INTERVIEW: JENS JØRGEN NIELSEN

Danish Historian Fired After Ukraine Blacklists Him

Jens Jørgen Nielsen has degrees in the history of ideas and communication, was the Moscow correspondent for the major Danish daily Politiken *in the late 1990s, is the author of several books about Russia and Ukraine. He is a leader of the Russian-Danish Dialogue organization, and an associate professor of communication and cultural differences at the Niels Brock Business College in Denmark; he has been a teacher at the Copenhagen adult night school Folkeuniversitetet for eight years.*

Mr. Nielsen has participated in several Schiller Institute conferences, including the Institute's Danish-Swedish videoconference on May 25, 2022 for a new international security and development architecture. Then, on July 14, 2022, he, along with other speakers at the May 25 conference, was put on the blacklist of "information terrorists" put out by Ukraine's UK-supported and U.S.-funded Center for Countering Disinformation. There was widespread coverage of this in the major Danish media. The Danish parliament conducted a consultation about this affair with the Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod on Aug. 28, 2022.

He was interviewed for EIR and the Schiller Institute by Michelle Rasmussen in Copenhagen on Nov. 14 here. The transcript has been edited, and subheads added.

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Nielsen Facebook page

Jens Jørgen Nielsen

EIR: You have just been fired from one of your teaching posts for political reasons. You are currently teaching a course about the history of Crimea, which you will be allowed to finish, but next year's courses about "Russian Conservatism" and "History of Ukraine" have been canceled.

Why have you been fired, and what led up to that?

Nielsen: Well, I would say I was not fired for anything which took place in the classroom, because there have been some evaluations of my teaching and they have always been very good. The latest evaluation was from February this year. And when people were asked about the professional level, 100% were very satisfied. So that's nothing to do with it. And I'm not politicizing in my teaching. When I teach, I objectively lay out various interpretations and sources, the interests of various nations and actors in the political process. So, it's not for something I've done in the classroom. It's obvious. Even though the board of directors who wrote me this letter tries to legitimize it by saying that I may be politicizing in the classroom, they have never attended any of my lessons. They didn't know what's going on there, and they never invited me to talk about it. They never invited any of the students who attended the courses. So it's obvious.

There's no doubt that it was for something which happened outside the classroom. I was on this Ukranian blacklist that you mentioned. And I gave also an interview to Vladimir Solovyov, a Russian on a Russian TV channel. And I didn't endorse the war, like some would say. We talked about the explosion of Nord Stream 2, and who may have done it, who might not have done it, what the Danes thought about this kind of thing, and things like that.

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derstand them.

I was not endorsing the war. That's very important, because I have my doubts about this Russian engagement in Ukraine. That is another question. But I didn't endorse it. But the fact that I gave an interview brought about a crisis in the board. The old board had left, and there was a new board. And the old, original board supported me, and the leader of the school said it was okay because there was nothing wrong with my teaching.... What I do outside the classroom, which points of view I had, was up to me. They didn't have anything to do with it as long as the teaching in the classroom was done objectively and people were satisfied with this.

Russian Presidential Press and Information Service

"It is very important to understand Putin, what his situation is, his background and his way of thinking." —Jens Jørgen Nielsen. Here, Putin addresses the German Bundestag, Sept. 25, 2001.

So it was because I was considered to be a person who showed understanding for Putin. Showed understanding for Putin. I was asked by a journalist, "Do you really show understanding for Putin?" I said, "You have to be aware that you use the word *understand*. What does it mean? It is very important to understand Putin, what his situation is, his background and his way of thinking," and things like that. It's absolutely not the same thing as to say it is very good, but you have to understand him. But I think in the Danish media, journalists think it's an offence, in itself, to understand Putin, and to understand Russia, not either endorsing or not endorsing, but to understand them....

'No, We Don't Have Freedom of Speech'

Well, it seems like we are living in—our thinking—something has happened. It resembles something that happened in Stalin's time. You have very strict control with people at the university, or you're allowed to say some things, and you have a lot of taboos you're not allowed to talk about.

So, for me, it was really a surrealistic experience in my own country, which I was brought up to believe is one of the best countries. We have freedom, and we have freedom of speech. We have all these kinds of things. No. It doesn't really work that way today. And I was surprised about it because I had some illusions about my own country, which I don't have now. So, freedom of speech. No, we don't have freedom of speech.

