I actually don't want to say that mainstream, that even the president is responsible for terrorism. I don't believe that to be true, but there is a kind of continuum on which this exists, which is a domestic continuum, not a foreign one. That is why it's going to be more difficult to deal with.

Tanya Domi: Charlottesville is the example, right?

Anne Applebaum: Exactly. Exactly.

Tanya Domi: I want to go back to Europe. You are a Europeanist, and what has been going on in Europe, including the rise of illiberal states, such as Hungary, Viktor Orban. Of course now we have right wing governments in Austria, in Italy. Poland has brought back the long-

Anne Applebaum: It's still in contest in Poland. Yes.

Tanya Domi: Yes, but it's a situation with regard to Orban, who has been visited by Bee Bee Netanyahu, and they've held press conferences together, gas lighting George Soros. They pushed central European university out of Hungary. There events have been deeply troubling.

Anne Applebaum: The Hungarian thing is complicated. Orban did started in quite a different place. He was a young liberal, who was actually educated at Oxford on a Soros scholarship, 25 years ago, and so his progress, I think, is mostly to do with his power obsession, and his desire to stay... I think one of the things, he was one of the first to work out, was that his... There were weaknesses of the Hungarian state that he could exploit, and that if he could exert political control over the legal system, over the media, that he could begin to take over some of the, what were meant to be the independent institutions of the state, and it turned out they were weaker than people realized. I think just in his case, it began as a
desire to stay in power, and not lose. He began to do that, and I think he then subsequently developed a kind of ideology around it, that this was about, I don't know, traditional values, or Christianity, or something like that, but I think that's very much secondary.

I think this is a... This is about, in his case, it's about money. It's about power.

Tanya Domi: Power.

Anne Applebaum: It's about enriching his family and his friends. It's about making sure they don't lose an election. He lost an election at one point, which he found to be very painful, and unpleasant, and I think he's trying to never repeat that again, so what you've seen in him is somebody who's used the weaknesses of his state, and used... It's a very small country. There's a lot. It's very centralized, and he also used another... Another thing that he's done, which is a real canary in the coal mine, because I think all... It's just going to be true in all Western democracies. He realized before others did how weak the media is, and how weak it is financially. Not so much intellectually, although that, too, but how easy it was to take over the ownership of big newspaper groups.

This is, of course, particularly true in a small country, where there aren't that many of them. There's only a few television channels, and it turns out that you can both use the instruments of the state to... For example, you can make it very difficult for an independent channel to get advertising if you're the government.

Tanya Domi: That was one of his first acts, wasn't it, to amend the Constitution with regard to press freedom.

Anne Applebaum: Right, so with regard to press freedom, but then he did something even more than that, which is that he understood that he could take over the companies that ran the media, and make sure that they were run by friends of his. This process of taking over the media is then something that others are now imitating.

Tanya Domi: Modeling. Right.

Anne Applebaum: As the media has, and all kinds of media, by which I mean newspapers, and I mean websites, and I mean television stations, that has become clear that one of the many impacts of the internet is that it is... Sorry, of social media, is that it has captured the advertising markets that used to go to other kinds of media, and so genuinely, the newspapers are now out of money in many countries, particularly smaller countries. They don't have the money. They don't have advertising. It's been taken over by Facebook, so it turns out to be very easy to take them over, and just kind of tip them, and then they get distributed to oligarchs. He understood that first, but it's a process that I think we'll see in...
many countries, unless we find alternative funding models, unless we get used to the idea that newspapers have to be publicly funded, or they have to be funded through charity, or they have to be philanthropies, or, and some of that.

Actually, one of the first people who did begin to understand this was the Soros Foundation, which, and they began funding some independent media, and that's part of Orban's etimus against Soros.

Tanya Domi: Sure. That makes sense, but it's regrettable, don't you think, that the EU didn't take action sooner, because this gets... Then what does the EU stand for? These are the issues that, when you look at the Balkans and their hopes to join the EU, people become extremely cynical because they don't see the EU acting consistent with its values and principles.

Anne Applebaum: In Hungary, part of the problem was that Orban did what he did very slowly, and he did initially constitutionally, so in other words, he had this constitutional majority. He started to change the constitution.

