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|  | Speak Up - Kōrerotia  Responses to the Ukraine crisis  20 April 2022 |
| Female | This programme was first broadcast on Canterbury’s access media station Plains FM and was made with the assistance of New Zealand on Air. |
| Female | Coming up next conversations on human rights with “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”, here on Plains FM. |
| Sally | E ngā mana,  E ngā reo,  E ngā hau e whā  Tēnā koutou katoa  Nau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”.    Tune in as our guests “Speak Up”, sharing their unique and powerful experiences and opinions and may you also be inspired to “Speak Up” when the moment is right.  Nau mai ki te hōtaka tika tangata, “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”. I’m your host Sally Carlton, ko Sally Carlton ahau. In this episode, we’ll be discussing the Ukraine crisis, particularly looking at the ways in which people have been responding.  Just a little bit of background: on the 24 February 2022, Russia launched a military offensive against Ukraine, that’s almost two months ago as the show goes to air.  In terms of human rights issues - goodness, the list is very extensive. We’re hearing allegations of war crimes - things like rape, summary executions, attacks against civilians and civilian target schools, hospitals, residential areas. We’re hearing allegations of genocide, destructions of homes and towns, we’re seeing footage of children and families living underground trying to carry out their education in metro stations and in bunkers. We’re hearing of shortages of food and water and petrol and other necessities.  It’s certainly the largest displacement crisis Europe has seen since World War II. In mid-April, an estimated 4.5 million people have already fled Ukraine’s borders - they’re refugees, once they’ve left the border - and another 6.5 million internally displaced within Ukraine itself. We’re also hearing allegations of discrimination against people who are trying to flee, particularly people of colour but also against the transgender community.  And as things drag on longer and longer and longer, how will things look in the longer term as well once hopefully the conflict starts to wind up, how will things fare in the future as Ukraine faces a massive rebuilding task? Some of the estimates at the moment: The World Bank is recently saying Ukraine’s economy is predicted to shrink by 45% this year, the UNDP projects up to 90% of Ukrainians could face poverty and extreme economic vulnerability as we move forward. So we’re not just thinking right now, we’re thinking how are things going to fare in the next few years as well.  Obviously it’s a conflict, the situation is changing all the time and it is very difficult to get a sense of exactly what is going on, not least because Russia and Ukraine are providing us with different interpretations of the situation. But what we do know is that there have been an incredible range of responses to the conflict. From western democracies, we’ve seen things like unprecedented sanctions; we’ve seen companies, banks, withdrawing operations from Russia or suspending their operations in Russia; millions of dollars of aid and millions of dollars of weaponry - which really is something that bothers me quite a lot, but I guess what do you do, it’s a conflict - and we’ve also seen such a massive outpouring of solidarity around the world, as well.  So what do we make of this situation? I think this is probably our big question for today. How do we begin to try and make sense of it, how do we begin to try and understand what’s going on? What does it mean for Europe? What does it mean for the world? And another issue: Why haven’t we seen the same sort of scale of response with other recent crises?  So we’ve got some fantastic guests joining us today, I’m really excited to hear from both of you. Professor Natalia Chaban from the University of Canterbury and Associate Professor James (or Jim) Headley from the University of Otago. It would be lovely to hear from both of you a wee bit about your expertise and what you’re bringing to this panel today and why it is that you’re going to be taking part. |
| Natalia | Thank you Sally, kia ora everyone. My name is Natalia Chaban and I work at the University of Canterbury as a Professor. I am specialising in studies of political communication and I hope today I will share with you a couple of insights into a very complex fabric of information flows around the war, look at different sides – Ukrainian, Russian side, but also international side. We are all in the ocean of information and I hope we can have a discussion about it today. |
| Sally | Thanks Natalia. It might also be lovely to hear a wee bit about the personal side of it that you bring to this as well. |
| Natalia | Oh absolutely, you can hear from my accent I am not from New Zealand originally, I was born in Ukraine and until 24 February, my parents lived in the Ukraine and unfortunately they left the country because of the war. They really didn’t want to go, they are safety now, they are staying with my sister who lives in the United States - but at the moment they are suddenly retired; they were working until the 24 February, suddenly they have to live in a country where they don’t speak the language, they don’t speak English. Suddenly they are on the mercy of my sister, suddenly from being independent and also in their 70s, they became more dependent in many aspects of their life. So I am tracing that story through my family but I have my friends, my classmates and other relatives who are still in Ukraine. |
| Sally | And our heart is with you and with them, it must be the most difficult situation. |
| Natalia | Thank you, yes it is not something I have ever anticipated in my life ever. |
| Sally | And Jim? |
