

## **[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right**

Welcome to The Rest is Politics with me, Alistair Campbell.

And with me, Rory Stewart.

Now, Rory, we're going to be talking in the second half about the seventh coup in Africa since 2020, this one in Niger.

We're also going to talk about the problems in Sweden in particular, and also Denmark where there's been this Karan burning going on, which has led to all sorts of difficulties for Sweden and to a lesser extent for Denmark.

But we're going to kick off with Ules, but also you've been digging into this a little bit.

So just tell us what you found in relation to the campaign against the ultra-low emission zone extension.

Absolutely.

So we've talked a lot about populism, polarization, post-truth, and we've talked a little bit about the way in which new social media coincides with that.

So obviously, there's no coincidence that the Arab Spring takes off in 2011 once Facebook and Twitter is going.

And we can talk about that a little bit, actually, also in the way that coups are spreading across Africa.

There's a bit of a social media story there, too.

We've seen social media playing a role in the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

We've seen it play a role in Brexit.

But it's only recently that really clear proper methodology is beginning to be shared with the public on how this actually works.

And a friend of mine called Emma Skies shared some research from Valent, which has looked at the Ules campaign.

What is Valent Rory?

So Valent is a research organization that focuses, it seems, on social media manipulation.

And they've done a particular study around the creation of new Twitter accounts in the campaign in London, which led to the Conservatives holding Uxbridge, which was a campaign about ultra-low emissions zones.

So again, just very, very quickly to remind people, this was Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, trying to extend new taxes on people with polluting vehicles out to the edge of London.

And the objective of that was to stop air pollution and help climate.

And it's been very, very unpopular, particularly with people who felt that a lot of their incomes was going to have to go into paying these taxes on their cars.

So what's very interesting, though, in this study is that what they found is the way in which this is done.

And I want to pause for a second before I get into the granularity of it, and maybe push the conversation back to you a little bit.

Because I first came across this when I was running to be mayor of London.

I don't mean the Ules issue.

I did come across that, but I mean this emergence of a new type of political campaign consultant

## [Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right

offering to win elections by manipulating social media.

I had two quite significant companies come to see me in my house in London, overseas companies saying to me, if I employed them at very, very considerable cost, it was going to be hundreds of thousands of pounds a month, they would win the London election for me by manipulating social media.

And they would say things like, we have worked with 30 countries across the world, we've just won an election in a former Soviet Republic, we've just done something in the Middle East. One of these companies claimed to be associated with people who were ex-Israeli intelligence and special forces officials.

They showed me ad campaigns that they'd run in the past, and they claimed to be able to manipulate TikTok, Facebook, Twitter.

They said they'd done it recently in an election in Eastern Europe.

And if I was going to hire them, they'd be able to do that for me.

So let me just pause that.

And obviously, spoiler, I was slightly horrified by the suggestion that TikTok proceed with these companies.

Presumably you'd have been limited, well, you wouldn't have been able to do it legally because were there spending limits on the London mayoral campaign?

No, very weirdly, there were no spending limits on the London mayoral campaign.

It's very odd.

You could make a normal British MP campaign.

So you could have done it?

Yeah, could have done it, almost limitless.

The question was, could you raise the money?

So you would have to raise many, many millions.

That would be the first constraint.

And to put that in context, Labour and the Conservatives were probably spending four, five million each on the London mayoral election, although they don't disclose that money properly.

So for an independent, you'd have to raise that money.

You'd have to deal with the very significant reputational risk if it ever came out.

But I guess if you were really desperate to win it, it would have been pretty appealing, pretty tempting to have these people offering that they could win it for you by doing this stuff, that if you pay them a few hundred thousand a month, they can bring it through.

I do get the feeling, based on some of his recent utterances, that Rishi Sunak is definitely desperate to win.

And they've made a couple of changes as well about some of the, aren't they raising the limits on spending that you can have for campaigns before having to declare them?

So I think there, I wonder whether Rishi Sunak might be a tad more ruthless than Eurorion and perhaps take some of these people under his wing.

Listen, I've worked in campaigns in different parts of the world.

And the first thing to say is, as you know, I'm not a big tech person, I probably should be.

I give a very good impression of being quite good at social media, but I don't think I

## **[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right**

am at all.

