

World Class Podcast

Ben Rhodes on the Global Rise of Authoritarianism

November 8, 2021

This transcript has been edited for clarity.

McFaul: You're listening to World Class from the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. We bring in depth expertise on international affairs from Stanford's campus (or sometimes abroad in Santa Monica) straight to you. I'm Michael McFaul, your host and director of the Freeman Spogli Institute. We're starting our new season of World Class with a bang by talking with Ben Rhodes.

Ben is a writer, political commentator, former Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Communications and Speech Writing under President Obama. He also co-hosts the internationally acclaimed *Pod Save the World* podcast, along with former White House National Security Council spokesman Tommy Vittorio. Ben's latest book is called *After the Fall: Being American in the World We've Made*.

He recently spoke up here at Stanford about the book in person at one of our first in-person events ever, by the way, in the new COVID era. I was going say post-COVID, but it's not quite post-COVID. And Ben has agreed to do one more bite at the apple to talk about the book with us on World Class today. Ben, thanks for joining us.

Rhodes: Mike, always good to talk to you.

McFaul: Let's start with the first question we had when you're here just to give some context, and then we'll dig deeper into the pieces of it. Explain to our listeners why you decided to write this particular book at this particular time.

Rhodes: Coming out of eight years in the Obama White House, I was physically and mentally exhausted, and obviously had been spit out on the other end of this experience in the worst possible circumstance with Donald Trump being elected president. But more than that I'd felt – particularly in the later Obama years as you I'm sure did, Mike – that globally, the political trends are all moving in the wrong direction. The pendulum is just swinging forcefully towards nationalism and authoritarianism.

And I just wanted to understand that as best I could. And I noticed that I could see more clearly what was happening in America when I would travel outside of the country, when I

could step out of the insanity of day-to-day Trump politics, and frankly, see how America fit into one big trend that was happening the world. And the jumping off point for me really, for this book was Sandor Lederer, a Hungarian anti-corruption activist, in Berlin. And it was actually after a meeting in the former headquarters of the GDR, the East German government, which is now business school. That's kind of a Fukuyama-type transition.

But I said, “How did you guys go from being essentially a liberal democracy to essentially a kind of soft, one-party autocracy in a decade?” And he said, “That's easy. Viktor Orban got elected on a right-wing populist backlash to the financial crisis in 2010. Then he redrew the parliamentary districts to entrench himself in power, packed the courts with far right judges who would fine in favor of his power grabs, enrich some cronies through corruption who then finance his politics, but also bought up the media and turned it into a right wing propaganda machine, and wrapped this all up in an ‘us versus them’ message – ‘us’ the real Hungarians against ‘them:’ the immigrants, the Muslims, George Soros.”

And I'm just thinking, “Well, this guy, literally could be describing my experience of American politics in the last 10 years.” And so, I was like, “I'm going to go, I want to investigate this trend of nationalist authoritarianism through the prism of people, particularly [people] in opposition who are living it.” I ended up looking at Hungary, Russia, China, and the U.S., all of which I think are representative of a kind of a different flavor of the same authoritarian trend that we're getting.

McFaul: Right. But, tell me more. Was that initial conversation a chance encounter? Or did you deliberately decide you wanted to look at these transnational trends? We're going to get to all four the case studies, as we would call them, in a minute. Or was it that this conversation then helped you think, “Now I want to write this kind of book”?

Rhodes: So, it's really funny you asked us because you've asked a question that I haven't gotten [much before], but that has actually an interesting answer that I realized I haven't given. As I said, I was traveling, and I was also engaging with a lot of young civil society types because I was working with the Obama Foundation. And several of the characters that are in the book are people that I met in that context, like Zhanna Nemtsova, the daughter of Boris Nemtsov, who was obviously killed in the shadow of the Kremlin. I met her in kind of brought her into a couple of foundation events. Sandor Lederer – who's the Hungarian I spoke about earlier – was an Obama Fellow through the Foundation.

