



# WTH is going on with the coronavirus? How dictators drive disaster from Chernobyl to Wuhan

Episode #34 | March 4, 2020 | Danielle Pletka, Marc Thiessen, and Yaroslav Trofimov

Danielle Pletka: Hi, I'm Danielle Pletka.

Marc Thiessen: I'm Marc Thiessen.

Danielle Pletka: Welcome to our podcast, What the Hell Is Going On? Marc, what the hell's going on this week?

Marc Thiessen: Well, what the hell's going on is we're asking you guys to subscribe to the podcast. If you like what you're hearing and you're enjoying these episodes, we ask you to go wherever you're listening on Stitcher or Apple. We're on all of them, I think.

Danielle Pletka: We are.

Marc Thiessen: Wherever you're listening to this, please subscribe and also tell your friends. Rate us if you like us, don't rate us if you don't like us, and spread the word. We're having a lot of fun making these podcasts and we hope you're enjoying listening to them.

Danielle Pletka: Is there a What the Hell's Going On this week, or is it just about subscribers?

Marc Thiessen: It's just about subscribers.

Danielle Pletka: Bye everybody. No, what are we talking about?

Marc Thiessen: We are talking about the coronavirus and particularly the role of authoritarian regimes in threatening our public health security through their handling of this. There's a really fascinating piece in [the Wall Street Journal weekend section](#) by your friend, Yaroslav Trofimov, comparing the Chinese response to the coronavirus with Yaro's experience as a 16-year-old boy in Kiev during the Chernobyl crisis, all of his experiences, how the regime lied, how people were afraid.

Marc Thiessen: They were more afraid of the regime than they were of the radioactive dust until it became clear that the radioactive dust was coming, and then they became more afraid of the dust than they were of the regime, and that was a problem for the regime. There was a really fascinating HBO series recently called "Chernobyl."

Danielle Pletka: That was very popular as well.

- Marc Thiessen: It's really well done. There's a scene there, where the officials are talking about how a nuclear reactor can't melt down. They're reporting to Gorbachev in a Politburo meeting that everything is under control.
- Danielle Pletka: Small fire, it was just a small fire.
- Marc Thiessen: Exactly. We're going to play a little clip of that. [*"Chernobyl" clip*]. It's fascinating because there're two problems with authoritarian regimes in dealing with these, whether it's a public health crisis like a virus or a crisis with a Soviet-made nuclear reactor melting down. One, there's the problem of lying to the world. They lie to us and they don't share information, they don't tell people so they can take containment measures.
- Marc Thiessen: Two, they lie to themselves. There's a phrase called authoritarian blindness, that the people at the top of the regime don't get information because the system creates such fear that people are afraid to report bad news up the chain. They're already inefficient because they're totalitarian, and they're already prone to lying, but then they get lied to because they created this authoritarian system that then provides them with bad information so they can't even respond to the crisis.
- Danielle Pletka: You remind me, one of the things, this is what you get for listening to two moderately old people talking about the Soviet Union.
- Marc Thiessen: Moderate in my case.
- Danielle Pletka: Right, Marc's slightly younger than me. One of the things about the Soviet Union was that people got around direct commentary about the regime by telling jokes. I remember one joke that sounds exactly like what you just talked about, where Stalin's giving a speech to whatever it is, to the Comintern, and somebody sneezes while he's talking. He stops speaking and he looks at the room and he says, "Who sneezed?"
- Danielle Pletka: There's silence. Then he says, "No, no, no, I mean it. Who sneezed?" Still, there's silence because you interrupted the General Secretary of the Communist Party and our very scary leader. He says to the first row, "Stand up." They stand up, and he says, "Was it one of you?" There's silence. "I'm going to have every row stand up and if nobody admits it, I'm going to start shooting."
- Danielle Pletka: A man gathers up his courage, stands up in the fourth row and says, "Comrade Stalin, it was me, it was me. I sneezed, I'm so sorry." Stalin looks at him and says, "Oh, bless you," and keeps talking. This sort of encapsulates, if anybody's seen the film "The Death of Stalin", this is sort of, people become afraid of bad news. They become afraid of information, and of course, this is hugely relevant not just when you talk about Chernobyl in the former Soviet Union, but when you talk about the coronavirus and you talk about the Chinese Communist Party.
- Danielle Pletka: Comrade Xi has mismanaged this challenge hugely, letting the disease spiral out of control, because he wanted to suppress information about it. In fact, if you go through the news all you find is, every single authoritarian, totalitarian government is lying.