And on this kind of manipulative side, I simply don't understand how it works.

So we can get on to discussing, discussion based on this, what you looked at in relation to less.

The first thing I'd say is, around the world, there are companies which specialize in persuading politicians and leaders of campaigns that they could help them.

They've almost always worked with, well, sadly, the Special Forces is somewhere in the world. They always will give you some sort of amazing explanation as to why they can do things that other people can't.

But of course, if you think back to Brexit, it's not impossible to make the case that Cambridge Analytica swung it, you know, a fairly narrow win.

Likewise, I think in some of these elections in less established democracies where they don't necessarily have the limits on spending and some of the codes of conduct are perhaps a little bit less strict than we might like them to be, then I think it is possible to make the case that a very, very effective, aggressive social media campaign can be the difference to a candidate.

So I think you were probably right to turn them down.

However, I do think that there is something what they're saying.

What it seems to me, I've read the thing you discovered from Valent, and what it seems to be, am I right in this, is that they essentially are creating accounts which project a certain world view, and this is what they did in relation to Ulaz, and then they have all this amplification that they can do.

Yeah, exactly.

So let me just come out and let me sort of put on the record that I have absolutely no reason to think that Rishi Sunak is hiring a bunch of dubious ex-special forces to do social media manipulation.

That would be a pretty big story if that came out.

I think I was just making a more general case that you can see how tempting this must be to politicians.

He's got some pretty ruthless Aussies on the payroll.

Now, so back to the Ulaz case, what seems to happen is that there is about 10 percent of it, and this is obviously critical, of genuine authentic accounts of people who are really wound up about Ulaz, and these have been properly checked out, and these seem to be real people with proper profile pictures.

You can trace them down, and there's no doubt they're real people.

The trick, though, is that since November 2021, nine times as many accounts were created which appear to be fake accounts, and the purpose of those fake accounts is to amplify, as you say, what's said by the real people.

In fact, often these fake accounts are not really generating much material themselves.

A lot of what they're doing is simply retweeting what's done by the first accounts, but to be powerful, they have to outwit the Twitter algorithm.

Just as people will be familiar with this, if you want to get your ads high up on Google, you have to understand how the Google algorithm works, and if you want to really break Twitter,

## **[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right**

you have to work out how the Twitter algorithm works.

I noticed you were calling it Twitter, not X.

Not X, I should have said.

You're refusing to go with the Elon Musk rename.

I'm going to call it Twitter.

I'm not calling it X.

Very good.

I mean, how can you claim a letter to yourself, bugger off of it?

So first, I think the interesting thing in the Valence study is how do you identify, and this is useful for all of us when we're looking at our own Twitter accounts.

How do you identify something that is a fake account?

The answer is you want to look for one that's newly registered.

You want to look for one that has a very high number of retweets, not much original content.

You want to try to see something that's almost solely focused on a single SU, so it's a bit of a giveaway if they're almost entirely focused in this case on Ulairs or if they're totally focused on the Russian case around Ukraine.

And finally, you want to look at the fact that they're often using fake profile pictures stolen from other people.

They can be made quite easily, these accounts.

In fact, one of these companies linked to Israel, which there was a great Guardian article on in February 2023, which we can share on our exclusive newsletter, and it goes out every Friday.

And if you're not signed up, then go to therestuspolitics.com, and this week, we'll also be showing some video footage from Africa.

And this particular company sat down with undercover journalists and showed them how to create these accounts, and you could do them in a few seconds.

He sits there and he says, actually, you can get a thousand fake accounts for 31 pounds, it seems.

And he just shows you how you do it.

You just sit there and you say, okay, do you want a man or a woman, which country do you want them to be from?

Pick up a post, photograph, create a little strap line, create a little name, boom, you've got your account.

And they can do this.

There's a piece of software called Ames where companies can create 30,000 accounts across LinkedIn, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter at a time, and then operate them all remotely.

And when you say operate them remotely, presumably that once you're into that, that doesn't involve human beings at all.

This is all being done by automated software.

Well, I think you could often have one human being maybe directing four or five thousand accounts pretty easily.

And one of the ways in which you get Twitter to promote your products is by getting fake followers.

## [Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right

So one lot follows another lot.