Of course I have not been killed. I will not be put in the Gulag…. But when you fire people, you indirectly also tell people at other universities, "Beware about what you write and what you say. Don't try to say something which is opposed to government policy right now." This is the logic. This is the conclusion I have reached, that you have to get in line with the government policy....

So I think it's a sad day. Firstly, I think it's a sad day for democracy, because in a democracy, we come up with various points of view, and we discuss them, and we find a solution. Secondly, how do you develop new knowledge, if the young people who enter a career as a researcher in this field, indirectly they have been told, "Beware. Look at what happens to people who have some controversial points of view...." And I think this is the sad thing. For me, of course, personally, but a sad thing for the country, in terms of developing and knowledge, in terms of having a vibrant working democracy. I think it's a disaster for those two endeavors, for those two very, very important things in a democracy.

EIR: One of the things that immediately tipped off the controversy was that three of your fellow teachers resigned, saying that if you were allowed to continue, then they would resign. And then, the board of directors started an investigation and they accused you of "politicizing your teaching in favor of the Russian understanding of the war in Ukraine." On the radio interview on Radio 24/Seven after you were fired, the chairman of the board of directors simply said that you have very

strong, very biased opinions.

First of all, is this true in terms of "politicizing in favor of the Russian understanding of the war in Ukraine" in your classroom? Have have you brought your own political views into your classroom?

Nielsen: No, of course not. Normally when I start a course, I say that I have my own points of view, of course, but I will work here as a professional historian. I will present various interpretations and various viewpoints about this conflict, the situation, because I'm also teaching very ancient history. Regarding Crimea, the first two, three classes were from ancient times and from the Middle Ages, 2,000 years of history. So it's impossible. Putin has not really anything to do with Crimea a thousand years ago. That's one thing.

And the people said they were in shock because I didn't politicize, I didn't do anything. I just put forward some facts and various viewpoints.

And secondly, these people who criticize me, those of my colleagues who would not want to teach if I teach, they have never attended even a second of any of my courses. So, I don't know what is going on there. And there was one colleague who also participated in this debate on the radio. He has never read any of my books. He did not understand the interview with Vladimir Solovyov because it was in Russian. Well, I asked very humbly, "On what basis have you made this decision? Because you don't know anything whatsoever about me, apart from what some people say on Facebook, and other social media."

So I couldn't call it anything other than a witch hunt. It seems like a kind of a witch hunt, because it's as much a witch hunt as we had here in Denmark and northern Europe 400 years ago, where we picked out some women, and we killed them because we said that they were probably evil, we didn't know exactly how, but probably, they were evil....

Students Shocked

We are not discussing anything I said, anything I wrote, anything I have done. We are discussing a picture which someone has made about me being like a Putin follower who likes what is going on, who likes to kill Ukrainian children, and things like that. That's what's going on. And I think it's not at all worthy for a democracy like the Danish democracy. I think it's outrageous.

EIR: You said that neither you, nor any of your students were spoken to by the board of directors. Have any of your students complained that you were politicizing your teaching, and now, after your firing, have any of the students protested against your being fired?

Nielsen: Yes. Of course. Many of the students there have been protesting now. And if you go back, there was one remark in February. But an evaluation was made where 100% were satisfied with the professional level of the teaching. And 75% were very satisfied and 25% were satisfied. There was no one who was dissatisfied or less satisfied. But there was one who mentioned that it was a little bit too pro-Putin. That was one among 30 people who made this remark. But that was compared to the other 29 or so. It couldn't, by any means, be a reason for this. Of course, it's not. You could also say that it was at the beginning of the war, and actually, in the classroom, there were several people who were very staunch supporters of Putin—a small group—and a small group who very much disliked Putin, and they had some quarrels between themselves, which has nothing to do with me, because I was not part of that. I think that this was the reason why one person said this. But before that, there hadn't been anything like that. Nothing of the sort. There have been several evaluations, and apart from this, there haven't been any remarks at all.

EIR: And you said that many of your students have written to you, protesting your being fired.

Nielsen: Yes. I don't know exactly how many, but many said they would protest it. How many actually have done it? I'm not quite aware, but I think that there probably will be a lot, because it was a shock, because people have been following me for years. Some of those ... have attended all my courses, or many of my courses, and they were shocked, because they didn't understand it at all.