| Jim | Kia ora. So I am Jim Hedley from University of Otago from the politics programme. Professionally, my area of expertise is Russian foreign policy, I also teach on nationalism and I’ve researched in the past about comparisons really, the breakup of Yugoslavia and the breakup of the Soviet Union and really I suspect what we’re seeing in Ukraine is some of the kind of repercussions still of that. And I think some of my kind of response to it is the kind of bringing together that foreign policy aspect but also nationalism studies. But also I’ve been seeing it a bit through the lens of what I studied in and to a certain extent experienced vicariously at least in the 1990s with the wars in Yugoslavia. I knew a lot of refugees and people who had left Yugoslavia in the 1990s when I was studying in London and you know, we’ve got a kind of recurrence of many of the issues and I like to make the point that the Russian position then was that they actually voted to impose sanctions against Serbia for doing exactly the kind of thing that now Russia is doing and that’s why sanctions are against Russia now. So we’ve had that horrendous kind of switch around in Russian foreign policy.  So I don’t have the kind of personal connection as such - although of course I’ve been to Russia a number of times. Just professionally, it’s shocking and that’s something that we will talk about, I think - just why 24 February changed things so much despite horrendous things Russia had done before, why this was perhaps so shocking and trying to kind of dealing with that. I’m kind of dealing with PhD students with Russia in this horrendous situation where they can’t speak to their parents because their parents are buying the propaganda, they’re falling out with them. Of course it’s very different, I’m not in exile and I’m not a refugee but it is affecting a lot of people in a lot of ways. |
| Sally | And there will be I’m sure so much to talk about in what you’ve just touched on there, Jim. I guess to kick start our kōrero today: How have we got to the 24 February? - and Jim, in your brief intro there, you did touch on Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union and the breakdown of the Soviet Union and that’s no doubt part of what has in the long term fuelled, I guessed, the situation we’re currently seeing. But it would be great to hear from both of you the background, I suppose, to the saga that is currently unfolding. |
| Jim | Yeah I mean if we go back to the breakup of the Soviet Union, I like to kind of think of it almost as the breakup of the last kind of big multi-national land-based empire in Europe - certainly the issues about where the borders are, about minorities who maybe feel that they are not part of the nation. Now what happened was when the Soviet Union broke up, the republics that made it up, the 15 republics, were recognised by each other and by the outside world in their existing borders and Russia accepted that, accepted Ukraine in its existing borders.  There were some issues around Crimea at the time and so on but the Russian government at the time had a very different approach. And then gradually there’s been this switch, under Putin particularly, towards the idea that Russia is there to protect ethnic Russians living outside the borders of the Russian Federation, that those people’s rights are threatened and ultimately claiming the right to use force to protect them. And ultimately, of course, also challenging the idea of that sacrosanct nature of the borders which the republics emerged within. So Putin wrote this inflammatory article last year, July last year, where he basically denied the existence of the Ukrainian nation as such. Said that it’s just a kind of sister group within the family of the Russian nation and also made this huge diatribe about the borders, about Ukraine being an artificial state, constituted really by the Bolsheviks and the kind of the technical legal point claiming that when the Soviet Union broke up, it was a dissolution of the Union Treaty of 1922 therefore they should go back to the borders which existed then and Ukraine’s borders were much smaller then.  So all of this at the time was inflammatory and of course it raised the kind of rhetoric for what there is now. But we’ve seen it already with Georgia in 2008, that Russia was no longer prepared to recognise these borders and then of course - and Natalia might say more about this - the more recent history of course with the Revolution of Dignity and the changes around 2013 and 2014 which kind of then leads much more to the current situation. |
| Natalia | When you were talking about the collapse of the Soviet Union, I remembered that in 1991 I was a teenager who was very annoyed that in August all my favourite TV shows were cancelled because the coup was going on the putsch, the coup was going on and they were playing the Swan Lake ballet again and again and that music and that image of the Swan Lake ballet - such beautiful music and such a beautiful ballet - has become forever associated with the coup and collapse of the Soviet Union.  What I wanted to say that during the Soviet Union, it was very clear who was Ukrainian, who was Georgian - Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic or Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. They were marked by different folk costumes, different languages, different constitutions. Ukraine has its constitution, Georgia had its constitution, as Soviet Socialists Republic.  And if you think about the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first republic who voted for independence was the Russian Federation because that was a political play by Boris Yeltsin to grab power from Mikhail Gorbachev. So if you look back, there is nobody to blame for the collapse of the Soviet Union but the political actors specifically in the Russian Federation. Yes, Ukraine was the next republic to vote for independence but because Russian voted for independence. It’s about the collapse of the Soviet Union, there is quite a bit of drama and intrigue but Jim, you are absolutely right. Ukraine since that time has showed specific, very distinct dynamic in its historical development.  First of all, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new social research service had a survey public opinion poll about the perceptions of democracy, not only in the former Soviet Union but also in the former socialist blocks countries, and the general public from Ukraine scored much higher than even Poland. So the appreciation of democracy was higher even in the very beginning of that post-Soviet existence.  Ukraine is the only former Soviet republic who had two revolutions. The first one was bloodless, people didn’t die, and Ukraine felt very proud with democratic tools you can actually achieve a change in society and it was a massive feed into the civil society of Ukraine. And something which Russian Federation of 2022 totally has underestimated is the development of that civil society within Ukraine in the 30 years of independence which ultimately has led to the second maidan and the second decision of people that they disagree with certain political decisions and they are not afraid to say it in a different way.  And so that makes Ukraine a little bit different than other post-Soviet republics: the three Baltic states had a different path because they were accepted to the ascension of the European Union pretty early; then we have central Asian republics who have a different type of relationship with the Russian Federation; and then we have the three Caucasian republics - but we won’t go there.  This whole area will remain an area to study for years to come. I can talk about history a lot but my memories: Swan Lake ballet. |