- Marc Thiessen: Yes, absolutely, and Ronald Reagan always used to say... I can't pass up a chance to tell a joke so I'm going to digress because there's another great Soviet joke like that, that illustrates the point. Brezhnev goes out on the balcony of the Kremlin at dawn and the sun is rising. He says, "Good morning, sun," and the sun says, "Good morning, glorious leader Brezhnev of the Soviet people, proud leader of the proletariat. Have a wonderful, wonderful day."
- Marc Thiessen: Brezhnev goes back into the Kremlin. At the end of the day he walks out at dusk, and he sees the sun setting. He says, "Good evening, sun." The sun says, "Fuck you, I'm in the West."
- Danielle Pletka: Ronald Reagan used that kind of language, Marc Thiessen?
- Marc Thiessen: We have an explicit rating for a reason. I'm going to use it.
- Danielle Pletka: Living it up.
- Marc Thiessen: The point is, nobody wants to tell Brezhnev or Xi or any of the-
- Danielle Pletka: Or Ayatollah Khamenei or Kim Jong-un.
- Marc Thiessen: What they really want to say is, "Fuck you, I'm in the West," or "Fuck you, there's a coronavirus! We need help," and they're afraid to do it. There's a terrific piece in the Atlantic about this authoritarian blindness. The author points out that in 1958, there were all these reports to Mao Zedong about record grain and peanut and wheat production happening, to the point that Chairman Mao actually advised people to eat five meals a day.
- Marc Thiessen: They were pouring out the leftovers into the river because there was so much food. In fact there were not record numbers. It became the largest famine in human history, killed tens and tens of millions of people, because nobody wanted to tell Chairman Mao that actually no, your agricultural policies are actually-
- Danielle Pletka: Failing.
- Marc Thiessen: Failing and destroying the country.
- Danielle Pletka: The propaganda behind it is a lie. No, I mean, look, this is the challenge. You and I are going to talk about this with Yaroslav. I do think that it provides the American people with a different perspective on the threat that authoritarian and totalitarian governments pose to our country, which is, it's not just that they support terrorists, or they have illegal nuclear weapons programs that we can argue about till the cows come home.
- Danielle Pletka: It is that in the very way that they handle a public health emergency, they are lying and they are perpetuating it, and they are spreading disease. That image that I'm betting almost everybody who's paying attention has seen, of the Deputy Health Minister of Iran giving a press conference in which he is reassuring everybody as he wipes sweat from his forehead, only to of course, be revealed the next day to have come down with the Wuhan virus himself. This epitomizes the challenge that these guys pose to us.

- Marc Thiessen: It also shows how people within the regimes actually buy the propaganda.
- Danielle Pletka: Right, but the problem for us here is that this is also a crystal ball for us because the Wuhan virus only affects the young and the elderly and the infirm. We understand that. Most people who get it only have the sniffles, they may have a slight fever, but they're not going to die. On the other hand, there are other diseases that have cropped up, whether it was Ebola or even HIV Aids, where if it is something of that lethality, you're looking at such unbelievable risk that is posed to us by these lying, vile governments who would rather see people die than cured.
- Marc Thiessen: Well, first of all, we don't know yet how lethal and how serious this virus can be. This could peter out as the weather gets better and as we succeed in containing it, or it could get a lot worse, so we need to be careful. You're right, the next time it could be something far worse, far deadlier, and it's a problem. There were a lot of people who criticized George W. Bush for his focus on democracy.
- Marc Thiessen: One of the reasons why he was so focused on advancing democracy, especially in the Middle East, is that people who live in free societies have an outlet for their grievances and they're less prone to radical ideologies, and I agree with that.
- Marc Thiessen: Here's the thing, is that whether you believe in globalization or are concerned about globalization, we are in a global economy, we're on a global world. People travel more, people communicate more, people trade more. We found on September 11, 2001, what happened 3,000 miles away can affect us here at home. It's the same thing with public health, it's the same thing with a lot of things.
- Danielle Pletka: Right, but folks, one thing that's really important is, don't lie to yourself that somehow if we build a higher wall or we let in fewer immigrants, or we stop all airplane travel into the country, that that somehow works. Remember, the bubonic plague, the Black Death, spread before there were trains, before there were Chinese tourists.
- Marc Thiessen: Before there was modern sanitation.
- Danielle Pletka: Well, that too, but before there were planes, trains and automobiles, these diseases spread. That's why it's so important to have early warning. It's why it's so important that leaders like Xi share the information that they are supposed to share with people who can decode and begin to look for a cure. We lost six weeks because of him.
- Marc Thiessen: Well, I mean, just understand how deadly that is. It's more, actually, than six weeks. I mean, in early December they found the first people who had come down with this. They discovered in the hospital very quickly that the medical workers got infected, that because the key to it is, if there's a new virus, does it have human to human transmission, right? Did they just get it from eating a civet or did they get it from spreading it from person to person?
- Danielle Pletka: What in hell is a civet?
- Marc Thiessen: It's a furry animal that Chinese people like to eat sometimes in Wuhan. As soon as you discover that there's human to human transmission, you realize this could