I also gave a course on the history of Ukraine last year, and there were really many participants. The people said they were in shock because I didn't politicize, I didn't do anything. I just put forward some facts and various viewpoints. Because when you're talking about Ukraine, you have very different narratives

Ukrainian Center for Countering Disinformation

For speaking at a conference sponsored by the Schiller Institute, Nielsen was among those put on the blacklist of "information terrorists," published by Ukraine's UK-supported and U.S.-funded Center for Countering Disinformation.

about what Ukraine is. And even inside Ukraine, you have very different points of view. What constitutes actually a country like Ukraine? I have several Ukrainian friends who have very, very diverging ideas and concepts of what Ukraine is, what constitutes Ukrainian identity. It's not a simple or unambiguous concept, because it's very controversial, what it actually constitutes. It's not that easy. So I had to put forward something.

But many of the people who criticize me, they criticize me because they think I should say exactly what the Western governments and the Ukrainian government say. This is the thing, that I have to say something exactly like the public version of the Ukrainian nationalist government's interpretation of Ukrainian history. But as an historian, that's very easy to criticize. Because there are historical facts which run counter to much of the Ukrainian [government's] way of thinking.

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EIR: Along that line, the one thing that the board of directors did do, besides referring to these very few student remarks, was that they read one of your books called *Ukraine in the Field of Tension*. What did they criticize about your book?

Logo of Folkeuniversitetet, Copenhagen's adult night school, which fired Nielsen.

Nielsen: They criticized me when I wrote about the so-called annexation. First, I would say that it's a book written six years ago. A lot of things have happened since then. There was a discussion about what does annexation mean? Because, I admit also that the Russian troops did not adhere to the agreement between Russia and Ukraine regarding the lease of the Sevastopol naval port. They were allowed to have 25,000 soldiers to defend the fleet and the port, but the Russian troops had no right to stay in Simferopol. They went from Sevastopol to Simferopol. It´s true. But on the other hand, it's a very strange annexation given there was hardly any bloodshed. There were two or three people who were killed by accident, and there were 21,000 soldiers in the Ukrainian army in the Crimean garrison, but 14,000 decided to join the Russian side.

It means that it's a very split country, whatever you may call it. And I also said that, I think it was in the Summer of 2014, [Quinnipiac University Polling Institute] made a survey in Crimea saying that 80 or 90% of the population endorsed the status as a part of Russia. And the same result was arrived at by the German polling company GfK in 2015. So, when the majority of the population accepts this transfer from Ukraine to Russia, is it an annexation? I had a discussion in the book about it. You can say, on the one side, it depends, if you look at it like that, you can consider it to be an annexation. But in other ways, it's not a very typical annexation, because of what I've just mentioned.

So they really made a mistake, because they said it shows that I am teaching the history of Russia in favor of the Russian war in Ukraine going on right now. So they are manipulating things to get it to fit into their own narrative. It's not serious. Not at all. I'm open to debate about this. Of course I am. But they are not interested in a debate. I wrote a letter to them and they have, of course, not answered the letter.

And whatever I wrote six years ago, it is not what I'm saying in the classroom.

Liberties Only in Time of Peace?

EIR: As a teacher at the Folk University, don't you have the right to take part in the public debate, even if some may object to your views? What do you think about that? And why do you participate in the public media debate about Russia and Ukraine?

Nielsen: Well, my case seemed to prove the fact that if you take part, and have some points of view which do not suit public opinion, or does not suit the government, you will lose your livelihood. You will lose your job. So this is what it proves, that you can lose your job. I have lost two jobs because of this. So it's obvious that there are some costs connected to it. It shouldn't be like that. You should not be fired because of some points of view you have, and that you bring into the public discussion such a very, very important question as the war going on in Ukraine right now. So it's difficult. At any rate, it comes with big costs for those who participate. They can be fired. There can be a witch hunt against them. There can be a campaign against them, smear campaigns, and such kind of things. It has taken place here, and I also understand—I just followed some of my German colleagues, and they have been exposed to something like that.

EIR: Yes, you liken this to a German word "*Berufsverbot*." What is that?

Nielsen: *Beruf* means your work. *Verbot* means you're blocked, you're fired, you're not allowed to work there. Some years back, 40 or 50 years ago, we had this discussion. Are you allowed to work at university, if you have certain points of view? Also at this time, there were people who were fired, some from the right and some from the left, by the way. And we had a discussion. I don't recall precisely, but it was in around the '70s, Vietnam, the '80s, where we had this discussion. I was very young at this time. I think it ended up with the fact that we agreed that you should not be fired because of your public opinions. One of the leaders of the Nazi Party in Denmark was a teacher at Aalborg University. I knew this guy. I didn't like him. But that is off the mark. There was discussion, and actually, he was allowed to stay there, because there was no complaint about his teaching. He was teaching German language and literature. There was a discussion about it.