| Jim | When the independent TV station shut down and they walked out the studio and they put on Swan Lake and this was a great message of replaying that - and in fact that’s what I’ve been writing in certain analyses pieces I’ve done - really, what Putin is trying to do is bring about that coup, to make it work this time, almost to reconstitute a Russian-dominated Soviet Union or at least a Slavic Union. And of course an authoritarian one and one which is stopping Ukraine’s democratisation and orientation towards Europe.  And this is where, of course, Natalia is quite right, it was Yeltsin who kind of pushed for this, partly for political reasons - but of course for Putin, he was a traitor in some ways, I suppose, to the Russian cause. So we’ve had that real kind of switch around. In the 1990s, there was worries about danger of somebody coming in and trying to reverse it all and when Putin first came in, it didn’t look like he was going to but now he has become that person.  Just one other thing I said about how he claims that Ukraine is an artificial state: well, all states in many ways are kind of accidents of history where their borders are. There is the national identity anyway - a long standing one around language and narratives of history - but also just the fact of living together in a state for 30 years and particularly with that democratic process and so on and again, I think that’s something that Putin underestimated. |
| Natalia | On this note I would like to add that Ukraine is a multinational state, it always had big communities of ethnic Russian, ethnic Bulgarians, ethnic Slovakians, ethnic Hungarians, Polish. Ukraine borders too many countries, there is always a cross-border communication. In the south, we have Greek settlements from much, much older times. And the fact that the person is ethnically Russian, doesn’t mean that this person living in Ukraine will use Russian as their first language. This person could use Ukrainian as their first language and the fact that somebody who is ethnically Ukrainian is not necessarily this person who will speak Ukrainian as their first language. They might speak Russian due to education or where they live. It’s much more complicated. And what Jim is talking about, it’s not the ethnic identity that matters, it’s the civic identity and what Ukraine has succeeded in 30 years is to develop a civic identity.  It doesn’t matter what language you speak, it doesn’t matter what ethnicity you are, as soon as you have a passport of a citizen of Ukraine, it means you adhere to certain norms and values. Many of the decisions, I think, by the Russian Federation was still looking back in the 19th century concept of ethnicity and nation - and Ukraine has moved on. |
| Sally | Jim, you touched on there around potentially the driver behind this being expansion of the Russian borders. Is that what we think is going on? |
| Jim | I mean they’ve already the changed the borders with the annexation of Crimea or attempted to do so, so that’s already happened and yes I think it’s the same scenario that at the very least by recognising these so-called breakaway republics in the east of Ukraine then presumably that would be a similar route towards incorporating them into the Russian Federation.  I mean, this was one of the things that shocked people, I suppose, was this attempt really to take control over the whole of Ukraine and what that might mean in the long term. This is why it was so shocking, I think, on the 24 of February. First of all, it’s very hard to see any kind of way back, any sort of negotiation, any interim ceasefire-type thing because it was such a clear aggression. But also the scale of it, what was this going to mean in terms of what they were going to do with Ukraine.  We really don’t know whether the Russian military top brass and the political leadership really did believe that Russian troops would be seen as liberators - because they’re not even seen as liberators among the ethnic Russian population; places like Kharkiv, of course, have been subjected to horrendous bombardment and it’s having the opposite effect. Just seeing that if they really did want to institute, I suppose, a puppet government like the Soviet Union did in Hungary and Czechoslovakia and so on, this meant full-on occupation - which I could never see was actually ever going to work.  But ultimately presumably some sort of reconstitution of some sort of union. So yeah maybe not even necessarily incorporating all parts of Ukraine into the Russian Federation as such, but presumably some sort of reconstituted union and I kind of mention east Slavic because of its based on this idea of ethnic Russian and then Ukrainians and Belarusians being kind of part of one big ethnicity, then that presumably means Belarus as well, maybe northern Kazakhstan, Transnistria, Moldova, and so on. So that might have been the plan. I don’t see that it can happen now, partly because of the strength of the Ukrainian resistance and the fact that Russia is now caught up with the specific conflict in Ukraine that it’s hard to kind of see how it can threaten other areas. But that might have been the ultimate plan. |
| Natalia | For me, one of the key moments is the objective of the war to ‘de-nazify’ and to ‘de-militarise’ Ukraine - which sort of doesn’t deal with the just grab of the territory; it has more. Going back to eradication of the values and norms which have been developing in Ukraine for 30 years and of course if you remember the Budapest Memorandum, Russia was one of the states who signed up to warrant the security of Ukraine for demilitarising. So Ukraine has demilitarised already in the past and there are still debates about shouldn’t Ukraine have kept at least a couple of those nuclear missiles, just in case.  Isn’t it almost ironic to talk about demilitarisation when Ukraine has done it and is attacked by the guarantorof the security? |
| Jim | Just on that denazification: This caused quite a stir, even abroad, this piece by a supposed political scientist in Russia, RIA Novosti from one of the main news channels, the other week, basically talking about how Russia has this duty to de-nazify Ukraine. Every single line of the article, was quite a long article, had ‘de-nazify’ in it or ‘Ukraine is Nazi’. It never defined what it meant but ultimately it seemed to mean that they were doing things that Russia didn’t like and it talked about the duty of Russia to de-nazify and that would take a generation.  This isn’t necessarily official policy but it’s been released and it’s on the official channel and this is supporting Natalia’s point: it goes beyond demilitarising or whatever, they’re actually kind of controlling and changing that whole kind of mindset and values - which is going to be impossible. |