become an epidemic and a pandemic if it spreads. If you get it in the first week or so, and contain it, then you can stop it from spreading. If it takes five, six weeks and all of a sudden it spreads, then you can't control it.

- Marc Thiessen: Literally, the authoritarian system in China that encouraged people to suppress information in those early days, and might have suppressed the information coming up to the government in Beijing because people didn't want to report bad news up the chain, literally authoritarianism is responsible for the spread of this virus. The fact that China is a repressive, totalitarian regime and they're jailing a million Uyghurs, and people say, "Well, that's too bad for the Uyghurs, but what does it have to do with me?"
- Marc Thiessen: That's the reason why there are people now, we have the first case in the United States of a coronavirus transmission from somebody who had no contact with anyone in China, community transmission. If this spreads in the United States, it is because of Chinese totalitarian repression, directly.
- Danielle Pletka: I couldn't agree with you more. We have a great guest to talk about this. Again, Marc and I both mentioned [the piece](#) that he wrote for the Wall Street Journal that prompted us to ask him. Yaroslav Trofimov, he's a journalist, he's an award-winning author, he is the chief foreign affairs correspondent at the Wall Street Journal, which is just an amazing job. I'm completely jealous of him.
- Danielle Pletka: He's been a foreign correspondent for the Journal since 1999, covering the Middle East and Africa and Asia. Prior to 2015, he was their bureau chief in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He's a guy with a great taste for adventure and a really fascinating history, so we're delighted to have him.
- Danielle Pletka: Yaroslav, welcome to the show. As the news about the coronavirus spreads, and as the virus itself spreads from country to country, we have all been struck by how badly the communist Chinese government has handled the challenge that they face. You actually wrote a wonderful piece about this in the Wall Street Journal called "[From Chernobyl to the Coronavirus](#)." Would you just share the story with our listeners?
- Yaroslav Trofimov...: Yeah, thanks. I'm glad to be here. When I was watching the news from China, it really struck home. It made me think about my childhood. I was 16 years old when the reactor caught fire and exploded in Chernobyl, 90 miles north of my home town of Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. Obviously we knew nothing about it for days. There were rumors in the school and some of my classmates, whose parents recently were connected whispered during the morning break, "We're all going to die. You know that the reactor exploded."
- Yaroslav Trofimov...: The authorities' main preoccupation was that the news shouldn't leak out and nobody should just drop their routine and their appearances. We're all drilling for the May Day parade, this being one of the main socialist holidays of the International Solidarity of Workers, that was supposed to happen under the radioactive skies with tens of thousands of children participating.
- Danielle Pletka: Stunning, and of course, nobody wanted to be the bearer of bad news to the supreme Soviet that something cataclysmic was happening.