So it's not a new thing. We didn't have this discussion for many years. Now it's come back, and it tells that when you have some tension, some conflict, and things like that, our highly valued liberties, they immediately fly away. So it's a thin layer. Our democracy, the democratic culture here, is maybe a very thin layer. So I wonder: If Denmark enters the war more directly, I think we'll probably lose all our liberties. We can have liberties when you have peace. There's no danger. But when you have some tension, they should prove themselves. These liberties should prove themselves in times of tension.

'Europe Should Not End Up in Nuclear War'

EIR: Why is it that you have participated in the debate about Russia and Ukraine in the public media?

Nielsen: Because I'm very dissatisfied with the policy. I think that the policy the West is pursuing towards Russia—and also Ukraine—I think it's hopeless. I think it's very, very foolish, and is very dangerous, by the way. For Russia, of course, but also for ourselves. I think we're playing with fire. It's a very dangerous situation. I think this is the most dangerous situation we have had, including the Cuban Missile Crisis, which was 60 years back. Of course, I'm driven by this, that the West, that Europe should not end up in nuclear war. Because I know exactly, that if there will be a nuclear war, Europe will be the first theater which will be hit, and it will really, really, really have consequences which we have not seen in the history of mankind, ever.

You can't find a road to peace, really, if you don't find out how we got here and how to proceed.

We know the potential for nuclear war. We know where it is. And you can be angry with Putin around the clock, but, at the end of the day, there's no alternative to have some kind of agreement with Russia to find some kind of solution. To defeat Russia is stupidity. I'm not talking, maybe, because I feel sorry for the Russians. I feel sorry for ourselves. I feel sorry for the Europeans who are following a very shortsighted policy, especially from America, the United States of America. I think Europeans should find another approach to the policy, because it's obvious for everyone now, because of the sanctions, Europe is really in straits. Europe is the part of the world which is hit most by the sanctions. It's actually not really Russia. It's Russia to some extent, of course. But Russia can sell their oil anywhere. And we buy their oil. Much of the gas and oil from Russia goes to India, and China, and they sail around the globe, and they end up in Germany for four-five times the price. It's stupidity. It's pure stupidity, and that's why I engage in the debate.

EIR: You've also said that in your media debates, you have not legitimized Russia's military intervention

in Ukraine, but that you have stressed that it's important to find out how we got here—also the responsibility on the western side. I interviewed you in December of last year, and you were warning about—that was at the point where Russia had just proposed two treaties to try to avoid crossing their red lines. But you said that you have also participated in the media debate to find out how can we reach a peaceful solution?

Do you think that you being put on the Ukraine blacklist, and that being widely publicized in Denmark, could have been a factor that led to this situation where you've been fired?

Many politicians, and also people from think-tanks in the West, tend to think that our way of thinking is the only way of thinking.... I think it's a very, very dangerous way of thinking.

Arrogance of the West

Nielsen: Definitely, among other factors. But it definitely has played a role. There's no doubt about it.

I also need to just add that the two questions are actually interrelated, because to find out what brought us to this point, it will also be very meaningful when you find out how we proceed from here, how to get to a more peaceful solution. So those questions are interrelated actually. You can't find a road to peace, really, if you don't find out how we got here and how to proceed. So I think that is very interrelated.

But when I look at many of the researchers in Denmark, they have some strange, ideologically fixed pictures of Russia. There's a lot of things to criticize in Russia. That's not the point. But to find out, more exactly, what's taking place. And I think that the West should take off their ideological glasses, and look much more realistically at what's happening on the ground. And then, they will probably, maybe, come to some more effective solutions, I don't know. But then there's a chance of it, at least.

You can't find a road to peace, really, if you don't find out how we how we got here and how to proceed.

EIR: You have also warned in your media debates that people who think that if you just get rid of Putin, then the problem is solved—you have warned that there are factions which are very anti-Western.

Nielsen: Yes, sure. Because I think many in Denmark, and in the West in general, tend to forget that Putin was actually very pro-Western in the beginning of his term when it started more than 20 years back. He was President in 2000. They seem to forget it. He actually wanted Russia to become part of NATO. He appealed to the West in his speech in the Bundestag—the German parliament—and so on, and met with George W. Bush, and things like that. He was very good friends with [UK Prime Minister] Tony Blair, I think. There was a hope for the world, but things changed, and I think it is very interesting to understand what changed in those years. I think that there were many steps. It's a little complicated to put it shortly here, but a lot of it, I think, was the West's arrogance, and the West saying we can do anything, without asking Russia.