And that gives Twitter the impression that this is a really great account that's taking off.

The giveaway with a lot of bots in the past has been you have sort of one or two followers as you should assign that there's something a bit juvios about it.

But these things can generate hundreds of followers quite quickly.

Well, has your friend Emma been able to assess who has been willing to pay large sums of money in this particular campaign?

Is it possible to trace it back to the, I don't know, the oil and gas industry or to the Tory party or to Tofton Street or whoever it might be?

No.

The research has been very careful to say that they estimate that this campaign around you less will have cost about £160,000, a considerable sum of money, almost certainly paid to a company like these companies that I've referred to, contracting one of those companies to do it, probably costs a bit more, actually, to be honest, 160,000 sounds to me like a bit of a bargain, given the sorts of money these companies were asking for from me, although they may have seen me as a bit of a sucker.

But as they say, they are only studying Twitter.

They haven't looked at Facebook, which is notoriously actually much more prevalent, this kind of abuse on Facebook.

So the actual scale of this campaign on you less could well have been a much, much bigger half a million, million dollar campaign.

And they're saying they don't know what was happening on the other platforms and they have no idea where the money was coming from or who was paid to do it.

And meanwhile, Sidy Khan won his case in the High Court against Tory councils that we're trying to block the expansion of Ulez.

And also, meanwhile, following on from the Uxbridge by-election and the row that there's been about Ulez, Rishi Sunak seems to be going off on a remarkable kind of anti-environmental. He defines it as promoterist, latest plank of his campaign strategy, talking about reviewing 20 mile an hour speed limits, near schools, talking about reviewing low traffic neighborhoods, being photographed, I found this a bit bizarre of all the things he could do this time, being photographed at the wheel of Margaret Thatcher's Rover and saying that only the Tories were promoterist, that Labour hates the motorist.

And the other thing, he goes on about, I'm on the side of the motorist, but the other thing Labour should be saying, well, you may be on side of the motorist, you say, but you're not on the side of the motor car industry because your beloved Brexit is, frankly, wiped out.

So Rory, you're a Tory-ish.

What is going on with this one?

Well, I think clearly they have concluded from Uxbridge that there are votes in being on the side of motorists.

And I think this is partly about a strategy about trying to keep a blue-collar working class Conservative voters on side.

## [Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right

Those are the people who are most affected by this Ulez stuff, that will be the people living in and out of London who have older cars, who are on low incomes and who are struggling to work out where they're going to get £12.50 a day extra to pay for driving their existing cars.

I think it's one of the reasons why Labour has been very, very shy about coming strongly behind Siddique Khan's policy.

They clearly feel the stress of this.

And they're putting Labour in a very, very difficult position because it's going to be very difficult for Siddique Khan to say, I absolutely agree with the Tories, I'm on the side of the motorists, but equally, it's going to be very, very difficult for them to risk alienating those voters by sounding like they're out of touch.

And this, I think, brings us on to what's happening across Europe, because if you look at the alternative for Deutschland, the right-wing party that's just polling 20% at the moment in Germany, a loss of that has been about attacking the environmental policies of people like Angela Merkel, as well as her immigration policies.

And this relates to the bigger thing that we've been talking about for the last few weeks, which is that, unfortunately, the way that environmental policies have been done in Europe are regressive.

They have the biggest impact on the poor because the poor pay the largest proportion of their budgets for their fuel, for motoring or their fuel for heating their homes.

So, one of the things that people like you and me who care about the environment but also care about equality have to crack is, how do you get environmental policies in place that don't find their biggest burden falling on the extreme poor?

Yeah.

I mean, I think just before we leave SUNAC and the kind of politics of this, because the other thing that's happened this morning, just before we started recording, SUNAC doing a visit to Scotland and saying that they're going to allow another hundred exploratory licenses for oil and gas in the North Sea, Labour having had a pretty strong line against. Now, first of all, is he now just doing everything as a sort of political positioning against Labour?

And is that actually clever politics for somebody who is one trying to show that they're a bit different to what went before?

And secondly, in a country that feels pretty much like he's in a mess.

And I'm not convinced by that.

In fact, I did when I was looking for your wedding ring in Buxton last week.

Thank you for that.

A pleasure. I'm sorry I failed.