Tanya Domi: Legally, he could do it.

Anne Applebaum: It was very hard to not... That is a contrast, for example, to Poland, where upon a kind of populist party won their elections in 2015, and immediately set about, without a constitutional majority, in fact, a very, very slim majority based on a minority of support, and so on. They were just very lucky the way the parliamentary math worked, and they didn't have a majority of the population at all, but they tried to use their very thin majority to change the constitution. That was something the EU did find easy to stop, and there was... There has-

Tanya Domi: Merkel, she-

Anne Applebaum: It wasn't Merkel. It was EU institutions pushed back, and said that Poland was violating various standards to do with judicial independence, and so on, and which interestingly has been very popular in Poland. People are glad the EU has done that, and that's been...

Tanya Domi: That's good. It's good for EU as an institution.

Anne Applebaum: It is. It's good for the EU. The story is not over yet, and there's still more to go, and we don't know how it'll work out, but I agree with you that the... Given where we are, it was... Now we're in a place where I don't believe Hungary is a democracy anymore, in all kinds of ways. Orban is, it's essentially not possible anymore for an opposition party to win an election because of lots of small things that he's done.

Tanya Domi: We would call that state capture.
Anne Applebaum: I would say it's state capture, and yes, I think it's time for EU institutions to start kicking him out, because it's never happened before. It's difficult to do, but I agree with you that there is a problem with ideas, and ideals, and so on. Frankly, there's a problem for NATO as well.

Tanya Domi: Absolutely, and on NATO, one of the issues... I'm glad you brought that up, is that one of their principles that they espouse is they say they support democracies, so when you look at one of its most recent members that joined, Montenegro, where you've got a really correct government which has been there for a long time. Mr. Jovanovic is the transcendent political entity there. If he leaves office, he might be dead, or he might have resigned, which would be really, really an aberration in his case, because he's gone from the president, to the Prime Minister, sort of like Putin with Medvedev, and now you're talking about this country that's pretty corrupt, and some people are like, well, are they protected because they're in NATO, or are they protected by authorities, and they openly know that they're corrupt? That is a problem in that, and that example-

Anne Applebaum: NATO historically has had non-democracies as members.

Tanya Domi: Including Turkey, right?

Anne Applebaum: Including Turkey, and prior to that, even further back. Spain was a member before it was a democracy, so there have been several other members of NATO who are not democracies, so it has a slightly different history. It did make democratic accountability, and separation of the civilian control of the defense, of the army, a condition for becoming a member of NATO in the 1990s, for the new east European states.

Tanya Domi: I just want to say, though, you do see, you hear these EU talking points, and you hear NATO. They're tracking together.

Anne Applebaum: Yeah, they are tracking together.

Tanya Domi: They are tracking together. I just want to say that.

Anne Applebaum: Yeah. No, no. They are tracking together, and it is certainly... Hungary is certainly a problem, I think, for NATO, not only because of its behavior, but also internal politics, but because Orban has now also decided to play both sides with... He's very friendly with the Russians. There's a big Russian nuclear power investment in Hungary, which is very, very fishy. The deal has always remained secret. It's thought that lots of bribes are being paid.

Tanya Domi: To Orban, yeah.

Anne Applebaum: There's suspicion that there's a lot of corruption in Hungary that's Russian connected, and that's been a problem for the US. I think it is a problem.
dilemma has been whether it's more important to keep these countries in, and therefore maintain a relationship to them, where whether at some point they'll be expelled. I think that's, we're a ways away from that moment, but we might be... We might eventually get there.

Tanya Domi: Speaking of the EU, you just wrote a piece on the Brexit, and the UK's agonizing process to obtain an agreement to leave. I thought one of the best sentences that you wrote, you were quoting about how the Brexit has devastated Britain's international reputation in respect for its democracy. You quoted in this sentence, "But even if you took a bunch of Italians, Poles, and Hungarians, kept them up all night, and got them drunk, they still wouldn't come up with anything as disastrous as what we are seeing in the House of Commons," unquote.

Anne Applebaum: Yes. It was my Italian friend said that to me. Yeah.

