

DEFIANCE 011

THE POISONING OF SERGEI SKRIPAL

ARIC TOLER
RESEARCHER & TRAINER
AT BELLINGCAT



DEF011 - ARIC TOLER INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

THE POISONING OF SERGEI SKRIPAL

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Peter McCormack: 01:54

Aric, how are you?

Aric Toler: 01:55

Good.

Peter McCormack: 01:56

Thank you for coming on. So, you work for Bellingcat?

Aric Toler: 01:58

Mm-hmm.

Peter McCormack: 02:00

Very interesting organisation, obviously doing some really important investigative work. What's it like working there?

Aric Toler: 02:06

Well, it's pretty great. I work from home. Pretty much all of us work from wherever we live, though we also have an office at the Hague, in the Netherlands, but most of us work from home. We do digital research, into whatever it is we're interested in. My pet

topics are mostly in Ukraine and Russia, and a little bit in the U.S. as well, but we have people who work on topics like the war in Syria, Libya, Yemen, chemical attacks here, there, and everywhere, disinformation, environmental research, all sorts of other stuff.

Peter McCormack: 02:33

Okay. So, there's a lot to unpack there.

Aric Toler: 02:34

Yeah, yeah.

Peter McCormack: 02:34

And at also a time, where I'm personally really struggling with mainstream media, struggling for truth in news, it feels what Bellingcat's doing is very important.

Aric Toler: 02:46

Yes. Well, I hope so. Yeah. So, a lot of the stuff we do intersects with what you would see in, I guess, mainstream media, but we take a little bit different approach, in that the central ethos, I guess, of the site is that we try to have as much transparency, and, I don't know, legwork involved in our investigations, as you can imagine. So, if you're reading something in BBC, or the New York Times, or whatever, you may just get a three-inch article, or 500 word article, that just has to lead, the nut, and the conclusion, and that's about it, but we try to have as much detail, excruciating detail a lot of times in our investigation.

Aric Toler: 03:20

So, going through exactly what we found, every piece of evidence we could dredge up on topic A, B, or Z, going through false leads, and loose threads, investigative process, who else has done this stuff, this, that and the other thing. So, we strive to be exhaustive as possible, and our stuff is open source, by definition, meaning all the sources that we use in our investigations are accessible to anyone with a internet connection, and sometimes a bit of a wallet, if you get through a pay wall or things, like that.

Peter McCormack: 03:47

But you don't have to rely on advertising, and sponsors in a way the mainstream media tends to.

Aric Toler: 03:52

Yeah, we have a different funding model. So, New York times, or whatever, they mostly work through advertising, right? We have a handful of things. So, we do get some grants, and things like that. So, maybe grants from places like OSF, big bad Soros, and whatever, maybe 30% to 40%, or so, of our budget, but the rest we make up in either donations, because we have a Patreon, like seems half the websites on the internet, or podcasts, have a Patreon nowadays.

Aric Toler: 04:16

Also, the thing that's really unusual about our funding model is we get half, or over half, of our funding through paid workshops that we run, mostly for journalists, and

also for NGO researchers, human rights advocates, and things like that. To retrain people, in five day workshops, how to do very, very, very in-depth digital research. We have a mix of participants from private organisations, newspapers, others, and we teach them over a week how to exhaust the internet as much as you can on researching different topics. So, how to go through, analyse materials on social media, YouTube, how do you find and collect and verify visual materials? How to use satellite imagery in your research? How to use databases, flight tracking, Naval tracking, all those things you can do through Google Earth, or Chrome, that you can use, in complementing traditional investigative journalism.

Peter McCormack: 05:03

Is this as an objective to try and improve the quality of investigative journalism, and improve the supply of journalists? Because, like I said, something I'm really struggling with, I'll give you one example. I remember seeing a chemical attack in Syria, and I saw two sides of the story. I saw a side that this was the Assad government, and I saw another side that said this was a fake attack, that was propaganda. I think somebody like myself, or other people who maybe aren't aware of Bellingcat, they struggle to know what the real truth is these days.

Aric Toler: 05:33

Yeah, it's tough. The whole Syrian thing is just a complete mess, with... It's extremely emotionally charged, from everyone. Syria is not my specialty. I'm with the big hodgepodge of Russian, Ukraine, which is equally politicised, in it's own way, but the Syria chemical attack question, I can't even imagine, it being a nightmare to approach from the outside, and not knowing where to start, because everything is again, extremely... You have people who are either completely in the bag for Assad, or completely want to go in there and murder him immediately, and put in a so-called friendly government, right?

Aric Toler: 06:06

So, you have everyone doing that, and then when you try to find out what actually happened on the ground, about a bomb did drop from the sky. There's a million of these chemical attacks. There's only a few of them that get a lot of coverage, but they actually happen really, really frequently. It's tough to know exactly what happened and what didn't, but usually by going through fairly basic investigative processes, you can collect as many materials as you can, suss out what happened, what didn't. There's a lot of places using really interesting techniques to do that. We do our collection through digital materials, satellite imagery analysis, things like that, but there's other places who use a little bit more scientific forensic approach, to reconstruct the area through CAD models. Of course, you have traditional journalism, New York times, whatever, who will talk to people on the ground, from people who say that it did or didn't happen, or whatever. Suss out who's reliable.

Aric Toler: 06:53

So, with all these things, it's a nightmare to walk in and figure out what happened, but hopefully with our research, we try to be as transparent as we can. If you don't agree with us, that's fine. We still show all the primary materials, and you can find out where we screwed up, if you think we did.

Peter McCormack: 07:06

All right, so you're focused, as you said, on Ukraine and Russia, right now. So, what is the status between Ukraine and Russia, in terms of the state of war, at the moment?

Aric Toler: 07:16

Well, the wars still going. It's cooled down a bit. 2014, into early 2015 was the height of it, when it was just full on, just not even hidden Russian involvement. Now, it's a little more nuanced, more complex. So, in the summer of 2014, and the early winter of 2015, Russia wasn't even hiding the war. They would send soldiers from the border area by Mongolia, showing up with tanks in Eastern Ukraine, and they didn't exactly look like the average Ukrainian. But, now it's much, much more nuanced, to where they have the Russian support for the Eastern Ukrainian separatist government, whatever you want to call them, is a little more nuanced and much more advisor roles, technical support. They send them drone operators, people who can do radar jamming, things like that. Much more technical stuff, that you don't have from the local idiots who took up guns down there.

Aric Toler: 08:07

Obviously, there's still a war. A Ukrainian soldier, or separatist soldier dies about one or so every night, or so, by average. There's still some civilians caught in front lines, mostly the elderly, and sick, who are stuck in the front lines, but the wars mostly crystallised, or settled, into a state of just mortar fire, back and forth every night, and no actual movement of the front lines, except for extremely minor positions being taken and lost. So, the war itself is still going, but at a very, very low intensity. The Russian support has gone from extremely obvious artillery attacks, tanks, all that stuff, in 2014, '15, and now it's down to just very relatively covert technical support, along with financial support, and political support, of course.