- Yaroslav Trofim...: Well, I think the way this works in the system be it in China as we have seen now, or be it in the Soviet Union, people don't want to share the bad news with their own population, but the authorities, they also don't want to share the bad news with the higher-ups because they will be held responsible, regardless of if they actually are guilty of whatever happened. People hide and report just the good news up the stream. That's sort of the built-in feature of these systems. The bad news is swept under the rug.
- Marc Thiessen: You talked in the piece about how your grandfather urged you not to leave Kiev. You said that he feared the radiation, but nothing was more frightening than the wrath of the state.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: Yes, well, this was the '80s, so in the '80s people weren't shot in the Soviet Union usually, and even the dissidents after two years in the Gulag could probably hope for resettlement in the West or an exchange. It wasn't a very brutal time and we didn't have that much fear. He had gone through a whole different past experience in the 1930s, the purges, where people were dying for the wrong look or the wrong word. That ingrained fear of the system sort of dominated his world view.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: He had seen in his youth people had been shot for showing insufficient zeal or insufficient patriotism, and to him I was making a great mistake. He called me and said, "They will never forgive you. You are showing cowardice by fleeing. You should stay because you will destroy your future." Radiation, well, that was less scary to him, and that's the way it operated in society.
- Marc Thiessen: You describe how you were lucky because you defied the authorities and sort of defied that advice. You bought iodine tablets and the next day they were sold out. You got on a train that was half empty and the next day people were handing babies to strangers on the same train tracks as the word spread of the disaster in Chernobyl.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: Yeah, there was an information blackout in the Soviet Union just like there is one in China now, which censors the internet and gives you no access to the Twitters and the Facebooks of this world, but here and there, there are ways around it. We could listen to the Western shortwave radios leaking out the news through the jammers. In China people use the VPN, so people will get the information, I mean, those who really look for it like me.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: I knew what to do so I did, and went and bought the iodine tablets that possibly saved my life. Then the next day, my good friend at the time had family in the eastern part of Ukraine many hundreds of miles away, and that's where we spent the rest of the spring.
- Danielle Pletka: It's an amazing story. When you talk about getting around the news blackout, it reminds me that in China, similarly, where you know they have not just a great firewall, but intense internal surveillance and a complete government crackdown on any mention of the virus, that people have gotten around it by actually referring to the virus as Chernobyl.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: Exactly, exactly. There were lots of comments in the review section where people were supposedly reviewing the issues. It's an old Chinese tradition, since a lot of the censorship is automated and based on keywords, people just use slightly



alternative terms that everybody understands. Then this way their comments, they'll get first on Weibo or no, on WeChat.

- Marc Thiessen: You've drawn an analogy between the May Day Parade that was being planned in Kiev with the reactor clouds hanging over and what happened in Wuhan province. Can you tell us a little bit about that?
- Yaroslav Trofim...: Yeah, I mean, some of the obvious parallels that struck me was that in Wuhan, weeks and weeks after the virus had been recognized, and the authorities there knew by the end of December or the very first days of January, they still decided to go ahead with this plan to gather 40,000 families for a giant potluck dinner, which they all shared at the same table and each other's foods and exchanged their infections. If any of these people had known that the city was actually facing this very dangerous virus, they probably wouldn't have shown up. They would not have gotten sick and maybe they wouldn't have died.
- Danielle Pletka: It was an absolutely staggering decision and an unbelievably ill-advised decision on Xi Jinping's part. I mean, when we think about the demise of the Soviet Union, obviously there were many factors in there but to the outside world, Chernobyl was such a sign of the collapse and the bankruptcy of the system. I wonder what kind of an impact it's going to have on Xi. What do you think?
- Yaroslav Trofim...: Well, I think it's probably going to have a lasting impact because what I know to what extent the central government was aware of what was going on in the first days, and clearly once Xi realized the gravity of the situation around January 20th, everything changed. Suddenly China adopted some of the most draconian measures to stop the disease in the history of mankind, probably.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: That didn't stop them from at the same time continuing to go after whistle-blowers and the reporters and people trying to spread the accurate information. However, the surge of containment was quite efficient. In the Soviet Union it was a whole different situation. It was already placing severe strains unlike China today, which is a real booming economy. It's slowing down but it's still growing very fast by anybody else's standards.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: The Soviet Union was in decay, ethnic tensions were already bubbling up, and the whole idea was bankrupt. This was just probably the final nail in the coffin showing just how inept the system was. At the same time as everybody did see, once people started getting afraid of death because of the lies spread by the authorities, the fear of the authorities vanished. That was really the turning point, especially in Ukraine where people realized that "Well, this government doesn't mind if we die. We shouldn't be afraid of it."
- Marc Thiessen: I don't know if you had a chance to see it, but there's this wonderful HBO series on Chernobyl.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: Yes, marvelous.
- Danielle Pletka: It was fantastic.
- Marc Thiessen: It was just fantastic. There's a scene where there's a Politburo meeting taking place

and everybody's telling Gorbachev that everything's fine and only a few people died, and it's a contained fire and all the rest of it, which I assume something similar happened in reality. I mean, this started in the first week of December and it took until January 20th for Xi Jinping to really crack down on this. Do you think that people were lying up the system and that he didn't know?