| Natalia | And of course, we have to mention that the whole Nazi thing is the total product of propaganda. People know that Nazis are bad, it’s easier to drive that vehicle, but it’s sort of scary, also, because the idea of Ukraine being a Nazi state is not new in Russia and the Russian Federation media have been quite persistent over the years to instil and install that idea in the minds of the general public. There are educated people in Russia, people who travel overseas - it is so dangerous to say, “Oh the whole Russian people”, that would not be true - but a big part of population in Russia does trust the state-run media, they might not have opportunities to travel outside of the country to see other things. It’s something to remember, that we are dealing here with quite a sophisticated propaganda machine. |
| Jim | And it goes back years, not just the years of Ukraine but this whole glorification of the Great Patriotic War of the Second World War which has become like the way in which Putin has managed to kind of tie together conservative pre-Soviet values with the legacy of the Soviet Union. And so that great victory of the Second World War and defeating Nazism - the whole kind of repetition and glorification of that over the years, including the younger generation - then the moment, you know, you talk about de-nazifying and beating the Nazis again in Ukraine, it chimes with people. So the groundwork for that has already been laid, unfortunately. |
| Sally | And I guess this ties into my final question for this segment, which gets to that notion of groundwork: Was this completely unexpected or have there been signs? |
| Natalia | Well I’ll tell you, it was a shock for me. I still hoped that common sense and maybe logic of we are in the 21st century, it is a globalising world, everybody is interconnected and interdependent and the sort of tools, they are hurting not only the ones who are attacked but the ones who are attacking. And we are already seeing it: How many connections are being severed by partners because they don’t want to be associated? - states but also private business who did not have to do it because they are not state entities. We see examples of how the perpetrator is taken out of the network of the world and it is very, very dangerous for business but also for information. There will be consequences.  So for me it was a surprise. I did hope, deep down, that this will not happen although all the signs were there - we heard about the troops on the border, we heard the letter, we heard the meeting of the council where pretty much every high official in Russia pledged their loyalty and decision to go to the end - all the signs were pointing, but deep down I still had a hope that it would not happen. |
| Jim | And even then, this full-on invasion… So what I did expect was, especially after that recognition of the so-called republics, that that’s where the war would be focused rather than this full-on invasion. So I was shocked and surprised partly because - and I think this has changed over the last few years - that Putin previously was fairly pragmatic and seized on opportunities. So I think Crimea was a bit like that, whereas this went so beyond and seems to be so against the long-term interests of Russia - for lots of reasons, but one is the Russian soldiers dying and the impact that might have in the long term. About the economic aspects, about the isolation from the west: Putin was all about kind of orientating Russia to Europe, now what? They’re going to be kind of propped up by China? That goes against a lot of identity issues in Russia and Putin’s own identity, I’d have thought. So for all of these reasons, it just seemed very unlikely. But once the troops were there, there was a dynamic about it and I think that’s where people in the know - and we had some fairly clear messages from US intelligence and this was going to happen - but it had almost created a dynamic on its own and it had been decided.  I was actually watching yesterday one of Zelensky’s advisors, Oleksiy Arestovych, and he did this interview back in 2019 where he basically predicted all of this. Now what he basically said was that Russia won’t respect Ukrainian neutrality, it’s going to kind of keep encroaching in the east but if Ukraine makes a move towards NATO which it has to do, then Russia will invade to stop it becoming a member of NATO and he said it’s going to happen 2021/22/23 and he was pretty well dead right and I think a lot of his insight looking at it in retrospect, was right about the dynamics of it.  One of the early things that shocked me was this fairly kind of realist but sort of mainstream foreign policy analyst that I’d kind of read about over the years, Sergei Karaganov. I’ve read an article by him justifying the war and saying Putin had to do this, this was inevitable. So even in the mainstream elite, this kind of acceptance that Russia had to do this to protect its security which I think is complete rubbish but seems to be part of the narrative there at least. So once all of that is set in train, perhaps we should have expected it.  It is something you have to question about whether we got it wrong in some sort of ways and that raises also about whether the west should have responded more strongly to Russia in the past, whether this would have come earlier or not. In a way, at least over the years NATO has been doing a lot of arming and training - one of the reasons Ukraine’s strong resistance. But yeah, two things about whether we were kind of wrong and also about how the west should deal with Russia, I think there’s a lot of kind of soul-searching going on, including in myself. |