Peter McCormack: 08:53

But what are they actually fighting over right now? What is the contentious issues?

Aric Toler: 08:57

Well, yeah, it's a really good question. So, the original uprising/war, whatever you want to call it, I'll get lynched either way, depending on what word you use, because people get very, very, very upset about word choice, with us. Lynched isn't the right word for this either. So, the original conflict started in early 2014, after the Russian annexation of Crimea, and then there is a combination of fomented, artificial stuff from Russia and Eastern Ukraine, and also some genuine locals who were upset about the recent change in government in Ukraine.

Aric Toler: 09:27

So, there's a change of government in Ukraine in early 2014, after protests in central Kiev. The relatively pro-Russian government was kicked out, Yanukovich, and the more Western friendly government came in replacing them. It's a seesaw, in Ukraine, back and forth. The corrupt Western, versus the corrupt Russian, back and forth. Moldova is the same way. It's corrupt either way, it's just slightly more corrupt on the Russian side. But, it really, really happened because there were promises made by the

pro-Russian government of EU integration, and Ukrainians really wanted to have Visa-free travel in Europe. They wanted work rights in Europe. They wanted integration with Europe, because it's just... If you had a choice between integration with Russia, and integration in the European Union, most everyone's picked the European Union. It's much nicer to go to Paris, and Brussels, and to work in Poland, than Russia, on the other hand.

Aric Toler: 10:14

The promises weren't kept, and they went back on their promises, about EU integration, and that's when the giant protest happened, and the change of government. Then, Russia stepped in, annexed Crimea, and then there was the uprising in Eastern Ukraine, which was a combination of some genuine unrest and dislike of the new government, and also Russia sending in actual soldiers, advisers, security service, stuff like that, to fan the flames, and increase their power exponentially.

Peter McCormack: 10:44

I seem to remember something to do with the gas prices as well. Wasn't Russia subsidising gas prices to Ukraine?

Aric Toler: 10:49

Yeah. So, they were also heavily subsidising... This is one of the biggest levers that Russia has over Ukraine, because they control much of the gas and energy input into Ukraine. So, yeah, they did. Part of the way to lure them away from EU integration, was to provide heavier subsidised energy prices. So, it was gas prices go down, heating goes down, because obviously in Ukraine, it's very cold in the winter, and heating is very important. So, that was one of the big carrots that Moscow offered for Yanukovich, who was the former ousted president, to turn away from EU integrations, for this. So, it's just trading favours back and forth. EU is the same way. There's IMF tranches, and stuff like that coming in. So, they're getting subsidised either way, but the people were a little bit more favourable to the EU integration, rather than the Russian integration. That's why the change happened.

Peter McCormack: 11:36

Did Bellingcat research into what happened with MH17?

Aric Toler: 11:39

Oh yeah, that's the... So, our site started three days before MH17, which conspiracy theorists will always point to, but the launch had been planned for months, and months, and months before then. So, that's how I got involved, and a lot of other people on the site got involved, because we were doing a lot of investigations into the downing. So, MH17 was downed on July 17th, 2014. This is just right about at the height of the fiercest fighting during the war. The shoot down was an accident. They never meant to shoot down a Malaysian airliner. They thought they're shooting down a Ukrainian jet, or military cargo plane. They misidentified the plane, shot it down, and then tried to cover their tracks, as fast as they could, though they didn't do a very good job at it. So yeah, we've been doing research for five years. We're still

researching different... There's not many angles left to research, but we're still researching it the best we can.

Aric Toler: 12:28

So, our early research on this was looking at all of the witness accounts, photos, videos, everything around what happened in Eastern Ukraine, on that day, July 17th, 2014. Looking at different military convoys moving around, troop movements, the internet, all these commanders in Eastern Ukraine, you have all these tin pot, want to be dictators, who have their own little units, little battalions of 20, 30 people at a time. They all very, very loosely aligned, in Eastern Ukraine. It's a combination of literal civil war re-enactors, like Russian civil war, not American civil war, re-enactors who like to dress up and play on the weekends, and then they got actual real men, they played behind. So, it's extremely bizarre. One commander, who used to be a mall Santa, he used to dress up as a mall Santa, then he became a warlord. It goes on and on and on. So, all these would be wannabes got actual men behind them, and because of that they weren't like professional soldiers, commanders, whatever, they were just, a lot of times, World War II history buffs, or re-enactors, whatever, who got real guns, and real men behind them.

Aric Toler: 13:29

Because of that, they weren't very disciplined in either how they talked online, or elsewhere, about what was happening, or in interviews, because they loved to give interviews, because they were very, very full of themselves a lot of times. So, you have a bunch of really, really chatty warlords, and war criminals, both online and in interviews, they were giving nonstop. So, this is a gold mine, of all these materials, to go through out, and research, and piece together. Also, because this is Eastern Ukraine, there's very, very high digital literacy, and internet penetration in the area. So, there's dash cam videos, which people always see those, of bears walking across the street, in Russia or whatever. These are in, not every, but in many cars in Ukraine, and Russia, for insurance fraud purposes. Someone jumps... You see those videos, like in China, people jumping on your windshield, and then like demanding money. It's like that. They have dash-cams, to go against insurance fraud, and also when police pull you over, to keep away from getting bribed, or having to give bribes away.

Aric Toler: 14:19

So, because of that, you have all these little spy cameras, going all around the country, and with that, you can really, if you look and look and look and look, you can piece these together, and figure out troop movements, convoys, license plates for vehicles going by, then match them to owners, and all this stuff. So, these are the things that we were doing around MH17, because you have a million little spy cameras, people have smart phones, people have YouTube accounts, Instagram accounts, who are posting what they're seeing throughout the day. Then, we piece all that together to figure out what happened, back on that day five years ago.

Peter McCormack: 14:46

Your conclusion, thus far, is?

Aric Toler: 14:48

Yeah. So, let me go back to the beginning, or semi beginning. So, at the time during the war, Ukraine had a really, really strong air advantage, over the rebels, or separatists, or Russians, or whatever you want to call them, in Eastern Ukraine. By vantage, I mean they had planes, and the others didn't. But, they were bombing bases, convoys, all sorts of stuff, and the separatists really wanted air power, air defense power. So, Russia sent them some shoulder mounted guns, a few low altitude missile systems, nothing too major, but they were still getting hit quite a bit. So, eventually they really wanted something that could actually scare Ukraine into grounding the airplanes, and not flying them over Eastern Ukraine. The solution for that was a Buk anti-aircraft system. So, a Buk is a Soviet era... It's named after a tree. I don't know why, but all their anti-aircraft systems are named after different trees. I don't know why.