Ian Dale was my interlocutor.

And Ian, I think, is a, you know, people know is sort of broadly a Tory, probably well to the right of you, I would say.

Yeah. And he was my opponent in the Bracknell election.

We stood against each other for selection.

We were both beaten by a man called Philip Lee, who was the local doctor.

## [Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right

He's now a Liberal Democrat.

Now a Liberal Democrat, exactly.

So he's to the left of you.

You're to the right of him.

And then Ian Dale is even to the right of both of you.

But I said to Ian.

We were talking about this, Oolay's, and we were talking about some of the culture issues that Sunak seems to be wanting to dive into.

And I was saying, look, is the fact now that they're so kind of scared of their record, they don't really have much of a plan for the future.

So this, so he's going to focus on these cultural issues and trends and, you know, kick back on the environmental agenda.

And Ian said something very interesting.

He said, well, they might be trying that.

But if they do, they're going to lose people like me.

And I thought that was very interesting because it does strike me that that Sunak is really trying to hit what I would identify as, you know, the cultural issues as opposed to a proper big agenda for the future.

Yeah. Well, I mean, I think that's right.

And I think you can see it.

Tim Montgomery, who's also well to the right of me,

is another Conservative commentator, was very disturbed by Rishi Sunak's tweet in which he seemed to be comparing Labour to criminal gangs and their support on immigration.

Oh, yeah, that was pretty grim.

That was on a par with the posters that you really hated.

Yeah, exactly.

So I think there's, there's a, I think that there is a real concern about that.

Where, of course, the Conservatives are right is this is going to be an election that was, I think we both agree, a pocketbook election.

It's going to be fought around the economy.

And Labour needs to be very careful not to sound as though it's pursuing environmental policies, which are going to stop growth, which is why, you know,

it may be smart for Rishi Sunak to focus on oil and gas exploration in Scotland, because it's a huge part of the Scottish economy.

It's absolutely the key to constituencies like Aberdeen, where oil and gas is a massive employer.

And it's not just a massive employer in Aberdeen.

It's also all the export of Scottish skills and oil and gas around the world.

So, I mean, to repeat the point, I mean, I would like to see one of these parties say, we are going to make a very difficult decision of transferring exactly the same amount of cash or even more to the people who are having to pay this Eulez, so that it encourages them to swap vehicles to save money, but they're not actually out of pocket if they choose to stick with the vehicle

## [Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right

they currently have. But that will be massively expensive.

Yeah, although if there's one issue in the politics, not just of the UK, but of every country in the world, where you think it's sort of crying out for somebody to show real leadership and leadership being about all of us having to do certain things we find difficult, then I think this is one of them.

And the other thing is, I mean, I know I'm mildly obsessed with Brexit and the politics of Brexit, but I think the other reason why I think Labour have been wrong to be shy about calling out mistakes of Brexit is because now we see the same people who brought us Brexit, who campaigned hardest for Brexit, and now the loudest voices calling for us to slow down on net zero.

Just this week, Farage, Duncan Smith, David Davis, Resmog, the same people who I think led the fight for something which I think most people now realise is pretty much, you know, damaging our country, and now the exact same people using the exact same campaign methods

to try to weaponise their word, the climate.

And I think that's just so responsible that we should call it out more.

Final thing just before we leave this subject, this

Euler's abuse of Twitter, it matters much more than just for the Uxbridge by-election because as AI begins to play into this space, artificial intelligence will make this kind of manipulation much, much easier and will define the US election.

So what we're seeing here is my explaining a relatively clunky analogue attempt to manually create a few thousand Twitter accounts to amplify some statements around a by-election. But AI can take this to a scale where the qualitative difference is absolutely unbelievable.

And these companies are offering many services beyond this.

I mean, the Guardian Investigation, which we'll share, has these companies using fake accounts on Amazon to buy sex toys and deliver them to politicians' homes in order to destroy their marriages with their wives. They're breaking into people's telegram accounts. So one trick is to send a telegram message apparently from the leader of your party saying,

I promise you the role of foreign secretary in my new administration and then send it to 15 other MPs at the same time to totally discredit the reputation of the leader,

et cetera, et cetera. And all of this can be done so easily. There's something called an SS7 vulnerability in the global communication system that allows these people to get into things like telegram that people thought were safe. Anyway, enough about that. But just worth returning to again and again because the next elections are going to be more and more about this.