So, I'm having these conversations. And I thought at first that I was going to make a podcast about this. I had no idea what the podcast was going to be; this wasn't for *Pod Save the World*. I just started recording conversations with people whenever I went someplace. In Paris, in Berlin, in Lisbon, I was just carrying around a recorder and just taping interviews. With Sandor I knew I wanted to look at Hungary because I knew that Hungary – beyond being a country of 10 million people – is that they've been at the vanguard of this trend.

McFaul: Right, right

Rhodes: in terms of this kind of belligerent nationalist thumbing nose at the liberal order. They're kind of a bridge between Russia and America, in a way. So, I was just taping this interview for a podcast, and I thought, I want to go deeper on this. I want to pull up this thread.

And that's really what the whole book is: me pulling on this thread of what is the interconnection between why this is happening, and how are people thinking about it? How can I approach it not as just pure analysis, but through the stories of these human beings?

Part of what I found, and what you've found, Mike, more than me and for longer, is if you ask the right questions in our world of civil society and democracy, everybody's got an extraordinary story that is revelatory of much bigger trends even than their own lives. And that's definitely what I found.

McFaul: Well, let's talk about that as well. I mean, that also was intriguing to me in a couple of ways. I mean, you are talking about in your book, what a lot of people in my world, in academia are writing about as well, including here at FSI. We have a lot of people you already invoked Fukuyama, Larry Diamond is writing about this. I'm writing about this, and many others.

You make two choices: One, you're telling stories. I mean, it's embedded in these big, analytic paradigms, and I could code the social science debates, but you chose very deliberately to be have those be in the background, not in the foreground.

Is that just because that plays to your natural proclivities as a writer, or not? So, tell me that piece. But also, you told the story from the perspective of the opposition leaders. You weren't interviewing the autocrats; you were interviewing those struggling with them. Tell us why those two choices, in terms of the focus?

Rhodes: Those are really important choices. On the first one: I know my strengths, and I know what my weaknesses, or what I don't have. I'm not an academic like you. I'm not somebody who's spent decades – and I say this with respect to you, to Larry Diamond – examining these trends.

What I had is the experience of being in the White House. I was in the room with Putin. I was in the room with Xi Jinping. I was in the room with a lot of these guys, and so I knew I had the recency of that experience. And, though I say this with humility, it's just my vocation; I'm a storyteller. I was a speech writer before for Barack Obama, and he used to say that our whole

job is to tell a story about America. And what I can bring to this is the very personal perspective of someone who's lived these trends and is trying to figure them out.

I make myself a bit of a stand in for the reader and try to tell stories. That's also what we do on *Pod Save the World*. How can we talk about these issues that sometimes people feel shut out of the conversation by, because it's not accessible? I just wanted to talk plainly, like, "Let me tell you a story about this guy named Alexei Navalny. You don't have to be following the news in Russia. I'm going to just start at the beginning and tell his story." And that I think, allowed me to draw out the thread of what's happening in ways it was accessible to people. At least that was my hope. The second choice, I just forgot, because I went on too long with the first choice.

McFaul: Regime versus opposition.

Rhodes: Oh yes. I thought about this, too. And some people said kind of critically, that I should have talked to the people [in the regimes]. And I hope other people are writing that book, too. But that's not what this book was about. This is a very personal book that's almost like a memoir, and I felt the experience of being on the wrong end of authoritarianism in a way that I've never had in my life. I've described it like feeling like an exile my own country.

I wanted to see how other people in more extreme circumstances than me – particularly in Russia or China – how they were dealing with that. How are we all going through this together? So this was a book for all of us who are concerned about this trend, to understand how we're looking at it, how we're thinking about it, how might we push back against it, and why do we think it happened? And again, there's another book to be written in going around and interviewing people that agree with the autocrats, but I didn't see that as my role in the universe.

McFaul: That is really interesting. And by the way, you got to know Zhanna Nemtsova, but you didn't know her father, did you? I don't think you ever met her father, Boris, right?

Rhodes: No. So that was interesting to access the life of this giant figure through his daughter, who's also a remarkable woman.