Aric Toler: 15:36

So, Buk is a type of tree, in Russia. There's also a Topol tree, and a few others. So, this Buk system was sent from Russia, across the border, under nightfall, and then got into Donetsk, which is the largest city in Eastern Ukraine, on the morning of the shoot down. This was to detour Ukraine from attacking their positions. Two days prior, just for an idea of what it was like at the time, two days before the shoot down, Ukraine tried to bomb a separatist military base. They missed, and hit an apartment building, and it killed 12 or 13 civilians. So, at the time they were bombing cities, both precisely and imprecisely. They were killing civilians, and also killing separatists, and Russian forces. So, this Buk was meant to deter further Ukrainian air attacks. So, this Buk system was literally paraded through Eastern Ukraine.

Aric Toler: 16:24

This wasn't some super duper secret operation, to get this missile system in. They had it on the most populated thoroughway in Donetsk, which is a city of over a million people, in Eastern Ukraine. They had three or four vehicles, in the convoy, and they literally had sirens blaring, clear the street. It's like a parade. Clear the street, this thing is coming through.

Peter McCormack: 16:40

It's a deterrent?

Aric Toler: 16:41

Yeah. They were trying to say, like, "Look what we have. We have this extremely powerful system. Stop. Leave us alone. Let us have military movement." Don't leave us alone, like we're peaceful people, but, "Let us move our tanks through, and position to neuter the Ukrainian air superiority." So, they were literally parading this through sirens, through the middle of these large cities, which is why we have so many videos and photos and witness accounts, because people saw this thing and they're like, "Oh my God. Can you believe this? There's a big green monster who's moving through my city right now." Then, they eventually deployed it, in a field, in the middle of nowhere in Eastern Ukraine. Somebody from a nearby city, they were looking for... No one knows exactly what they are looking for, but people suspect they were waiting for either Ukrainian fighter jet, or a military cargo plane. These are intercepted calls that

were published by the official investigation, the Dutch investigation MH17, because they had access to the phone lines.

Aric Toler: 17:37

The guy called in and said, "A little birdie is flying your way," which is code a plane, a little birdie. Then, they said, "Okay, we're going." Then, literally 45 seconds later they launched a missile, and shoot it down. They thought it was a Ukrainian plane. It wasn't. Once they got to the crash site, they were looking for the pilots. Whenever you shoot down a fighter jet, the pilots jump out, and then you look for the parachuted pilots or whatever. They were looking and looking for a pilot. They were confused, because they saw these Malaysian passports, and vacation stuff everywhere. At first, their first reaction was that these were things that the military cargo plane had this stuff to trick people, I guess. Like it was secretly a spy plane, but then they realised, "Oh, wait. We just made a really big mistake." Then, they tried to cover it up as fast as they could, but yeah, it was already done.

Peter McCormack: 18:26

But there's been no admission of guilt.

Aric Toler: 18:28

There was, but then they took it back.

Peter McCormack: 18:30

Yeah.

Aric Toler: 18:31

So, immediately after the shoot down, they were posting on social media, like, "These are our skies. We told you we shoot you down, and here you go. Leave us alone." Then, they were-

Peter McCormack: 18:40

But that was an admission of shooting down a plane, or an admission of shooting down-

Aric Toler: 18:43

Well, they said, "We just shot down a Ukrainian plane."

Peter McCormack: 18:45

Exactly, yeah.

Aric Toler: 18:45

Yeah, exactly. They said, "We shot down the plane. We told you these are our skies, don't fly here." Then, as soon as they realised, "Oh wait, this wasn't a cargo plane..." They even posted pictures of the debris falling from the ground. So, they said, "We did it." They reported it. You could still go into Russian state media reports, that are still up for some reason, up today

Aric Toler: 19:03

about initial separatist claims of victory, of we ... Whenever that's happened they would brag about it because it was ... Again, these are like little tinpot wannabe dictators who would brag about what their unit and they bragged about it, and then once they realized they just kind of backtracked as fast as they fell over and trying back track then. Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 19:20

Was the weapon, you call it sort of a-

Aric Toler: 19:22

A BUK, a BUK, yeah.

Peter McCormack: 19:24

So I would imagine something like that would have to have properly trained people using it?

Aric Toler: 19:28

Yeah, yeah.

Peter McCormack: 19:28

And ideally you would have an infrastructure that also it allows you to be aware of what's in the sky.

Aric Toler: 19:35

Yes, so that's the question. Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 19:39

They had half of it, right?

Aric Toler: 19:40

So that's the big, that's where the legal case of the MH17 crux is upon, because this was, when it came over, when this BUK system came over, it came over with a crew of Russian soldiers, actual enlisted Russian servicemen to come with this. Because there's a history of when Russians send equipment over to Eastern Ukraine, if it's old Soviet era like 70s, 80s, crappy old tanks they can send it over, like, "Return it if you want, who cares? It's a gift." It's like getting rid of old equipment that they're not going to be using anyways, right?

Aric Toler: 20:11

So they send their old beat down stuff and a lot of times even when you look at weapon caches in Russia, the ones that get sent over to Eastern Ukraine are the ones that have a damaged wheel or the old, crappy ones, they clear them out. So this is like it's going to Goodwill in the US of donating your stuff. But when they sent really advanced stuff, so like the new high tech tanks that were made in the last 10, 15 years, the stuff they actually want back they have a crew with them. They don't send them just as a gift, they send them with a Russian crew with the expectation they're going

to return. So they send them for specific operations, specific battles, specific tasks and then return them, and this BUK was sent with a Russian crew.

Aric Toler: 20:48

So that's the crux of the Dutch criminal investigation MH17, it's how high does the responsibility go for this? Because they clearly made a mistake and they were operating under stress conditions because there is kind of ... there are fail safes within a BUK system to override for friendly plane versus not, the altitude, the speed, all that stuff and an operator would theoretically see not a military plane traveling at this height and this speed, which matches that of a civilian plane.

Aric Toler: 21:17

But you also have to think about what the person's ... Imagine you're some 24 year old Russian soldier, you've never seen actual fighting, you weren't old enough for Chechnya, let alone Afghanistan. Two days prior there was a bombing and just about two or three kilometers from the launch site was where 12, 13 Ukrainian civilians were killed.

Peter McCormack: 21:36

Which you're going to be upset about.

Aric Toler: 21:37

Which I don't know if they have a personal investment in those people, but they're panicked, they're fearful, they're worried. So you can imagine that with different Ukrainian air attacks recently, you don't have a lot of combat experience, you're maybe just a petty officer, whatever, you're just going to, "Yes, yes, yes, yes." Imagine you're trying to open up or close, you have a word drafter, Chrome tabs you're trying to close these like, "Yes, yes, yes." Right? You just do all the overrides, so you override, "Yes, fire please. Don't kill me fighter jet." Because when these systems are turned on and you're under the radar they can be detected, right? So if you run radar, therefore you can detect the radar back. So they were probably just trying to fire as fast as they can because they were told that this is a fighter jet or a military plane coming towards you.

Aric Toler: 22:18

So the question for the Dutch investigation around criminal liability is the Russians sent a crew, they sent them in to operate it, but they clearly did not send with the proper safety procedures, support and they didn't use it ... I mean it's impossible to use this responsibly because it's a giant weapon of war, right? But within the realms of atrocities and war crimes, it was not used within the realm of responsible use for a giant monster, I guess.