The first thing was the bombing of Serbia in 1999, and the extension of NATO, and things like that. Secondly was the Iraq war, and things like that. So things changed in Russia.... I lived in Russia in the '90s, and I talked to the Russians. I had another picture. I knew, at this time, that Russia would rise again as a superpower.

And it was important, also, to have some kind of confidence in each other, and to get into a more comprehensive cooperation with Russia. It didn't happen for several reasons.... And does the West's attitude have anything to do with it? It definitely has. But this is the discussion.

I think that's also where many of the discussions tend to stop today, because in the West, many politicians, and also people from think-tanks in the West, tend to think that our way of thinking is the only way of thinking.... I think it's a very, very dangerous way of thinking. I think they will end up with conflicts.

So, I think it's important to have, in universities, but also among politicians, to have a discussion. Where has this American-led world brought us today? It has brought us to the brink of catastrophe, to the brink of a breakdown of a lot of things. And many of the Russians are aware of this. They look at it this way, but many in the West have difficulties to see it, because we are blindfolded, more or less, ideologically, and it's dangerous.

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Voices of Dissent Are Important Now

EIR: Just to conclude, what has to change now, on the Western side, and also in Russia, to make it possible for us to switch over to peace negotiations to avoid nuclear war?

Nielsen: The first thing is to have a ceasefire. And it's interesting: Everyone knows that there had been some steps to make ceasefire in March and April. It's very interesting to see who stopped it. It was actually not the Ukrainians, in the first place. It was first, the European Union, and then Boris Johnson from the UK, and also Biden. It was the West that stopped it. There were some attempts in Belarus in the first place, and later on in Turkey. Erdoğan invited Russia and Ukraine to some talks, and there are still some talks. There are still some talks about the export of wheat from Odessa, and they're sitting in Istanbul, while we are talking. And it was because of Erdoğan. There are many people in the West who do not like Erdoğan. I'm not very much in love with Erdoğan, but this is a very, very—it's the most reasonable step which has been taken. It's been taken from Erdoğan, because he invited Russia and Ukraine.

UN/Jaclyn Licht

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President of Turkey, has taken the most reasonable step toward de-escalation by inviting Russia and Ukraine to talks, says Nielsen.

Russia and China are allied this time, and Russia has strong allies, also, in India, Pakistan and all the Asian countries. Russia has integrated itself into the Asian environment.

And now, maybe, it could seem that it's too late. I don't know exactly. But it seems now that—because the Ukrainians, Zelensky, has now changed his mind, he wants to go to the end, to have a military victory. So he believes that Ukraine can kick all the Russian soldiers out of Ukraine, and the Crimea included. I don't believe it will be that easy. Definitely. If you look at it a little cynically, it might seem that the Americans want a war of attrition against Russia, so that Russia will be weakened. Because they're saying that what happened, probably in the beginning of the '80s, ... the Americans made some new armaments, and the Soviet Union could not follow. Eventually, the Soviet Union collapsed. And maybe they are thinking about the same strategy now, which they had in the '80s with the war in Afghanistan, and also with the armaments, that it will break the back of Russia. But it's a very dangerous game they're playing.

I'm definitely not sure it will happen this time, because Russia and China are allied this time, and Russia has strong allies, also, in India, Pakistan and all the Asian countries. Russia has integrated itself into the Asian environment. I think that it's not a realistic policy from the United States and Europe. So I think, eventually, it will be bad for us, definitely.

I think it's important for us that there is a voice of dissent. As I said, there are some people who will present some other ways of thinking, because many of us who think like that, we are in a minority right now. But things can change very quickly. And I wouldn't be surprised if, suddenly, there will be a situation where people in the West, people in Europe, and also in America, will say enough is enough. We can't do any more, because this huge amount of money we're sending to Ukraine, I mean, we are taking the money from other projects: infrastructure, education, hospitals, health care system, things like that. So I think that there's a limit to how long a time we can continue this war. And I also think that that goes for Ukraine. How much can they destroy the country, and how many people should be killed? It's very important that some voices in the West demand that we have this peace process taking place as fast as possible.

EIR: Jens Jørgen, thank you very much. And thank you for your courage in standing up for your views, for your personal views in the media, and for having a professional attitude towards your teaching, where you have been presenting different viewpoints.