Tanya Domi: That was a great quote. That gives you a picture to think about. I always like to watch the Prime Minister's questions. I think it's one of the most interesting practices in a democracy, even as an American. I find it very interesting, and I've been watching it during these torturous debates. What do you... Clearly you've made your observations evident, how it's ruining UK's reputation.

Anne Applebaum: I think it's doing two things. I think it has... This was predictable, actually. It has really sucked all the oxygen out of everything else, and this is all that's happened in Britain for two years. There really no other politics. There's no other initiatives, and it's also meant that Britain doesn't really have a foreign policy, because they just don't have the... Everybody's doing Brexit.

Tanya Domi: The capacity.

Anne Applebaum: They don't have the capacity. They've had to deal with this very weird Russian poisonings and so on, so they have some, but they've really lost their... Because everybody else in Europe is sick of them, because it's been such a long, drawn out process, and they... The negotiation was difficult, and then the Prime Minister has been unable to get her Parliament to accept the deal that she did with Europe, it's really meant that Britain has very little influence or say over anything much right now, and that's very, very depressing, because Britain has, I think, played a very positive role in international politics for a long time, in a very... It's been a very important pillar of the West, and that's one piece of it. The other piece is that this has been really damaging for democracy, and this is both because of one of the effects of Brexit was that it very badly divided both major parties.

It's not just that the Tories are profoundly divided. The Labor Party is also divided. Labor happens to be led by a very extreme, unusual, again, in British history, far left leader who is personally in favor of Brexit also because he thinks of the EU as a kind of capitalist cabal, which is ironic, because the Tories think of
it as a kind of socialist cabal, but anyway. What you have is this spectacle of the ruling party being profoundly divided, so much so it can't get a deal through, and at the same time, the opposition not really offering any alternatives. It isn't like the Labor Party has some, okay, we can fix this if we just take power. Oh, you would do X, Y, and Z, and it would be over. It's also badly divided, and it's also very unclear what they're doing, and looks to a lot of people like they're kind of happy to let the crisis continue because that's good for their poll rating, and so it's a very ugly moment for domestic politics as well.

It's kind of... Both major parties seem incompetent. They both seem unable to get anything done, and I think a lot of people have also kind of lost the plot. We're now really down in the weeds of arguing about Parliamentary procedure, and what can be done, and what can't be done, and what are the different options, and what are the different trade issues, and I think for a lot of people, it's now kind of... It's boring, and frustrating, and...

Tanya Domi: They just want it to be over.

Anne Applebaum: They want it to be over, but of course, the terrible thing is, it's not going to be over. Even if they do crash out of the European Union 10 days from now, it still won't be over. There will be many more pieces of it to negotiate, and many more consequences to deal with, I think, probably for a decade or more. It's kind of... It's like a big meteorite has fallen on top of British politics and smashed it, and that's a... It's now indefinite on kind of endless crisis.

Tanya Domi: Yeah. It's, yeah, what you would call frozen conflict.


Tanya Domi: Frozen conflict.

Anne Applebaum: Like what the Russians are doing in eastern Ukraine.

Tanya Domi: Exactly. I do want to ask you really quickly, the Ukraine presidential elections are at the end of this month, and it seems to be hotly contested, and where do you think things will shake out? How do you think they'll shake out [crosstalk 00:39:40]?

Anne Applebaum: I really wouldn't want to predict.

Tanya Domi: Okay. Fair enough.

Anne Applebaum: I don't want to predict what's going to happen in the Ukraine elections.

Tanya Domi: Fair enough.
Anne Applebaum: Ukraine is, it's either half empty or half full. You can look at it in two ways. They have made a lot of progress in the last few years, and it is... The economy is recovered, and many of systems that didn't work before are working now, and I think there has been some attempt to curb corruption, and there are a lot of...

Tanya Domi: There's been some improvements.

Anne Applebaum: There's been some improvement. There's some pieces of the government that are working better. There's some parts of the country that are working better. I was just recently in western Ukraine, which is kind of miraculously well functioning, and was visiting [crosstalk 00:40:18].

Tanya Domi: That's good to hear.