Peter McCormack: 22:45

Yeah, okay. So just say they lose the lawsuit, what happens?

Aric Toler: 22:49

Yeah. It'll happen, nothing happens.

Peter McCormack: 22:52

Nothing happens because-

Aric Toler: 22:53

Nothing happens. Yeah, I mean that's like it's fun to go through, not fun but it's ... Anyway, it's interesting to go through all the different possibilities and the culpability and all that stuff, but at the end of the day I mean Russia could be hit with a \$2 billion lawsuit from the victims of the family, there are multiple court cases out right now at the EU Court of Human Rights and with the US as well. I mean obviously they're never going to pay anything or maybe in 20 years they'll admit guilt, right? Just to get this lawsuit off their back or to get some sanctions reduced or something like that.

Aric Toler: 23:22

But it would take a coup, it would have to take some tremendous shift and structural changes in Russia for them to ever admit culpability or to pay out restitutions or do anything. I mean they'll just withdraw from any institutions that try to punish them. So if the Interpol or whatever tries to get them, they'll just pull out of whatever these institutions are just to avoid repercussion. So I mean honestly, and what are they going to do? Kick them out? You can't kick them out of the UN, right? What are you going to do really?

Peter McCormack: 23:51

Yeah.

Aric Toler: 23:51

Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 23:52

Well, it's one of the interesting things about Russia as a casual observer, it seems like they don't admit guilt to anything.

Aric Toler: 23:58

I mean why would they? I mean yeah.

Peter McCormack: 24:00

Yeah. And one of the very interesting things was, I'm assuming you've watched the Chernobyl season, series?

Aric Toler: 24:06

I need to, I have them pirated but I haven't watched it.

Peter McCormack: 24:07

You do.

Aric Toler: 24:09

I've read the Alexeiovich, the books that it's based off of, The Voices From Chernobyl, so I've read the book that it's loosely based off of but I haven't read or watched the movie yet, or the show.

Peter McCormack: 24:19

Well, I'm not going to ruin it for you but in the last episode there is a moment where-

Aric Toler: 24:23

It melts down, I know.

Peter McCormack: 24:24

Well, yeah. So following the meltdown one of the whistleblowers essentially, he was given a very kind of, let's say, a warning, talking to from a ... I'm trying to remember who it was, but it was written like a nationalist speech that you protect the Motherland, don't go against the Motherland. And the thing about Russia that seems to still exist, it feels to me, again as a casual observer, you'll know more about this, but it seems to me during the Gorbachev era that Russia was embracing the West and with following Yeltsin, now Putin, it's gone backwards. What's happened there? You would know a lot more than me.

Aric Toler: 24:57

I mean it's complicated, but yeah. So with Gorbachev, I mean most Russians, not all Russians, but many Russians look back at Gorbachev as like this huge embarrassment. Yeltsin, I mean Yeltsin even times 1,000,000 because he was giving drunken speeches in public and falling over himself and whatever. But I mean Gorbachev was often looked at as either someone who's, depending on who you ask, either someone who just sold out, maybe he was a secret American spy the whole time or he sold out. Or the most generous interpretation, he was an idealist who just had bad ... Maybe like how we think of Jimmy Carter in the US, he had a lot of good ideas and maybe he was a nice guy, but he just wasn't practical. So I mean, yeah, Gorbachev is a pretty ... I can see.

Aric Toler: 25:38

But with Putin, I mean obviously he has, I guess yeah, kind of pushed back against international norms and whatever you want to say after 2013. Again if you're the average Russian, life was horrible in the 90s. I mean you had people were literally being paid in toilet paper at some jobs because the currency was worthless or they were paid in good and commodities because the ruble wasn't worth anything. And then Putin came in and for right ... whether or not he actually did do things to bring the economy forward or it was just the good luck of oil prices rising which is probably more true than not, life became manageable and better, as good as it was in the Soviet 70s or whatever.

Aric Toler: 26:21

I mean the social safety net was destroyed and all sorts of other basic social services were gutted compared to before thanks to the 90s often. But for the average Russian there is actually a Russian middle class, as small as it is now, people actually have opportunities to have a better life now. When before you had to be a gangster or go to Poland to have any sort of prosperity for you or your family. So I mean with Putin, yeah, he's definitely turned against international norms and the West and the EU and

all that, but for the average Russian, I mean foreign policy isn't as important as your domestic situation.

Aric Toler: 26:55

So even though we say, "Putin's bad, whatever." Yes, obviously he's done all sorts of horrible things, but from the perspective of the average Russian and why he still maintains relatively high popularity, life's better now than it was in the 90s. Though still there Russia still has ... I think yesterday or the day before some stat came out that Russia now has the greatest wealth inequality, they passed us and China, us and China, US and China were the tops, now Russia beat us in wealth inequality. But still if you're the average person living and a working class person in Moscow or Petersburg or whatever, life's much better now than it was in the '92, '93. Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 27:29

But is it genuine? Because why would Putin fear democratic elections?

Aric Toler: 27:35

Well, I mean it's complicated. So if he actually had a completely free and fair election, 1,000% completely transparent, whatever, he'd still win and probably by a pretty big margin too. But the issue isn't so much about him at the presidential level, it's more on the governor, state, local level to where United Russia, which is his political party, or I think they renamed it, but United Russia is what everyone knows it as, is not very popular all over. And it's kind of the Russian model of the Boyars and the Tsari, the figurehead is popular but the guy actually running the stuff on the nitty gritty local levels are very, very unpopular.

Aric Toler: 28:12

So free and fair elections would ... he'd still do fine, he'd still win every election probably. But he would not have complete superiority in the Duma and the upper chamber of the parliament and he wouldn't have complete and utter power throughout all the governors. Because they don't vote, in Russia you don't vote directly for your governor, it's assigned top down. So on a kind of a local, state or I guess oblast level in Russia, he wouldn't have the complete and utter power. And also of course if he does actually genuinely lose popularity and someone comes up to gain power, he has measures in place to stay in power no matter what too.

Aric Toler: 28:50

So I think that the free and fair election thing, I think I guess he's done just because that's his mindset, "You do it not because you necessarily have to do it, but just that's just what you do, that's what people before you have done." Because Yeltsin fixed the election just like he did and we helped him with that as well, we definitely helped Yeltsin fix the '96 election, but yeah-

Peter McCormack: 29:11

But so isn't there a certain amount of hypocrisy there with the recent accusations of Russians meddling?

Aric Toler: 29:15

Yeah, sure.

Peter McCormack: 29:16

How do you feel about that? Do you ever feel like, "Well, come on, how can you-"

Aric Toler: 29:18

Well, I mean obviously US has meddled in sorts of elections and things all over, including in Russia with Yeltsin specifically. I mean meddling is only the least of what we've done, if you look at Chile and other places. But again, two rights ... two wrongs don't make a right or whatever. So with the Russian interference in the election, obviously there's the whole bots and troll thing, I just don't even pay attention to that. That's not consequential at all.