| Natalia | Well from the position of a political communications scholar, there were plenty of signs since the early 2000s to see that the mass culture production was embarking on forming the image of Ukraine as the ‘other’ and that ‘other’ had particular characteristics, that ‘other’ was seen as one of us but turning into traitor. So there were plenty of movies - fictional movies not documentaries - showing Ukrainians as collaborators to fascists. Plenty of productions where Ukrainians were seen turning their back on Russia, not only World War Two politics. If you look in the period preceding the Crimean invasion and annexation of Crimea, there is a great number of movies and TV productions and they were developing that theme now not just a traitor but the ‘other’, the enemy. Yes, you can see that there is responsibility lying on the cultural personalities in Russia.  There is this movie called T34 and it’s about the Russia tank brigade, 300 Spartans, black and white. This is like a computer game but it was very clear in its message. But there were other productions which were targeting more educated, more sophisticated audiences and they were much more subtle in their message, the poison was much more subtle. But I just wanted to bring one example: one of the latest/last productions between Ukrainians and Russian cinematographers was a movie about a Ukrainian sniper during World War Two and it was done with great respect to this personality, how war is destructive for human beings. But the translation in Ukrainian, it was ‘She is unbroken’ which would be seen as ‘Ukraine is unbroken’ because Ukraine is a feminine gender in Ukrainian. While in Russian movie theatres, it was going until the title ‘Battle for Sebastopol’. Even in that little detail, it demonstrates that the framing was rather different. But yes, from the position of political communication, that was visible for at least a decade. A consistent othering of Ukrainians and framing them as the other to Russians. |
| Jim | Yes, and as you say, ‘traitor’ because they’re presenting their narrative of Ukraine as being part of the Russian nation or the bigger family then it’s turning against its own family and turning to the west. And you’re getting that in Russia of course as well, this kind of othering against internal so-called traitors. And I’d say also democratising, western-orientated, European Union-allied Ukraine is such a threat, of course, to Putin’s regime, it’s the opposite of what Putin is about in Russia. So it’s also that threat to his regime so that’s why there’s that othering as well. |
| Sally | We might jump in now and have our first song. Natalia you have suggested a song by a Ukrainian group, Okean Elzy. |
| Natalia | This is one of the cult rock group, they are known not only in Ukraine, they have quite established international reputation. They toured around the world. The song was quite popular specifically in the context of the Donbas war and it is now revisited, people play it again. It’s called ‘Obijmy’. |
|  | **MUSIC BY OKEAN ELZY – OBIJMY** |
| Natalia | I am just going to start with the fact that it’s 49 days of war and we still have news about the war in Ukraine as the top news. This is almost unheard of, very often even the war news don’t go ahead of other news for that long. This is, as you mentioned in the beginning almost two months. There was one day when *The Guardian* put the news about the Ukraine as a second line of news, that was very quickly corrected, I don’t know why, did they realise they did it or somebody complained or wrote? But unfortunately, the war of Ukraine keeps coming with more and more shocking twists and of course one of those was the massacre in Bucha. But again, Bucha became a symbol: there are more small cities and bigger cities - we will know, I’m sure, still even more about Mariupol - but these stories, they keep coming and these developments don’t stop shocking or surprising people.  So we do see Ukraine as a top news of the western media and even New Zealand FM stations are looking into the war in Ukraine. The Breakfast Show plays usually pop songs but nowadays when you drive in the car to work and you listen to morning shows, in the news segments you hear updates about Ukraine. And in 20 years of my life in New Zealand, this is new for me, I’ve never heard updates about international far away wars in FM morning news segments.  There is a trifecta. First of all, western media, many of them are liberal character, they are prioritising newsworthiness but also they are very clear about what news sells and news about the war always sell - and as I mentioned before, there are many developments in Ukraine unfortunately which keep feeding into that newsworthiness component.  I think the second factor is actually Ukraine itself. We already talked how Ukraine became different through the latest decades and just even the latest events of the maidan in 2013/2014. The annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas. Ukraine came into the international media with big profile and big visibility and many discussions. So Ukraine potentially, let’s say in New Zealand is very incognito - people don’t trade with Ukraine with Ukraine much, people don’t go there as tourists - but those events definitely have put Ukraine on the map.  And finally of course, the figure of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the president, is the leader of the country. He attracted massive global media attention and I will allow myself to say that this is due to his many qualities as a politician: his charisma, his humour, his bravery, his communication skills. But also ultimately you can be all this and you can still not hold much attention. I would argue here that he represents a new generation of political leaders in the world. He is not the typical post-Soviet leader. If you look at Vladimir Putin or Poroshenko, you see even visually they are very different, while with Volodymyr Zelenskyy we have a completely different post-Soviet but I would say modern, I would say western-type leader who is horizontal in his communication with people, who is not afraid of difficult questions but doesn’t have to rehearse or be rigid in responses, who sort of takes a little bit of risk. These are the three factors I would name. So the media characteristics themselves and then of course Ukraine as a country and Zelenskyy as the leader. |
| Jim | Would things have turned quite different had Poroshenko been the president still? He was a very different figure. |
| Natalia | Yes, Poroshenko was again a strong president, sort of more of that post-Soviet cohort. He grew out of that system. While Zelenskyy being non-traditional politician who was not engaged in any political interactions before he decided to run for presidency in a way was a fresh approach but in general if you think about even now, he is aware that we live in the world of open communication, international communication and he himself is a great communicator and he uses modern tools, virtual diplomacy, addressing parliament via Zoom. Every day he has an address but we can see it on YouTube, every day he meets with different people, he walked with Boris Johnson on the streets so all sorts of different things, social media. But he has a talented team, a team of communicators who are his advisors, and it’s also a gift to collect people who will be talented communicators in ways with different skills, different appeals. That’s something to think about, it’s a talent to have a talented team. |