McFaul: She is an incredible woman, and you write about her and make her sound as incredible as she is, which is true of all your characters, by the way, and that's why everybody should get this book because you'll get to be introduced to these people. And the style, too, of bringing the reader into conversations worked really in a brilliant way.

The footnote I was going to say as I was reading the book, and something I've just discovered now in our conversation, all of your stories are actually people that are living in regimes that were more liberal or democratic fifteen or twenty or even five years ago than they are today.

But you know, Nemtsov is actually most like you just so you know, because he was part of a movement and change we believe in. He was a young supporter of this charismatic guy, Boris Yeltsin, at a very euphoric moment. He was always kind of the heir apparent. and then he went from being almost president working in the Kremlin and being part of that movement to then being an exile in his own country. That literally was the trajectory of his life. I had not made that connection until just now.

Rhodes: Well, the structure I ended up using for every one of these conversations and each section of the book ended up being the last thirty years, starting at the end of the Cold War, and how you get from 1990 and that “end of history moment” to today, whether or not you were someone who was older, when that happened, or whether you were born right around when that happened. I just wanted to start at the beginning and take you through.

Each experiences the rush of spirits was it was so fascinating to relive the 90s. In that moment of hopefulness and sense of things opening up and the sense of kind of freedom. Zhanna was talking about campaigning across Russia, barnstorming with her dad with rock concerts. You can picture these 90s Russian rock bands and stuff. But then very quickly, obviously, the door begins to shut on that. And what was interesting is that the story of Putinism and how he consolidated control foreshadows the very same playbook that Orban used, which people walked me through, which now in many ways ran in parallel to what the Republican Party's done and become in the United States.

At the same time that in China, which is the main beneficiary of all this at the end of the day, I started from the question of, “Why were they the outlier at the end of the Cold War?” How did they survive post-Tiananmen and get to this position where they're kind of taking the baton from the U.S. and the liberal democracies? That organizing structure of looking at the last thirty years really allowed me to do the hardest part of writing a book, which is to figure out how it's going to flow.

McFaul: Well, let's talk about a couple of general themes, and then maybe if we have time, dig into a couple of the personalities in the book.

You intimated in your talk here at Stanford, that you see these trends in very different places. Give us your 30,000 feet take as to why it's happening all over the globe. And related to that, is there connectivity between what's happening in Hungary, the United States and Russia? Are they all kind of parallel stories that are correlating, but not necessarily related?

Rhodes: I settled in on kind of three structural trends post-Cold War that have fueled this.

The first was the excess of globalization, the excess of capitalism, and the creation of exploding inequality happening at the same time that globalization is kind of encroaching on

people's national identity or tribal identity. And what I found is, you know, Orban is an exemplar of someone who was very capable of tapping into the post financial crisis and a complete disgust with globalization. People were open to different systems. He sensed that the cataclysm, the financial crisis, coming on the heels of people already thinking, "Is this working for us? Or is it just working for some rich people, because I feel like I'm losing ground underneath my feet?" He tapped in that yearning for belonging and that anger at elites in systems that seem rigged.

Another trend through line was the post-9/11 securitization of the American superpower. When we turn our national purpose into this war on terror, not only do we militarize our engagement with the world, which I think was generally bad for democracy, but we also provide a template and a justification for autocrats to expropriate that for their own purposes.

It doesn't mean we're responsible, but it does mean that when Viktor Orban builds a wall to keep out Muslims; when Vladimir Putin cancels the election of governors after the 2004 Beslan attacks, citing a war on terror; when Xi Jinping says it's a 'People's War on Terror' to put Uighurs in concentration camps – they're using a framework that we provided, and we have to own that.

And I think it also created an 'us versus them' dynamic in American politics that fueled xenophobia and led to Trump in that way.