Aric Toler: 29:44

But if we found out that American hackers hacked the entire private inbox of Putin's chief Kremlin aide and then put ... and then published the entire inbox on some US aide or whatever site, then people would rightly be angry that the US was meddling in Russian society and life or whatever. Which is exactly what Russia did with us.

Aric Toler: 30:07

So, yeah, obviously there's this hypocrisy, but just because America invades countries unilaterally and commits human rights abuses and all that stuff, doesn't mean we can't criticise Russia for doing the same thing. So I mean, yeah, obviously we've done election meddling and far worse. But just because we've done it, doesn't mean everyone else is immune to criticism and, yeah.

Peter McCormack: 30:28

Yeah. What's the state of freedom, human rights in Russia at the moment now? Is there still a clampdown on the gay community? What's going on right now?

Aric Toler: 30:36

It really depends on who you are and where you live. So if you are in Chechnya or Dagestan, then you have pretty much no human rights and you could just be murdered or kidnapped at any point. So yeah, if you're in Chechnya and Dagestan, it's like it's very ... it's like you're in Saudi Arabia. Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 30:52

Are they still at a state of war?

Aric Toler: 30:53

No, technically not. I mean they still have guerrilla operations, every once in a while you'll have some guerrilla operations that kill so call terrorists or Islamists or whatever. So they're not in a state of war really, but they still have skirmishes and rebels and all that stuff in the mountains, little pockets. But for the most part no, I mean it's relatively normal, as normal as a Saudi style theocracy can be. So Chechnya and Dagestan are their own ... they're technically part of Russia, legally and politically, but they operate under their own completely different rule sets.

Aric Toler: 31:24

The rest of Russia, again, it depends on where you are. If you are a journalist or a gay man or woman out in the oblast, out in the regions, out in the middle of nowhere, you could just be kidnapped and murdered and nothing may ever happen. There may be some minor little protest and stuff in your favour, but they may just be it, just because you have little local warlords out there doing whatever they want. If you're in Moscow and Petersburg and you're a journalist you're relatively protected, you're relatively ... I guess relatively is doing a lot of work here, but you're relatively okay if you're a private oppositional journalist in Moscow or Petersburg. There are exceptions.

Aric Toler: 31:59

If you cross Kadyrov, the leader of Chechnya, you may just get shot on a bridge while walking across the bridge or leaving your apartment, which happens. Whenever we talk about journalists being killed in Russia, it's almost always Kadyrov the Chechnyan warlord who's killing people. Putin doesn't really kill journalists, it's mostly Kadyrov. Or if you cross Yevgeni Prigozhin who is the infamous Putin's Chef everyone calls him, but he's much more than that, he runs his own private military company, Wagner, which everyone knows about and also runs ... He runs the so-called Troll Factory and all ... he does all the dirty stuff. He's also targeted, tried to hack journalists, tried to have them attacked, beaten up and there are incredible accusations he had some Russian journalists killed in Central African Republic as well. So the Russian government won't just walk up and shoot you if you're gay or a journalist. But kind of some rabid dogs who are under the protection of the Kremlin, Kadyrov, Prigozhin and some ultra nationalist groups, they may and they may get away with it.

Peter McCormack: 32:56

Okay, wow.

Aric Toler: 32:57

Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 32:57

See, I wasn't aware of that. So my assumption of, because I have read about journalists being murdered in Moscow, it has happened.

Aric Toler: 33:04

Yeah, yeah, they're shot down in broad daylight, yeah.

Peter McCormack: 33:06

Yeah. So my assumption was this was the Putin government.

Aric Toler: 33:10

Not really. It's not worth the headache if you're Putin. So if you're Putin, what he does is he won't kill you if you're a journalist. What he'll do is he'll shut down your bank accounts, he'll audit your employer, he'll harass you whenever you cross the border, keep you held for eight hours at border patrol, he'll have you kicked out of your apartment, he'll have tax ... he'll have you thrown in jail for fake tax fraud. Those are

the things that they do, it's much ... I mean it's not subtle, but it's more subtle than a bullet in the head, right?

Peter McCormack: 33:37

What about international journalists?

Aric Toler: 33:39

You're fine. If you're like an AP journalists or New York Time journalist working in Moscow, you won't be touched. You'll be monitored, you may be surveilled, you may have your phones tapped. Those things may happen, but you'll never be like ... no government official's going to attack you. I think some of the worst things that have ... I mean again you have the Kadyrov Factor or the Prigozhin Factor, maybe they'll have some thugs rough you up or whatever.

Aric Toler: 34:01

But if you're a New York Times correspondent or BBC correspondent in Moscow, I mean the government's not going to have you killed. The worst they'll do is maybe they'll have, again, they'll surveil you, watch you, maybe put some nasty materials about you, record you secretly in your apartment. They'll do those kind of things, maybe, but also just deny you a visa for you, kick you out of the country but they aren't ... again, you're not going to be killed. It's a lot of stuff.

Aric Toler: 34:22

I mean we, again not to do equivalency, but the US does similar things to some journalists as well. Some Iranian and Cuban journalists in the US. Russia is one of many countries that, we don't do it to the same level as Russia obviously, but this is kind of practiced with dictatorships all over.

Peter McCormack: 34:39

Okay. Right, let's talk about the work you're most wanted for recently, you've done a lot of research into the chemical attacks. I'm assuming what happened in the UK?

Aric Toler: 34:48

Oh yeah, the Skripal stuff, yeah.

Peter McCormack: 34:49

Yeah. So again, a very, very weird, very bold-

Aric Toler: 34:52

Really, really weird, yeah.

Peter McCormack: 34:54

... and brave as well, but it goes back to the Litvinenko?

Aric Toler: 34:59

Litvinenko, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Peter McCormack: 35:00

Litvinenko. That was the first time, right? That I remember.

Aric Toler: 35:02

Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 35:03

And it was very bold and brave to go onto another country and start assassinating people.

Aric Toler: 35:08

Yeah, with polonium sometimes too, right? Yeah, yeah.

Peter McCormack: 35:11

Yeah. I mean so did your research start with them?

Aric Toler: 35:13

No, no, no. We didn't exist back then. So yeah, 2014 is when we started, yeah.

Peter McCormack: 35:17

But did you do any back work on that or did you just-

Aric Toler: 35:20

No, it's too old.

Peter McCormack: 35:21

Too old, okay.

Aric Toler: 35:21

I mean it's done, I mean it's the inquiry's done, all that. I mean yeah, this is, I talked earlier about how Putin won't go and kill journalists, right? Maybe local governors, maybe local police, maybe Chechen warlords, maybe private businessmen will. But Putin's government won't, doesn't murder Russian journalists. But he will kill you if you are a former spy, so that's the thing.

Peter McCormack: 35:44

Because you're a traitor?