- Yaroslav Trofim...: Well, it started in December, but I think the realization of what it is happened around New Year's. There's sort of different details of when the virus was sequenced, but it's around December 30th, January 1st, January 2nd, at which point apparently, the Wuhan authorities told the labs to destroy the samples and keep it quiet. To what extent did he know? Anybody's guess, but I would presume that the information flow was constrained by the authorities in Wuhan.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: For a while, when the same happened if you remember in 2003 during the SARS epidemic, when the authorities in Guangdong, which is China's wealthiest and very important province, with its own representation in Beijing, also censored the news and filtered the news. The authorities in Beijing didn't quite know for a while what was going on. Again, it's anybody's guess, I think, exactly who knew what, when. It's a very opaque system.
- Danielle Pletka: Right, no, and I don't think we're going to have much window into it, but I mean, it does beg the question globally about how it is that we're able to fight pandemics of the kind that this coronavirus has evidently become. Ignorance is one thing, and there's certainly plenty of that to go around. You know Italy well, I know Italy well. There's plenty of ignorance to go around in Italy on the question of health and how to fight it.
- Danielle Pletka: Then, when we look at other places that are experiencing it, we see not just ignorance, but we see more the Chinese model, which is lying to the public and hiding from the public the gravity of the risk to them. I mean, how is the world supposed to work when the Iranians and the North Koreans and I presume also the Russians probably, are lying about what has affected them?
- Yaroslav Trofim...: I think it's really just a test case now, because we're seeing in real life two very different systems, two different countries, Italy and Iran, experiencing an outbreak that is of comparable proportions, probably much, much larger in Iran. You see this new information coming out, often exaggerated because everybody is rushing to report more cases and the problem of the false positives. In every region they don't know exactly who died where.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: At the same time, however, they are adopting pretty serious measures, isolating a couple of towns and then putting the police before the checkpoints, so it's also acting as a serious state. What we see in Iran is actually the worst of all worlds, because on one hand you have the secrecy that you have in China, but on the other hand, you have the incompetence.
- Danielle Pletka: That you have in Italy.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: Italy always gets a bad rap. I would say that the Italian state on a day to day level, actually functions reasonably well by European standards, probably better than a lot of European states that have a better reputation, like Germany, but that's a whole different conversation. In Iran, you see this, the ministers are infecting each other,



not bothering to put on the mask.

- Yaroslav Trofim...: You have this complete disparity between the numbers of deaths and the number of infections, which suggests that it's a much larger number of infections. You have this medieval cleric insisting that the faithful should return to the shrines and keep kissing the shrines because the shrines cure the diseases. One of them declared this in Qom yesterday, protesting against plans to close one of the shrines. Compare it to the reaction by Saudi Arabia, which decided to ban religious pilgrimage for the first time, I think, in recorded history, to Mecca and Medina because of this.
- Danielle Pletka: That's stunning. I actually hadn't heard that, very interesting.
- Marc Thiessen: It's interesting because, to relate this back to sort of the public policy debates here in Washington, we've had sort of with the Trump presidency, a pushback on this idea that America should be promoting democracy around the world. The idea is, "Authoritarianism is not our problem, people are repressing their own people, they don't have free societies. That's their problem, let them deal with it, America first" and all the rest of it, but doesn't this kind of an outbreak show that really authoritarianism around the world is a public health threat to America?
- Marc Thiessen: This is another example of how what happens somewhere else in the world, where there's a lack of freedom and lack of transparency, and a lack of a free press and free information and accountability, that that can come back and literally kill Americans here at home.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: Absolutely, lies kill, lies kill it happened in China in 2003 and no lessons were learned from that. We have seen the same pattern of behavior until the extent of the disease became something they couldn't handle anymore.
- Danielle Pletka: Marc makes a really interesting point, though, because I think when we think about geopolitics and geostrategy, we really do think, I mean again, in this political season, we see a group of Democratic candidates, most of whom largely agree with Donald Trump's foreign policy and would go further. They would disengage, "This isn't our problem, Syria's not our problem, Idlib's not our problem. We shouldn't commit military force, we should cut our military budget."
- Danielle Pletka: While a couple of them have talked about promoting democracy, the reality is, that hasn't been a priority for the extreme left any more than it has for the extreme right, but it does have other than geopolitical implications. I think that what this has done has really highlight how damaging it can be, not just that a country like Iran sponsors terrorism or that a country like China seeks to dominate the East or South China Sea, but that they are incubators for problems that will affect us in plenty of other ways.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: That's certainly the experience we're having now and we're just at the beginning of it, I think, where there are more countries still to come. Depending how big it gets, it will also test the nature of our democracies because I mean, we'll see how the populations react and what sort of measures they will demand. There's certainly lots of irrational decision-making already.