| Sally | Certainly as a lay person, watching his addresses, it really strikes me: he always looks straight into the camera, he’s always dressed in the same colours - whether he’s wearing a t-shirt or a jacket, it’s always the same colours - whether it’s symbolic or not, it’s that army green colour. Yes, you’re right, it looks like he’s almost doing selfie videos sometimes out on the street. Here I am, this is me walking through the streets of my city. I think it’s been quite striking how personalising he is trying to make his communications. |
| Jim | …to watch the address he did to the Russian people on the 24 February, it was a very powerful address and it was talking about exactly those things about how we developed our identity, we got these names of parks and things which mean something to us and they don’t mean something to you and that’s what having a national identity is. But it is striking re-watching it because he was wearing a suit and tie and it just looked really kind of in a different era and it was 24 February. |
| Natalia | But speaking about clothes, it is actually symbolic and I think it is intentional. First of all, it presents how atypical the situation is, that he actually addresses the top leaders of the world wearing very non-official military-style outfit and it became his almost signature look and it also shows that he doesn’t care how he looks. For him what matters is the outcome, the results. But also if you think how the negotiation team looked because if you look at the negotiation set up when the two teams are sitting in front of each other, the Russian Federation team sits in suits and in ties and all Ukrainian negotiators are also in the military-style khaki colours.  The clothes actually tell us a story. There are information from the Russian Federation that Zelenskyy doesn’t live in Ukraine anymore, that he escaped, he is in safety - so when he makes these videos, he specifically shows that he stands in front of his administration, on the streets of Kiev and he hasn’t left. There is another message in his social media appearances. |
| Sally | Something also that struck me is a) how much is coming through social media feeds but b) how much street art I’ve seen coming through my social media feeds which I guess a really popular representation against what’s taking place. And one of the ones that struck me the most, if we’re thinking about portrayals, was Zelenskyy has Harry Potter and Putin as Voldemort. The underdog versus evil. |
| Natalia | Have you seen the memes with Zelenskyy being like a Marvel hero? My daughter is twelve and it has been circulated in their virtual universe, that meme, so you definitely see that popular culture coming in.  But in terms of art and war, I think it needs to be a different podcast. There are many talented, brilliant artists who are at the moment reflecting on the war and producing very powerful work. There are people who are sitting in the bomb shelters and they are playing classical music to support their fellows. We can talk about ballet principals going into the war action. Culture and war, this is a big one. And of course we could reflect the other side, how many cultural personalities from Russia chose to leave the country - I’m talking about classical art but also mass culture celebrities - and their departure is quite meaningful. Some of these moments, I suppose, they are overlooked here because for people these celebrities don’t mean anything, people don’t speak the language, they don’t know their songs.  Then on the other side, some celebrities decided to stay and the response differs. Some of them became ardent supporters of the current actions by the president, others keep silent. I’ve been following Russian stand-up for some time and the Russian stand-up comedian, he’s actually Kazakh but is very popular in Russia around the border, went to the United States with his show where the audience confronted him with the question, this was day 46, we haven’t heard a single joke, a single reflection on the war and he said, “What do you want from me? I’m afraid, I have a family”. So some of them choose this and some of them choose a position of voicing while staying in the country. So there is a range of responses but there is a role of culture in this conflict and we will need to look more and with greater detail. |
| Sally | One other issue that I was wondering about raising with you two was the issue of terminology and we touched right at the beginning on labelling. We’ve heard about war crimes, we’ve heard about genocide, these sorts of very high-stake, high-emotion terms. |
| Jim | It is clear that war crimes of various kinds of happened. Invasion itself is a crime of aggression which is one of the four main crimes that the International Criminal Court can investigate and it’s such a clear-cut abrogation of Article 2 of the UN Charter, it’s just so clear. However, because Russia withdrew from the International Criminal Court in 2016 it can’t be prosecuted… or in fact, because the Criminal Court is for individuals, Putin as head of state can’t be prosecuted for that crime but they’re looking at ways to do it.  On the genocide aspect, Russia justified in terms of a genocide against ethnic Russians and so what Ukraine did was then took it to the International Court of Justice which is for states, can investigate crimes of genocide and the majority decision and therefore the binding one that this wasn’t a case of genocide against the Russians and therefore Russia’s claim of this being a legitimate reason to invade was invalid and therefore Russia must stop and withdraw. So that rhetoric almost backfired but an interesting point comes out of that, that this is a long standing tactic of Russian propaganda, of muddying the water of language and so to kind of misuse the term genocide to then almost delegitimise any kind of proper investigation of whether genocide is happening. And also of course to sow doubts, particularly in the west, to say well maybe there’s some truth in this.  