Aric Toler: 35:47

Yeah. My least favourite type of Russia talk is people who try to psychoanalyse Putin and say he's a KGB blah, blah, blah, whatever. But I mean this is one case when, yes, he is a former KGB officer and he did serve in the security services, and so he does actually have a very personal feeling towards turncoat spies, right?

Peter McCormack: 36:04

Okay.

Aric Toler: 36:05

So the most brazen actions have been against turncoat spies, Skripal obviously and Litvinenko back in ... it was like 2004, 2003?

Peter McCormack: 36:14

Yeah.

Aric Toler: 36:14

Yeah, a while ago, yeah.

Peter McCormack: 36:15

Okay, so the basis of the research, where did you start? What are your goals with the research on this?

Aric Toler: 36:22

So the Skripal stuff, I mean very, very basic what happened with Skripal. So a guy named Sergei Skripal and his daughter were both poisoned in Salisbury in the UK, he was a former spy, turncoat, he was in a spy exchange, now he's back in the UK and supposedly no one really knows for sure, but supposedly was possibly helping some EU and UK government stuff about Russia. So there's all these rumours, I have no idea if they're true, if he was involved somehow in the Steele Dossier, all these shady things.

Aric Toler: 36:49

So there's some people say that the Skripal thing was done because of current actions, but whether or not, he is a former spy living in the UK and he was poisoned with this very, very, very exotic Soviet Era chemical, biological agent. And he did not die, his daughter did not die, but a woman named Dawn Sturgess did die because the vessel they used to deliver this was like a perfume bottle.

Peter McCormack: 37:12

Like a perfume, yeah.

Aric Toler: 37:12

Yeah, yeah. Then some guy found it in the trash and gave it to his girlfriend and-

Peter McCormack: 37:15

What a gift.

Aric Toler: 37:16

Yeah, yeah, no kidding, yeah. And she did die and that was an accidental thing. And the two guys who carried out the attack are, this is when it gets really, really weird-

Peter McCormack: 37:26

They said they were on holiday.

Aric Toler: 37:27

Yeah, so there's two guys, they traveled under the names Ruslan Bashirov and

Alexander Petrov, these two Russian guys and they traveled saying they were sports nutrition salesman who were on holiday to visit the Salisbury Cathedral. Okay, yeah. So these two Russian guys who travel-

Peter McCormack: 37:45

A common destination for people going to the UK as well.

Aric Toler: 37:47

Sure, sure. I mean Salisbury Cathedral, I mean it's very pretty, it's in that one famous painting, I can't remember who painted it, but it's famous. But they came in and they said that they arrived, they took a train from London up to Salisbury and they said, "The snow was so high on the ground we turned back. We walked around and turned back because-"

Aric Toler: 38:03

You know, so high in the ground. We walked around and turned back because we couldn't make it to the cathedral. Though from the train station in Salisbury when they arrived, you could actually see the cathedral in the background. But they walked the opposite way to Skripal's apartment. We know this because there's surveillance footage that the UK police have released. And they kind of walk towards Skripal's house. There's no video of it happening, but they then used this perfume bottle, like the spray on the doorknob or something, this chemical agent and they went home. And then the UK authorities said, you know, these are the two guys. It's this guy, Petrov, and this guy, Boshirov. They put out their passport photos and then things got really, really weird when Margarita Simonyan who's the head of RT, the, you know, Russia Today program, she interviewed these two men, which is how we got the story about the cathedral and everything. And they-

Peter McCormack: 38:48

I've seen the interview. It's so weird.

Aric Toler: 38:49

It's bizarre. It's very bizarre. They talked about how they wanted to see the famous 143 meters Spire or whatever. It seemed like they were kind of like trolling a little bit too. Like they knew that this wasn't believable. And the thing that makes it really weird is Russia, like again, some people think this is like punishment because they screwed up this operation, but they made them seem like they were gay together. They stayed in a small little a hotel room together, and they definitely insinuated they were partners. They never actually outright said it, which is again, so then that was the story up to a certain point.

Peter McCormack: 39:19

But you've obviously researched these guys.

Aric Toler: 39:21

Yes. So then that's where we come in. So then we were digging into these guys and we used a bunch of mostly leaked databases because then Russia has this very, very bizarre culture of leaking personal information everywhere. So, if you want to know

about someone's, I don't know, someone's DMV record or something like that, you can't just go and find some leaked database for the, I don't know, the state of New York's DMV database. You can't, you just can't do it. But in Russia, you can. There's like these little street kiosks all over Moscow, you can buy USB drives with like, you know, here's the car registration data from 2013 of everyone in the Moscow Oblast, which is like 10 million people or whatever. And these can just be downloaded on torrents or whatever online.

Aric Toler: 39:59

So we had this gigantic repository of these including airline tickets and vehicle registrations and residential databases and criminal offenses and speeding tickets. Everything you can imagine is online some way or other. Some of these are sold online for like \$20 in Bitcoin and then you'll get it. Or maybe you just download it on a torrent or whatever. So we're digging through some of these databases into this and we figured out some ways to figure out who these guys really are. Because Petrov and Boshirov are their names, but their identities did not exist before like 2016 or 2017. So these two men were more or less born a year before the Skripal poisonings, which is kind of weird because you'd think that Russia is a place of bureaucracy, of paper trails. It's kind of weird because everyone in Russia when you turn like 16 or 18 or whatever and you can get a, it's called a national passport. It's like a national ID card more or less. And they had their national ID cards or passports issued to them for the first time in their 40s, which is very strange.

Aric Toler: 40:54

So we started searching. We kind of had hypothesis that like, well, you know, maybe if we keep searching some of the details in their information, we can find out their real identities. And we did and we searched and searched and searched and looked for airline tickets and all this other stuff in these databases. And we eventually found out that their real names are Anatoliy Chepiga, that's the Boshirov guy. He's the one with the little goatee, if you've ever seen the interview. And the other guy's name is Alexander Mishkin who is the guy with kind of the buzz cut, the other guy. And we found them for a lot of ways, but one way is, for example, for Mishkin, his real name's Alexander, I can't remember his patronymic, Mishkin. And for his fake identity was Alexander Petrov.

Aric Toler: 41:30

He uses the same first name, the same patronymics because in Russia your middle name is patronymic, which is your dad's name plus ovich/evich or if you're a girl ovna/evna, and the same birth date and the same also home city. So if you were to just search these public, again, public because they've been leaked databases of everyone named this first name patronymic on this birth date from this town, he was the only guy. And when he used his fake identity because the GRU, turns out these guys were GRU agents, which are Russian military intelligence like the CIA kind of. Their fake identities were issue to them because a lot of times whenever these officers work, they don't travel under their birth names. They get fake identities. They used their real first name, their real middle name, and their real birthdate. And a lot of times their last name is just very slightly different.