- Danielle Pletka: I confess, I was happy to see that Donald Trump was asked whether he had any criticism for the CDC, for the Centers for Disease Control, which has really been at the forefront of this. He actually, in a rare show of control, said "No, they've been doing a great job. I have full confidence in them, and these guys are right behind me." It was quite remarkable, but you're right.
- Marc Thiessen: Of course, was criticized for contradicting the health officials because-
- Danielle Pletka: What? With the ban on China travel?
- Marc Thiessen: Yeah, but when he said that it's not a problem yet and that America's okay and we're on top of it, if any other president had said that, everybody would have been applauding him, but they say, "Oh, Donald Trump is not listening to the experts again."
- Danielle Pletka: Well, don't worry, he has plenty of time to screw things up, Marc. That's going to be the challenge for everybody. I mean, look at the stock market. There's going to be a desire to control this, don't you think, Yaro?
- Yaroslav Trofim...: Well, I mean, what are we seeing in Italy, right? I mean, we're already seeing the Mayor of Milan saying, "Oh, actually let's reopen the museums and the theater because the economy is suffering and nobody is doing anything," even though the number of infections is still growing. When I get back to Europe, where people have free health care and sick leave, imagine what could happen in the US if and when you have massive outbreaks in US.
- Danielle Pletka: No, I mean, I think that we're seeing just the tip of the iceberg in terms of how it's going to spread. I also think there's a lack of understanding. Scott Gottlieb, who is a colleague of ours at AEI and was the former head of the FDA, who we had on a few weeks ago to talk about the realities of the virus and how it was being addressed, has noted that unlike other viruses that tend to diminish in virulence when the weather turns warmer, this one has actually continued to progress even as it's already up in the 50s in a variety of places in Italy, like in Florence, for example, where there's a pretty big outbreak right now.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: Yes, yes, yes, and we know about the size of this outbreak because Italy is testing very aggressively. There may be other places with the same level of infection that we just don't know about. In Italy, they have 600 plus cases but more than half of them have no symptoms because Italy is actually testing people in the network.
- Marc Thiessen: There're also reports Yaro, that the Russian information trolls who were affecting the US election, that thousands of Russian-linked social media accounts have been launching what looks like a coordinated effort to spread misinformation about the virus and disrupt the effort to fight the epidemic and spreading rumors like "This was a biological weapon started by the CIA," and other sorts of things. Talk to us a little bit about how authoritarian regimes like the one in Russia seek to exploit these kinds of crises.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: Well, it's not just the Russian trolls, I mean, people say this on Russian television openly. This is one of the new sort of mainline propaganda lines in Russia and you clearly often see it sort of underhandedly in Chinese information operations. Look, I

mean, it's a typical modus operandi to spread conspiracy theories that make the US look bad. There are always ready markets for that. There are people in places like Dubai or Rome, I've met, who believe it.

Danielle Pletka: Really?

Yaroslav Trofim...: Yes, yes, it's somehow reached them secondhand with the social media and now the networks. There's always going to be a ready market that is very receptive to that and the Russians won't let that market share slip away from them.

Marc Thiessen: It's interesting because it seems like the information age we're in is a double-edged sword in a lot of ways because you pointed out in your piece about how it's easier for a dictatorship in the old days to hide bad news. Today, with the internet and everything, the information spreads and it's harder to clamp down on it, but at the same time, both the information age and travel and communications and global trade, it's also a lot easier for a virus like this to spread.

Yaroslav Trofim...: Right, absolutely, yes, because especially out of China, nobody was really traveling out of China in large numbers in 2003. Now you have millions and millions and millions flying every month. If you go to Moscow or to Venice, you will probably see more Chinese tourists than anybody else. Not right now, but until January. China in particular is still the world's biggest interface between wild animals and humans, because that's where most of the slaughtering and consumption and the mixing of fluids between humans and wild animals is happening. That's a very interesting issue because China now says it will ban it... China banned it after the SARS epidemic.

Danielle Pletka: They banned wet markets after SARS as well?

Yaroslav Trofim...: Yes, yes, yes, they banned these markets after SARS. They banned the consumption of civets, but in China it's a very important cultural thing. Some people compare it to gun ownership in America. It's the very same thing.

Marc Thiessen: You're going to take my civet out of my cold, dead hands.