Then lastly, technology is big difference maker in the sense that these platforms that at first were connecting people became the perfect vehicles for disinformation and surveillance. And that leads to your last point: to coordination. I do think that there's a deep level of coordination, deeper than is widely appreciated, not just of Russia interfering in our election. I think that Putin, or Orban, or Trump, or any other manner of autocrat sometimes are directly sharing strategies. Viktor Orban's political consultants on his first successful run back for prime minister were American Republican political operatives. Same with Bibi Netanyahu's political operatives.

But then what social media does is allows them to all turbocharge their narratives. And I think that what they've all figured out is that you can take over the algorithm of Facebook, or Twitter, or anything with your disinformation campaigns, and they're all complimentary. When Russia interferes in our election, they don't have to invent new storylines, they just to read Breitbart, and get a draft off of that. This technology gave both a different flavor to the authoritarianism, which we've still not got our arms around, and also allowed for kind of degrees of coordination that would have been impossible ten years ago.

McFaul: Right. So the technology enables it, but dig a little deeper into your take on the ideological content that unites Putin, Orban, Trump, and then help me understand and help

our listeners understand where he fits in and where he doesn't. You talked about that when you were here at Stanford.

Rhodes: I'm glad you asked the question this way. What's interesting about this group – and this isn't a new insight, but it kind of led me to something that's I think is newer – is that there's not like a communism or a large “ism” behind it. It's basically about an ideology of wanting to hold power, and to be powerful and wealthy. All these guys are corrupt. All these guys are wealthy. All these guys are stealing from the state. They're drawing on the oldest story in the book, ethnonationalism, to justify their rule, but not in service of any broader 20th-century ideological purpose.

What Navalny said to me about Putinism is that he doesn't need to sell that, he just needs to convince you that everybody is corrupt. So you might as well have your flavor of corrupt strongman. That's the whole “whataboutism” of Putin: the Americans are corrupt too, so you might as well have someone who shares your prejudices and will like flex on the world stage. And I think that's very common amongst these different leaders.

Now, the other thing I found in talking to young people, is that if the 20th century was about isms, the 21st century is shaping up to be about identity. And I think you'd find this at Stanford, and I find this whenever I talk to young people. There's a hypersensitivity focus about defining one's identity. That's because that's the battleground of 21st century politics, and that's what these leaders understand. They also understand they don't need to speak for the entirety of the country, they only need to speak to whatever identity is that they're defending: the white Christian identity if you're Trump, or Orban, or Putin.

Then this leads to your question about Xi. I had a couple of brilliant Chinese, including a guy named Bao Pu, who's from mainland China, was at Tiananmen, and now is in Hong Kong, walk me through how they did they survived post-Tiananmen. They reestablished who they were as a Chinese Nationalist Party. They had been a revolutionary communist party, then they give up a big chunk of the communism to move to capitalism. So the Cold War ends, and how do they have legitimacy? If you look at the curriculum in schools, if you look at the propaganda they're putting out if you look at the party documents of the 90s, they're making this turn towards nationalism. They are rehabilitating Confucius, who Mao had basically done away with, and putting themselves forward as the entity that defines what it means to be Chinese. You start to see a lot more anti-Japanese stuff, you start to see a lot more anti-Western stuff. And so China may look different, but I don't think they're nearly as different as people think. Right? You have to look at Xi Jinping, first and foremost, as a nationalist Chinese leader, not a communist Chinese leader. And in his brand of nationalism, he's very similar to Putin, and Orban, and Trump, and all the other leaders I could have done in this book.

McFaul: Well, and that creates real challenges for those opposing them because you don't want to be anti-patriotic, right? And I changed the word on purpose. If they're the nationalist,

how do you combat nationalism without appearing to be so? In the case of the Russians, which is the case I know the best, you get labeled as being “not Russian” and “puppets of the West.”

Tell us a little bit about how I mean, you've had this incredible experience . . . I was thinking about how you could get this funded if you were an academic and all the troubles you'd have to get from our IRB to do these interviews and all these different places, but . . . are there some common themes among the opposition – and I don't even like the word opposition, because then that makes them ‘outside’ but . . .

Rhodes: The democrats.