Aric Toler: 42:15

Not these guys. Their names were different. But sometimes they only change one or two letters because if you get asked, you'll naturally won't slip up. You'll remember your real name is. And so you can just reverse search these and find who they are, then find their photos, compare them. And we've worked with a Russian investigative outlet that actually sent people to the home village of these guys where they're actually from and ask people like, "Do you know?" You have a picture. Like, "Do you know who this guy is?" Like, "Oh yeah, that's so-and-so. I heard he joined the military," you know. "I heard he's a spy now." Whatever.

Peter McCormack: 42:41

So you found them.

Aric Toler: 42:41

We found them. Yeah. And also, a couple of weeks ago we were, because the New York Times published a story recently about this guy named and his last name is who commands the GR unit who did this group. So he's the boss of the guys doing all these crazy things in Europe, the GRU operation and the Salisbury with the Skripal poisoning. And also there was an attempted coup in Montenegro and there's an attempted assassination in Bulgaria and all sorts of crazy stuff. And the boss of all these guys, the big boss who's in charge of this GR unit, a guy named Andre, we were stalking him more or less, him and his family. And his daughter had a big posh, huge wedding in Moscow, like this gigantic, very hipster wedding of like, you know, I don't know, what the, Mason jars, you know, like those hanging light bulbs and you know very like hipster starter kit, like cafe looks like.

Aric Toler: 43:37

And because it's a very Instagram friendly wedding and there were tons and tons and tons of photos and videos and everything for this wedding. And this wedding took place a year before the Skripal poisonings. And they had a videographer who did like a little two and a half minute movie about their wedding with music over it and made a wedding photographer and all that stuff. And of course all the stuff's online because these wedding photographers, they all work freelance. They put their work up online, including from the wedding. And at this wedding for this GRU's daughter's boss, we see Chepiga or Boshirov, the guy who went to the RT interview, sitting there front and center during the wedding. And this is the crazy part. His daughter was the ring bearer for the wedding too. So Boshirov/Anatoliy Chepiga, one of the Skripal poisoners who was interviewed in RT, he was in the front row for his GRU boss's wedding. And his daughter was the ring bearer for the wedding. So sports nutrition salesman whose best friend apparently is a GRU commander in Moscow.

Peter McCormack: 44:33

Wow. Okay. So what's the response from Russia been to this? No, you're lying?

Aric Toler: 44:36

Just fake, fake, fake. You know, it's all online. You can't trust what's online, who cares? of course, then they reference other online reports saying that we're wrong because

you know, "look what this blogger said. They debunk Bellingcat. Look at Wall saying you can't believe any bloggers." Kind of simultaneously.

Peter McCormack: 44:50

Again to the world of information warfare.

Aric Toler: 44:51

Yeah, yeah. So they bring up other things like, "So why are you asking you about Russia? You should be asking about why the UK police botched this operation." You know, that kind of thing. So, I mean obviously it's just boring disinformation. I mean, their responses are really lame for the most part. But it mostly just goes back to like, "we can't believe you because you are secretly the CIA," or whatever.

Peter McCormack: 45:12

Why that choice of agent for killing him? Is that something easy to transport?

Aric Toler: 45:18

So why'd they use this chemical?

Peter McCormack: 45:19

Yeah.

Aric Toler: 45:19

I have no idea. It didn't work either, right? He survived.

Peter McCormack: 45:23

Yeah. Exactly. So it's just kind like-

Aric Toler: 45:25

I mean I've heard a million theories and I don't know, but I've heard some people think that this was like a message too to other former spies or people thinking about becoming, you know, former or turncoat spies because-

Peter McCormack: 45:35

And Litvinenko?

Aric Toler: 45:37

Litvinenko was polonium. I mean, very, very famously they put polonium into his tea and he died from radiation poisoning, which is a very bizarre way to kill someone. So why not, you know, use the like Bulgarian poisoned tipped umbrella. You don't have to put polonium, you know, some exotic radioactive element into someone to slowly, slowly kill them. Most people-

Peter McCormack: 45:56

Why not, because it's a crap way to die maybe.

Aric Toler: 45:57

Yeah, that too. And also it's just, it's very, very, very bizarre and you'll know this wasn't

an accident, you know. This heart attack this guy had was not from natural causes. It was from, I mean, you know, polonium/ an exotic Soviet era chemical agent. Obviously Russia did it or someone, you know, if you're a conspiracy theorist, someone did this to frame Russia. So there's no ambiguity, again, listen to your conspiracy theorist, about what the source of this was. This wasn't an accident.

Aric Toler: 46:27

You don't cut his brake lines, you know, and make it look like it was an accident. It was obvious. It was a message to other people. You think they'd pick a better poison to actually kill the guy and not just injure him. But again, I have no idea why they did this. Or maybe they meant to kill him and if this had been deployed properly, it definitely would have. But these two bumbling Salisbury tourists just couldn't put it on the doorknob, right, or something like that.

Peter McCormack: 46:49

But there's many repercussions, right?

Aric Toler: 46:50

I mean, yeah, there's been some sanctions. But yeah, exactly. And the sanctions that we've passed, by we, I mean the US and EU have passed on to Russia have been relatively mild. They're like, you have some sectorial sanctions along, like, you know, some oil and gas like that. But you know, people get around them.

Aric Toler: 47:07

I mean, compared to the sanctions that you have on like Iran and Venezuela, which are like hardcore, like really, really hurt, you know, the citizens and population of that country and deprive them and all that stuff, all sorts of moral and ethical issues around those sanctions. But one of the Russian ones, I mean, they like hyper, hyper, hyper focus on individuals and big oil and gas and military companies. And the biggest repercussions on the average Russian are Russian counter sanctions. So like Russian counter sanctions will be like, we're no longer importing cheese from France, you know, pasta from Italy or whatever. And so you have to deal with the crappy, you know, Russian crappy Russian cheese and alternatives and said. So the biggest repercussions for the population of Russia had been the-

Peter McCormack: 47:49

The self punishment.

Aric Toler: 47:51

... the self punishment, really. Yeah. Because the idea of it is like, you know, "look what they're making us do to you" kind of a thing.

Peter McCormack: 47:55

Is there a certain amount of Russia losing its power on the world stage and China becoming the second kind of superpower now?

Aric Toler: 48:03

I guess. I'm not an IR person. So I mean, I guess maybe. But I don't know. I know the whole like idea of power ranking countries is kind of silly.

Peter McCormack: 48:12

Well, no. But I didn't know if this is like something Russia's doing to try-

Aric Toler: 48:17

I guess.

Peter McCormack: 48:17

... and stay relevant on the world stage. Do you look into that or you're more just about research and facts?

Aric Toler: 48:23

I mean, yeah., I think that whenever people talk about like, "Oh so-and-so wants to be a bigger player." And like, yeah, maybe I guess, I don't know. I think that everyone's just kind of pursuing their own objectives that are a little bit more focused. So like, you know, China ... Russia isn't getting involved in Ukraine thinking like, "This is our way to become a big player on the world stage and people would respect it." It's more like we specifically want goal X, Y, and Z. And if maybe if this gives us more international prestige, you're standing, that's fine or whatever. But really it's about pursuing objective A, B, or C.