Yaroslav Trofim...: Exactly, that is exactly what happens. There was a lot of pressure to restore that industry and the authorities caved. A year or two after SARS the authorities caved. Let's not forget this very important political cultural element of that.

Danielle Pletka: Exit question for us. I know from your Instagram feed you travel probably more than pretty much anybody I know, not as much to the United States but between Europe and Eastern Europe and Asia and the Middle East. What are you seeing as you travel around?

Danielle Pletka: It has really struck me that despite the sort of rising hysteria that we're seeing here in Washington among officials but also, I would say, just in the public, that people are still traveling, people are still getting on planes and flying from place to place, to place, except China. What are you seeing and how do you think this ends, if you have to sum up the impact?

Yaroslav Trofim...: Well, I think that as long as this was seen as a China problem, people were still

getting on planes and traveling, put on masks maybe on a plane, but it was reasonably normal. I think we are entering a whole new period this week, because all of a sudden the list of countries where you cannot go or whose citizens cannot travel has expanded dramatically.

- Yaroslav Trofim...: There was a plane full of Italians that was going to Israel and they were forced to land in the military base near Eilat. Then all the Italians were sent back and all the Israelis were put into quarantine. If you are an Italian citizen, you can no longer visit a whole bunch of countries from the Seychelles to Turkmenistan to Saudi Arabia.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: I think the sort of list of restrictions are going to grow and I think there will be a major disruption in travel overall in the next few weeks. I think that's sort of the reasonable thing to do now is to assume that whenever you go to a foreign country, you might be stopped for two weeks or more.
- Danielle Pletka: Well, that sounds actually appealing to me right now here in Washington, DC in the middle of election season.
- Marc Thiessen: It depends on whether you're stuck in Florence or Wuhan.
- Danielle Pletka: I think, look, at the end of the day, one of the most fascinating things is going to be, afterwards when we do the reckoning, what the impact is going to be on the Xi Jinping government, what the impact is going to be on efforts to disengage the global economy from the Chinese economy, which have been certainly advocated by some here in Washington and elsewhere. It is going to be an interesting year indeed for all of us.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: I think it's going to be interesting to watch what could be the effect on the US government because there are two ways it can go. On one hand the argument will be that "It was all brought from foreigners, so let's build a bigger wall." On the other hand the argument will be, "Well, people are dying because we have no universal health care and that's why we have an outbreak." That will probably be how the debate will shape up.
- Danielle Pletka: Right. We talked about Russian trolls and the Russian government weaponizing this virus to use in their information wars, but you're exactly right and we're seeing it already. This is an election year and there is absolutely nothing beyond the pale for people to weaponize in their effort to boost their favored political candidate. There's going to be another debate coming soon, and unlike the last one, when we waited 80 minutes for the Wuhan virus to be brought up, my guess is it'll be front and center.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: Absolutely, yes. Well, I mean, I think it has now gone everywhere.
- Danielle Pletka: We shall see, we shall see. Thank you so much for taking the time. It's always a pleasure to talk to you.
- Marc Thiessen: Thank you for joining us.
- Yaroslav Trofim...: Thank you.