McFaul: Democrats! That's a better word

Rhodes: And not the capital “D”, the small “d.”

McFaul: Yeah, small “d” democrats.

Rhodes: I mean, there's some political tactics, but I want to speak to the broader issues about identity because what they all had in common was a visceral reaction against patriotism/ nationalism being defined as an exclusive thing, or as an “us versus them” thing. I'll go through this very quickly. Take Katalin Cseh, in the Hungarian opposition. She started a political party when she was like in her late 20s with her friends. It's now like the third biggest party in Hungary, and very important to this unified opposition that has a shot, at least at Orban. And she said, their basic starting point was the idea that “This is nonsense. We don't have to choose between being Hungarian and European. We feel proud to be Hungarian, and we feel proud to be European. Why is he [Orban] trying to define this for us?” They're trying to reclaim the identity issues and, particularly generationally, tap the vein there.

Navalny is the same thing. In the book, I walk through the ways in which he's very much a nationalist, and very much a person whose personal experience of the 90s made him the kind of person that gravitated to Putin. He was angry, he was humiliated. But what he said, to me, Mike – and this is such a great Navalny line – is, “We can be a great, enriched country without any of this garbage.” And he doesn't want to give up Crimea, you know. But why do you have to have this lunatic, constant, people-whipped-into-a-frenzy hating the West and blaming all these other people, and this victimhood? He's about getting rid of all that and the corruption and just being a strong, proud, nationalist country, but with democracy. And he's basically saying, that's a better way of being a nationalist.

And in fact, Crimea is a pretty good example. He' says wouldn't give it back, but he'll have a real election, because he believes those people will vote to join Russia, and all the

international viewers are invited. That's probably not the policy you're I would have designed, but it shows you kind of the difference.

Then lastly, the Hongkongers. What they said to me is that the protest was more about identity even than democracy. They want to be able to decide what it means to be Hongkonger. What really ticked off the protest that led to the Umbrella Movement was, in part, yes, democratic rollbacks, but suddenly having to stand and sing the Communist Party anthem in schools and changing the curriculum in the schools. People in Hong Kong feel that the Party is trying to change who they are; they're not just trying to control our politics.

And so what's interesting is that everybody in the opposition in these places, decided to contest the identity question, rather than to not contest it. We can get into obviously, their tactical things that they picked up, but you can't avoid this question. I mean, Obama was good at this. He didn't seed the ground with patriotism. But he gave, in my view, more patriotic speeches about America being great because we can change. And I think that's something that the center left sometimes starts to duck – the identity questions, or the culture issues – just say, “Well, we’re going to give you this social benefit. And that's important, but I don't think that's going to be sufficient in the long run.”

McFaul: Well, let's talk about the long run in my last question. So, you've talked to these amazing people under really difficult circumstances, including in our own country. I'll let you do the compare and contrast on how the United States fits in compared to the other countries you were in. But at the end of it, are you pessimistic or optimistic about the long-term future for small “d” democrats? And maybe you want to desegregate Hungary, Hong Kong, Russia, the United States.

Rhodes: When this book came out a couple of months ago, so you know, some of the questions I got were about it being pretty dark

McFaul: Yes.

Rhodes: And I'm like, “Well, I don't want to lie to you.”

McFaul: Didn't Obama even say that to you?

Rhodes: Yeah, Obama said it to me, too! So, the starting point is pessimistic. But I will get to the optimism. I'm pessimistic that it is all moving in the wrong direction, and we're lying to ourselves if we don't acknowledge that.

In this country, you have a major political party, that has completely gone off the deep end. They're literally setting up a playbook where they can overturn the results of an election through the laws they're are passing at the state level. And if Trump does come back, which is

a 50-50 proposition, he's clearly going to run and it will be another 50-50 election, right? And even if he loses, maybe they'll succeed this time overturning the result. They will start from such a more advanced authoritarian position, than even in 2016 when he was elected. He will not surround himself with generals; he will be surrounding himself with lunatics. And the Republican Party itself has made its choice; it's gone. Our political and media language hasn't figured out the way to talk about that, because we still have these people on interview shows as if we're going to ask their opinion about tax policy when they're supporting someone who wants to overthrow the democracy.