Anne Applebaum: At the same time, if you want to look at it from the other point of view, it's still... It's profoundly divided by these different oligarchic group, who control different pieces of the media. It's almost, in Hungary, you have Orban controlling all the media. Ukraine, it's kind of divided between these different oligarchs. You had these different oligarchic groups, and you still have pretty profound corruption problems, the academics.

Tanya Domi: There's a lot of contestation going on.

Anne Applebaum: There's a lot of contestation, and people there are also fed up, and as you probably know, one of the main candidates in the presidential race is now literally a comedian who plays a president on television.

Tanya Domi: Yes. I did hear about that. That is-

Anne Applebaum: It's one of these protest votes. We like the president that he plays on TV. We'd like to have that president. It's very frustrating for everyone else.

Tanya Domi: It's maybe mockery, more or less, of the-

Anne Applebaum: Mockery.

Tanya Domi: Mockery?

Anne Applebaum: By the way, mockery, parody, these are... This is a mood you have in a lot of democracies, and I think it's also connected to the nature of political, modern political information, a lot of which is parodic. A lot of what the internet does is... I think because it's a medium that is distance, where you're distanced from events, you're several layers removed from it, you're reading it on your phone, it's somehow conducive to parody in a way that no previous medium was.
Tanya Domi: Yeah. I want to ask you very quickly. You talked about Russia being really, that Putin is weak when he's leveraging these disinformation efforts, and that actually Russia's got a lot of weakness there. They don't have the cash. They're not a very diverse economy. It's based on gas and oil, but you're seeing an ascended China, an ascended China, whose investing, it's expected to be almost $1.3 trillion on their Belt and Road Initiative, and all of a sudden, it seems that Russia and China's getting along together. They seem to say positive things about each other. They give each other a lot of space. What do you think about that relationship, and who's up and who's down, so to speak?

Anne Applebaum: I think the Russians are very afraid of the Chinese, and I don't think there's that much love lost between them. I'm not that worried about them somehow becoming friends, and in the longer term, the Russians are very nervous about the fact that China's wealthier now. The border regions, it's very, very noticeable of the Chinese side of the border. You have big buildings, and wealthy towns, and on the Russian side, a lot of poverty, so everybody's very conscious of this being a very uneven relationship, and I think the Russians would rather, would still rather do business with and live in the West, the Russian elite, than they would in China. You don't see them living in Beijing, whereas they do live in London.

Tanya Domi: Trying to buy apartments in Beijing.

Anne Applebaum: Exactly.

Tanya Domi: Right. Right.

Anne Applebaum: There is a... It's complicated, but I do think, yeah, I think we are... China is another... It's another version of authoritarianism, which is rising, and which is seeking to compete with us in different ways. They have a different attitude, in that the Russians don't like the current sort of world system and balance of power as it is.

Tanya Domi: Multipolar. Yeah.

Anne Applebaum: They would like to undermine us. They would like to undermine the Western democracies. They would like to change the rules. China likes the rules. It's doing well in the current system, and it's fine with the rules, and so they don't have the same... They haven't kind of taken aim at Democratic politics in the way that Russians have, but as you correctly pointed out, they have other kinds of projects. They're very interested in the Balkans. They're very interested in southeast Asia. They're looking to make new alliances. They're doing...

Tanya Domi: Their soft power overtures are very interesting to watch. Yeah.

Anne Applebaum: Yeah. It's a little bit different from ours. They're not offering big ideas, or they're offering cheap roads, and pipelines.
Tanya Domi: Right. We'll build a bridge for you.

Anne Applebaum: Right.

Tanya Domi: We'll build a bridge. I think that what you're seeing is, I saw them even in Sarajevo, they had a photography exhibit, and paintings, and then they were playing Chinese music, and people were being taught to dance, Chinese dances.

Anne Applebaum: Yeah, I'm not too worried about that actually.

Tanya Domi: No, no. That is kind of nice, but it's very... I took notice because I had never seen them there before. They are there. They are there. They're definitely there.

Anne Applebaum: They're definitely in eastern Europe, and they're definitely in the Western Balkans.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, so Anne Applebaum, I really want to thank you for coming today. It's been great conversation.

Anne Applebaum: Thank you. Thanks for inviting me.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project, and thanks to today's guest, Washington Post columnist and author Anne Applebaum. The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.