Aric Toler: 48:51

So I mean, I guess maybe there's some big geopolitical planning meeting in the Kremlin talking about how we want to really make Forbes top five countries list. But I think it's more about very specific objectives, not like this very broad destabilising Europe or whatever. I think it's more like, "Okay, we want to keep spies scared. You don't want to keep spies from betraying us. There's an unfriendly government, Montenegro. We have weapon, whatever interest in there. We don't want that to happen. We want to keep this Bulgarian arms dealer from selling weapons to Assad's enemies and Syria." It's like very specific things rather than these big grand geopolitical designs.

Peter McCormack: 49:27

Right. Okay. Yeah. Because that was the next question I was going to ask you about. There was an alignment with Assad. There's another alignment with Maduro, you know. But people on the international stage who are not seen as particularly well thought of, these countries, what is that about? Is any of that about trade and trying to keep-

Aric Toler: 49:43

Well, some of it is maybe like a longstanding relationship. I mean they have a very, very long standing relationship with Syria, you know, going back quite a ways to the Soviet days. And also, I mean from a very, very practical standpoint, they now have a very good warm water port in the Mediterranean with Syria. They don't have that natural in Russia. And that's kind of been the entire struggle of Russian foreign policy,

you know, going back to Peter the Great is looking for a warm water port. And Crimea, they have one to the Black Sea, and they have one in Syria now or they've had one in Syria and they continue to have one there. So I mean, a lot of it's focused, highlighted, strategic objectives. And also Syria, God, who isn't involved in Syria nowadays, right? I mean everyone wants to have a place at the table, I suppose. And if Venezuela, I mean the Venezuela thing is, I don't know. They have so much money tied up. I mean, it's almost like a sunk loss at this point because they have millions and billions of dollars tied up from loans to Venezuela and assistance and all that stuff. Of course they would like to keep their investment going and not have that as a loss.

Aric Toler: 50:43

Again, I don't know if some US Trump official's wet dream comes true and they topple Maduro or whatever and they get some, who's that one, Guido or whatever that guy is, whoever that Guido guy is, get him in power. Then all the Russian debt will be canceled. Who knows what that is. But I think a lot of it is very specific strategic things and also just historical lines that they just want to maintain.

Peter McCormack: 51:05

And so what are you working on now? What are you looking at into Russia? Can you talk about anything right now?

Aric Toler: 51:09

Yeah, so obviously more MH17 work, like always. We've been looking into a handful of ... So the New York Times dropped a really, really big, I mentioned this earlier, a really big story recently about this guy Andre who is in charge of this GRU unit who's been doing all sorts of nasty things in Europe. Not just Europe, central Asia, the middle East, the caucas. Everyone focuses on the Europe, EU stuff, but they have stuff in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and elsewhere. EU just gets the headlines because it's what we read about most often. But they've been doing stuff all over with different Russian strategic locations. And so we've been looking more into this guy,, who's like the big boss and some of his subordinates. And we've found a few new people, things of this New York times investigation that just came out a couple of weeks ago, a few new people to stock online to figure out what they're doing. And also this has given us some new clues about people, some old faces and some new details that let us keep on digging into them.

Aric Toler: 52:02

But, yep. GRU hunting is what we've been doing mostly, looking to some of these guys because they're very, very sloppy online. Some of them are better than others. But for the most part, you can find a wedding or some college buddy who has a photo of them in the background because the Russian internet's a wild, wild West of unethical research because there's all these facial recognition tools that work with Russian social networks. None of these exist for Facebook or Instagram or whatever. But for Russian language and Russian platforms, social networks, you have all these extremely creepy tools you can use to do facial recognition and stuff that don't exist thankfully yet on Western social networks, which lets us do a lot of very powerful and I guess creepy research. You know, let's say we have the passport photo of some GRU agent. We can use some of these sites, one's called Find Clone or Find Face and then

it'll look for this face in millions or hundreds of millions of photos on this Russian social network called VK.

Aric Toler: 52:56

And even if this guy is in the background ... An example we found this one GRU guy. His daughter has an account on the site and she had a photo of her on for her birthday, and he, this GRU agent is in the background. His face is just barely illuminated by the candles on the cake. But this facial recognition software is so powerful. It matched the face we uploaded on a passport photo to a very dark photo of him just barely illuminated by candlelight. And even though this guy has no digital footprint, he has no accounts, we can't find an email address he uses, he has no Facebook account, he has no Instagram, whatever. But just happens that his college buddy had a different photo of him from his college buddy and from his daughter shows him and lets you know. If you know what her daughter's name is, we know his name because the patronymic of someone is their father's name plus last name.

Aric Toler: 53:44

So we could figure out all the other information about them. So, yeah. So, that was a very long winded answer. But yeah, we're doing all sorts of research into GRU agents right now.

Peter McCormack: 53:53

Well, it's funny because we're all a little bit scared of surveillance and facial recognition technology.

Aric Toler: 53:58

It's terrifying. Yeah.

Peter McCormack: 54:00

But actually these have been useful tools for you guys.

Aric Toler: 54:04

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I mean it's probably better these things don't exist. But because they do exist, we might as well use them. Because I know there's a million lawsuits and ethical issues around Facebook and their facial recognition, because if you have a Facebook account, maybe you've gotten this notification to where if a friend has upload a photograph with you in it, but you're not tagged, sometimes they'll Facebook and be like, "Hey, do you want to tag yourself in this photo? We know it's you," because Facebook has an extremely powerful facial recognition program built in, but it's just not public facing.

Aric Toler: 54:28

You're not able to weaponise that for research yet. There's probably somebody on Get Hub who has a script somewhere to where you could do it. But on the Russian internet, people don't have the same normal ethical and concerns around technology and development, so we can use those.

Peter McCormack: 54:43

Well listen, this has been fascinating, and I do really appreciate your time. I will say I think the work of Bellingcat is amazing.

Aric Toler: 54:47

Oh, thanks.

Peter McCormack: 54:49

I think more people should be aware. I think it's some of the most interesting journalism out there right now. Like I say, at a time when it's very hard to find good journalism, I think some ways the internet has destroyed parts of journalism because content is free. I desperately try to voice stuff like BuzzFeed because I think it's terrible.

Peter McCormack: 55:04

Well I think the work Bellingcat is doing is amazing. I'll share it out and let people know. But if people want to follow your work specifically, how can they follow you?

Aric Toler: 55:11

I'm easy to find. My name is Aric with an A, A-R-I-C, Toler, T-O-L-E-R. I thinking I'm the only person with that name. So I have, I think-

Peter McCormack: 55:19

In the world.

Aric Toler: 55:19

Yeah, I think so. I have a misspelled first name. So it's good for like SEO I guess, for search engine optimisation, but it's bad if I ever want to hide. So I'm very easy to find if you just Google my name.

Peter McCormack: 55:29

Right. Thank you. Appreciate it.

Aric Toler: 55:30

Sure thing.