Even though Joe Biden's elected, just the fact that that is as existential a danger in the next election as the previous one tells you that we're not out of the soup yet. Frankly, the answer to that is all the structural changes in our democracy that Joe Manchin Kristen Sinema won't allow to get done. So, America's just kind of stuck in this place where we're just going to have to keep fighting each time.

When I look at a Putin or an Orban, they're as entrenched as ever. Orban could lose next year because the opposition has done something interesting; they've decided to completely unify, instead of having four fractured parties, they had a primary and there's one candidate, and they pick the candidate who they believe is most likely to beat Orban, and he could lose that election. That idea of putting a big tent over everybody who cares about democracy is one of the fundamental lessons everybody has to internalize. It's existential, you have to do that.

But even if Orban loses, he controls a lot of economy and the media, so that story is not over. And Putin: you know, Putin is Putin, and he's obviously got even more extreme. There's been a steady trajectory of that. But I also think that Putin and Orban, and to some extent Trump – they're not going to be indefinite phenomena. They're corrupt, they have no answers, and people are getting more disaffected with them. So even if they are going to be a problem, I'm not betting on those guys for ten years from now.

The Chinese on the other hand – and so this that combination of technology and autocracy – they're blending it together in ways that are new. And Obama said to me, at the end of the book, “What's new about this time around?” And part of what's new is that technology can make 45% of Americans think crazy stuff, and it can allow the Chinese complete control over what their people consume and to some extent, think. And we don't have an answer to that. The degree to which that could spread beyond China's borders in areas where they have influence, and the degree to which we're already controlled on this: when's the last time he saw a Hollywood movie critical of China? The Chinese Communist Party wins. When's the last time a U.S. corporation put values over profit, nevermind the U.S. government?

So, there's a lot of reason to be concerned that the overall trajectory of society globally, is still moving in the wrong direction, notwithstanding Joe Biden's election. What makes me optimistic, though, is that I don't believe that that's how most people want to live. And I also

find, in most places – not all places, but most places – generationally, there's an overwhelming preference to not live like that. There's greater fragility inside of these systems, including the Chinese one, than is appreciated. Everybody's running out on democracy these days. But is Russian society working that well? Is China not dealing with even worse inequality than we are? Because they are. And so if we can hold the line and weather the storm for the next few years, and begin to figure out some structural things like, “How are we regulating social media so it doesn't drive half the country insane?”, I do think we can come through in the backend to a place where the pendulum starts swinging pretty hard in the other direction. That's the hopeful scenario here.

People say to me, “Well, you mentioned Navalny, but he's poisoned and in prison. You mentioned Hong Kong, but they've been kind of swallowed up,” and on and on. But the thing I know about movements, Mike, and I don't know as much as you, but movements fail, and they fail, and they fail, and they fail. But when they succeed, particularly if it's a global circumstance, it's overwhelming. So, I feel that if we can hold the ground, what you'll see is this groundswell of popular mobilization that we're already starting to see everywhere from Hong Kong, to Belarus, to Chile, to South Africa. People are just pissed; they don't like corruption. And I feel like if we can hold the line that can break through eventually.

McFaul: Well, I think that's a great note to end on. Ben. I think that history also provides some data to support that hypothesis. We just don't know when it happens.

But congratulations on writing a terrific book! It's called *After the Fall: Being American in the World We've Made*. Please go out and buy it. As somebody who wrestles with these issues in an academic setting, I thought the storytelling was just fabulous; it's a way for people to get into really big heart issues through the voices of people that are quite inspirational. Thank you for writing the book, and thank you all for tuning in!

You've been listening to World Class from the Freeman Spogli. Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. If you like what you're hearing, leave a review on Apple podcasts and be sure to subscribe on Apple, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you're listening to stay up to date on what's happening in the world and why.