In terms of the actual investigation, different political leaders outside Ukraine have taken different positions. So Biden has two times I think said that this was maybe genocide, Macron has come out and said we shouldn’t be using that term necessarily partly because it has quite a precise definition in international law and also because to kind of prove it, you need to show both intent. And again, this is about individuals - if you talk about Putin then you’ve got to show that he had that intent, has that intent to destroy in whole or in part, the Ukrainian nation and that what’s happening is because of his orders, or in fact that he hasn’t prevented actions to do that. Now in some ways you could interpret that as almost inherently the fact because if he refuses to accept the idea of the Ukrainian nation, that almost is a denial of Ukraine as a nation. Jacinda Ardern has also been quite cautious on this and basically said it’s up to the International Criminal Court to investigate, it’s up to them to show these links, we need to allow the legal process to run its course.  Then course you have war crimes which are specific crimes taking place during the war, killing of civilians, bombardments and so on which again I’m absolutely clear are happening. There are actually investigators going there from the International Criminal Court and other investigators, Ukrainian and other ones from Europe getting evidence which may in the future be used to go to the Criminal Court and because Ukraine is not a member but has since the Crimea and Donbas war allowed jurisdiction of the Criminal Court in Ukrainian matters. This could happen in the long term - although of course to get the people who really matter at the top, you’ve got to get them to the Hague.  Crimes against humanity, which is the larger scale ones, again I think are fairly clearly are happening but it’s kind of over to the lawyers and the prosecutors to try and get the evidence to prove it in the long term. |
| Natalia | I could add on that note of the legality, that Ukrainian lawyers, they’re very clear about the legal frame for the term genocide. There is a lot of work done by the Office of Attorney General in Ukraine documenting the crimes which happened in Ukraine inflicted by the Russian Federation. There are teams of experts working on collecting evidence. Don’t forget that Volodymyr Zelenskyy himself is a lawyer by education. It’s not only Biden who now used the word genocide, this latest news is Justin Trudeau in Canada also recognises that what is happening Ukraine is genocide.  But in general you are right, language does matter and in a different podcast I mentioned that even minor detail, ‘the Ukraine’ is actually an important detail because saying ‘the Ukraine’ sends a signal that Ukraine is not a country, it’s a province.  But I thought I will attract your attention to another interesting development, a different perspective when looking into language. You know that in the first days of war, the sailors on the island, they actually said a rude word to the Russian military ship. It is language which you would not use in a normal way because it is not the vocabulary which is welcomed in a well-mannered society. That strata of vocabulary suddenly became reused in Ukraine at times of war. |
| Jim | Ukraine issued a stamp celebrating this sailor swearing at the Russian warship. |
| Sally | Well speaking of culture: Jim, you’ve selected a fantastic song for us which I think is a really powerful way of showing quite a lot of what we’ve recently talked about, the power of culture to challenge or support what’s going on politically. |
| Jim | It really does address this kind of question about whether they can risk speaking and how they might speak but also the importance of culture and even actually the fact of swearing. What this is: one of my PhD students, one of the people she’s in contact with in Russia has set up this choir in St Petersburg and they call themselves Vox Humana or Human Voice. “We have no faces and no names, we have to be anonymous but Ukraine, our hearts are with you. Russia, while you cannot speak, we will sing for you and hope the world will hear it”. They basically recorded themselves over Zoom and things and they are very different styles of musicians so musically it’s quite weird but the song itself is called **‘**Strashnoe slovo \*\*\*\*\* [beep]’ and the beep of course is *voyna* [war] but they’re not allowed to say that. The song is called ‘Dreadful word called “\*\*\*”’ but with the beep and the first line is along the line of “Children can’t say that word” and about that silencing and what that means for language in fact, so what we were talking about there and then there’s a lot of sarcasm in it but it’s says caution, we don’t swear, we sing of obscenities. So it’s exactly that point, I suppose actually. |
| Sally | And it sounds a bit strange because there is beautiful singing and then beeeeep. |
| Jim | That’s right, yes. |
| Sally | Thanks Jim, what a fantastic message but also what an honour to be able to play it on this show, I think that’s pretty powerful. |
| Jim | Thanks and a part of that point was to try and get it across because they are voiceless, they can’t play it in Russia. |
|  | **MUSIC BY VOX HUMANA - DREADFUL WORD CALLED \*\*\*** |
| Sally | This is Speak Up – Kōrerotia and we’re talking about the war in Ukraine with James Headley and Natalia Chaban. Just in this final segment, I’d really like to think about what are these responses and just why are we seeing such unprecedented responses in the western world anyway, to what’s going on. And the flipside of that, why haven’t we seen this kind of response to other recent conflicts? Is it purely the scale? Is it because it's happening in Ukraine? I’m sure they both come into it but I’d be really interested in hearing your perspectives. |
| Natalia | In my view, and if you look back into our conversation, several times I stressed that in the 30 years of its independence, Ukraine has transformed itself into a different society, it’s a society with civic identity, society with active civil society and a society which respects democracy and strives to be part of a world with certain norms and values which could describe as western. In this 30-year transformation, Ukraine already has a new generation of people born after the Soviet Union. I think the war in Ukraine as such represents not just a conflict between a bigger country and a smaller country but actually conflicts of norms and values and specifically in the west, these are the values of freedom, democracy, of things which are very dear to the western societies - and this conflict is then seen as a conflict of values and I think that’s what it resonated so widely in the western world.  But I don’t want to say just western world, I think this war and the fact that potentially in the 21st century we may think that maybe we will not live with wars, that dream got shattered. There are many conflicts in the world, you are absolutely right. It is also about how we learn about the conflicts and there is a role of media in this. This conflict as we talked during our conversation, has received a lot of attention in western media. There are professionals with huge audiences, global outreach. If we want to compare to other conflicts, we need to think about the role media plays in the degree of visibility and as I mentioned the length of this visibility in the world. |