- Danielle Pletka: One of the most fascinating things that to me came out of this discussion is whether or not this virus has the potential to put leaders like Xi Jinping at risk. What do you think?
- Marc Thiessen: There's this [great article in The Atlantic](#) by Zeynep Tufekci, if I'm pronouncing that correctly. The author makes the point that in China actually before Xi, they were starting to have a little bit of this idea of reporting corruption. You could come to the regime and talk about these things. Xi has actually clamped down on that, sort of going back to traditional one-man rule and cult of personality.
- Marc Thiessen: He's trying to turn himself into a new Mao, so actually China is in the opposite situation that the Soviet Union was under Gorbachev, where under Gorbachev things were loosening up and people were speaking out a little bit more, and there was Glasnost and Perestroika, in China it's the opposite. You're having sort of a return to repression, return to one-man rule, return to even greater shifting.
- Marc Thiessen: It had been moving towards authoritarianism. Now it's moving sort of back to totalitarianism in a lot of ways. It'll be interesting how that affects whether the regime can withstand the blow-back from the people over its mishandling of this.
- Danielle Pletka: Well, I mean, it's a lesson to us as well potentially about how to erode confidence in leaders like that. Unfortunately, I don't think either Donald Trump or whoever the Democratic candidate to be president will be, are going to be willing to prioritize using information in this way against those sort of regimes, whether it's Putin or Kim Jong-un or Xi or Ayatollah Khamenei. Although, I did see that Mike Pompeo has been pretty aggressive in condemning the Iranians on how they're handling the coronavirus. For all of us, we really haven't confronted something like this in our lifetime. SARS didn't really have the same impact here in the United States as it did across Asia.
- Marc Thiessen: Well, because the economy was different, as Yaro was pointing out, that people didn't travel as much to China in 2003 as they do today. We didn't have the economic integration with China, the supply chains and the investment in China that we do today. It's interesting, because of the trade war there's been sort of this movement to disengage from China from people who had companies moving there, because of the trade war moving their supply chains out of China. I wonder if this is going to accelerate that.
- Danielle Pletka: Well, I asked exactly that question but it's not just because of the trade war. It's also because of China's malign manipulation of the global trading rules of the road, that companies, that individuals are asking themselves whether it's really where they want to lock up their dollars. This is only going to make it worse for China and I don't think anybody in their right mind can think to themselves, "Wow, I need to have all my eggs in the Chinese basket in the future."
- Marc Thiessen: I think a lot of Americans don't realize how integrated we are and dependent we've become on China for supply. I mean, my kids play ice hockey and we just got a note from our coach saying, "FYI, if you need hockey sticks, you probably should buy them now because a lot of them are being made in China and selections are getting disrupted." Just this morning I was listening on the news that there actually might be a shortage of diet soda because Splenda is made in China.

- Danielle Pletka: I know, I saw that. Diet Coke may be impacted as well.
- Marc Thiessen: People are going to start seeing that this is affecting our daily lives not just as a public health threat, but as an economic threat, too.
- Danielle Pletka: Right, well, I hope that what it does is it causes a rethink about the nature of foreign governments, the impact that it has on us economically. Have you seen all the pictures of shelves, for example, in Italy that have been absolutely denuded of basic goods, toilet paper. Masks are now absolutely unattainable in most places. I was at a CVS in downtown Washington DC looking for something else, but I saw that there was a big hole on the shelf where their masks had been.
- Danielle Pletka: I mean, there's a lot of misinformation out there. There's a lot of alarmism that shouldn't be there, but there's also a lot that we are learning right now. I hope that we are able to translate what we're learning and actually take some warnings from it and adjust our foreign policy accordingly.
- Marc Thiessen: Frankly, take advantage of this strategically. I mean, the reality is that China is the biggest national security threat to the United States going into the 21st century. This is a country that has been rising economically, rising in military power. The country that we're probably most likely to stumble into a war with in the next 50 years is China, as they become more powerful and have more military power and are less deferential to America.
- Marc Thiessen: If you're an American business right now and you're looking at China, and you're looking to put your supply chain somewhere, and you say, "Look, they're stealing intellectual property. We're in a trade war with them over all this stuff."
- Danielle Pletka: They are arresting people and throwing them in prison and running concentration camps.
- Marc Thiessen: Their mishandling of this virus has now disrupted your supply chains where you can't get your products out of China and you're losing millions of dollars if you do that. Why would you put your supply chain in China? Why would any sane person put their supply chain in China? Because of cheap labor? Okay, well, there's cheap labor in India.
- Danielle Pletka: Here's the exit point. If you looked around the world and you are old enough and you looked around the world and you said to yourself, "Gee, maybe an empire like the Soviet empire shouldn't really be building and controlling nuclear plants because they don't know how to build them and they don't know how to run them, and when there's an accident, they lie about them."
- Danielle Pletka: If you said that to yourself, maybe today you should be saying to yourself, "Maybe we shouldn't allow countries like Xi Jinping's China or Russia or North Korea to have so much control over their population that they can lie to the world about a disease that could have an unbelievably destabilizing effect on the world economy, not to speak of the number of people it's going to kill." Just ask yourself that question, and then say, "What should we do?"
- Marc Thiessen: I agree.



Danielle Pletka: With that, another episode is done. Let us know if you want to hear anything specific from us, if you want us to talk to anybody specific, if you really wish that we had done something differently. No, don't tell us that. We are absolutely impervious to criticism. You can just send that to Alexa.

Marc Thiessen: Unlike Chinese communists.

Danielle Pletka: Unlike Chinese communists.

Marc Thiessen: We want you to send negative information up the chain to-

Danielle Pletka: To Alexa.

Marc Thiessen: To Alexa.

Danielle Pletka: Anyway, thanks for listening and we'll see you next week.

Marc Thiessen: Take care.