| Jim | I might add just this question of values and so that’s why it’s become almost an existential battle. I used to be very resistant about the idea of a ‘new Cold War’ - and it’s still not necessarily a global competition of different political economic systems and so on - but it has become a fundamental clash for the liberal west about the defence of those values and specifically with Ukraine being orientated towards the EU. I think it also goes back to the fact that it is such a fundamental infringement on the UN Charter. It’s hard to kind of spot that many cases which are such clear-cut acts of aggression like this. I suppose the biggest clear-cut invasion of the sovereign state, you had Iraq invading Kuwait and of course America and its allies invading Iraq but that was partly in response in the longer term to Iraq invading Kuwait. So it’s not actually that often, certainly since the end of the World War, that you’ve had this full on invasion of a sovereign state and so it means so much for so many states around the world that this can’t happen.  It's interesting the Pacific Island Forum, all the small island states of the Pacific, issued a declaration but also voted for the UN General Assembly resolution that condemned Russian aggression because of the importance of the rules which are laid out in the UN Charter in which Russia is breaking. And of course there’s implications about that for what China might do in the future and so on.  Now if you look at, say, conflicts around Syria and Iraq and there was focus at times and maybe less at others and there was a kind of suffering fatigue sort of element within the media. And that’s what’s so striking, as Natalia began by saying, about how that focus has remained on Ukraine. In Europe, I don’t think that’s surprising at all because this is happening in Europe, the refugees are coming straight from across the borders, they’re culturally close and I don’t see that as necessarily racist to say we have this special duty because they’re neighbours. Similar sort of things happened during the Bosnian war in particular.  It maybe says things about New Zealand. As I say, there are other questions about the implications for the UN system or what that means for New Zealand which is a very important part of New Zealand’s identity. But perhaps on the other side, it does raise those questions about whether New Zealand has that Eurocentric outlook and what that might mean in terms of New Zealand… I mean, I agree with what Natalia said at the start: it was very striking seeing the New Zealand media having such a focus on it. And I think it is a good thing but I can also see why there might be critiques of it, saying this is a kind of form of eurocentrism. I mean, I think the New Zealand quota for refugees is ridiculous. If you go onto the New Zealand Immigration website and look at the bit about the Refugee Convention and what New Zealand has done and it says we have accepted 35,000 refugees… since World War Two! Look at the scale of it now! In European countries and also countries neighbouring the conflicts in the Middle East, people come across the border; here, we can control that border so it’s about who we decide to let it. And I don’t think we’re letting in enough people who need it. |
| Sally | Just as we finish up then, what do you think is likely to happen and what do you hope is going to happen? |
| Natalia | It is difficult to say. As you’ve said yourself in the very beginning, the war continues. There are things we know of through media but I am sure there are certain developments and certain moves we don’t know because the war always has a degree of secrecy. We also will not know yet for some time the number of victims, the losses among military on both sides as well as civilians. What to expect? I think we need to brace for more tragic news, I really want the war to finish as soon as possible and we keep hearing how the battle for Donbas, which is the east of Ukraine, will be the decisive battle in this war.  We also know that the 9 of May is approaching, 9 of May is V Day in the former Soviet Union and also in the former Soviet republics who are now independent states. There is a symbolic weight to this day: a symbolic victory for Putin would be very important but symbolic loss will be also very important for everyone involved. I think in the short term we need to brace for more dramatic news and this breaks my heart because I don’t want anymore dramatic news and I actually like listening to podcasts about other things, not about this in my country.  Long term, the consequences for the world, for the image of Ukraine, the image of Russia or what’s going to happen in terms of business, in terms of political - oh this is a huge, huge mapping that needs to be done and we will not cover it in the time left for us in this podcast. |
| Jim | This big fight over Donbas will come, that may be the determining factor. What you might end up is, again, a kind of a new front where it sort of settles down again. But the world has changed because of this, Ukraine has changed of course. What I hope for is change in Russia but it’s very hard to see it happening and if it does happen, how Russia itself would avoid conflict because it is so polarised and there has been so much brainwashing and things, how do you reverse that. So I kind of fear that but hope for it. And also I kind of fear and hope for a ceasefire in Ukraine but the reason I fear it is that if you look at the map of what Russia controls now, it’s too much, it shouldn’t have any of it but to have any kind of reward for this would be horrendous and that’s why Ukraine will keep fighting, I guess. Because of the very grand scale of the aggression as I said, the full-on assault on the whole of Ukraine and then the way it’s been conducted, it’s hard to see any kind of dealings with the Russian regime then, given that probably at some point Putin will be indicted as a war criminal. What does that mean for diplomacy? |
| Sally | Well I would like to say kia ora kōrua, thank you, it’s been a long and wide-ranging kōrero today and I had not expected anything less, I think this is such a massive topic and so very raw but thank you so much for sharing your expertise and Natalia, especially to you, I know this must not be very easy. |
| Natalia | Thank you Sally. |
| Jim | Thanks, kia ora. |