No. And as you say, but particularly with, I mean, I'd like to think some of our politicians might look at this and think this could be a problem for our democracy as a whole. But I think all too many politicians, unlike you when you had the people coming to see you to go for London Mayor, will be very, very, very tempted to use anything that gives them a competitive advantage, which won't be exposed until after the event. That's the other thing. A lot of this stuff people do in campaigns. And of course, one of the problems with the modern world is that there is a sort of vicious cycle here because we may end up in a world in which the politicians who refuse to use this stuff don't get elected. The politicians who do use this stuff don't get elected and that changes the whole culture. And just very briefly on what's happening in Europe,



## [Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right

because there was a lot going on at the moment. I was following the AFD, the Alternative for Deutschland. They had their kind of annual conference. That must have been a fun thing to follow. Blimey. Well, it's sort of interesting. And they had a huge banner behind which was essentially saying, given how much we've achieved in the last 10 years, think about how much we can achieve in the next. They've only been going 10 years. They're now into 20% polling. And ahead of the social Democrats, not far behind.

They're only behind. The only party they're behind is the CDU, the Christian Democrats.

So it would be, and just to give British listeners a sort of equivalent, that presumably would be a bit like UKIP or the Brexit Party overtaking Labour and being just behind the Conservatives.

Yeah, absolutely. Presumably, actually, they are a bit worse than UKIP or the Brexit Party.

I mean, because they've got a history with much stranger kind of neo-Nazi stuff in the background, right? Yeah, but they've done the same thing that Le Pen has done and Maloney's done and UKIP tried to do, sort of decontaminate themselves with the worst elements.

And they've actually moved off. It's interesting when we talk about this environmental stuff, they still bang on about migration a lot. But they're also part of this debate about environmental change being a thing for the elite. We've seen something similar in Holland, which frankly is giving the impression at the moment of being virtually ungovernable.

But there, a sort of out of nowhere, this farmers party has emerged and become very significant in the debate, again, focused on the environment. But what's been interesting in Germany in recent days is that Merz, who's Angela Merkel's successor as leader of the CDU, obviously now in opposition. And they've got this thing called the firewall. They talk about firewall between them and the AFD. They'll never have anything to do with the AFD. And he did an interview on television last weekend where he sort of suggested that when it came to local politics, it could be very, very different. And people are seeing this as the first chink in the firewall. And of course, it's very, very difficult because how do you, if you're, let's just imagine the next election in Germany becomes where the obvious thing becomes an alliance between

the CDU and the AFD. How do you kind of handle that? Unless you have been absolutely clear, as Merkel was the whole way through, we will never have anything to do with them.

And there's a huge history of this, isn't there? There's a great book on populism by Jan Werner Muller from Princeton. And he has the conventional wisdom, which is what you must not do is give, is form alliances with these people or start imitating their policies because that only strengthens them. But unfortunately, as they get stronger and stronger, it's more and more difficult to hold that line. I mean, that of course was the line that people, the conclusion people took from the 1930s, which was that parties were too willing to work with the Nazi party, too willing to think, oh, well, we'll cooperate them on a bit of a local level. We can do a bit of a coalition there. And by doing so, just gave more legitimacy and space to these parties going forward. But Jan Werner Muller also points out that there's another paradox, which is if you try to completely ignore them and refuse to even debate them or argue with them, that causes another problem, which is that their support base just strengthens their sense of a lease against the people, etc. Absolutely, absolutely. And that's the argument that's been running ever since.

But what was what was interesting watching the AFD conference was that it was a sort of weird mixture of them looking confident because of this situation in the polls. But they also

## [Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right

looked like they were doing their hard right version of the Mingva strategy of we don't want people to really know what we're about. Let's just sort of select. So all they talk about is kind of really tactical tactics. And the environment has become the latest area for them to operate this sort of, you know, we represent the people against the elite, which of course, all populism is founded in that in that prism. Well, I think maybe this is the thing to just as we go to the break to finish on, because a lot of this from you, Les and Twitter, through to the AFD is about the growing problems with making the argument for net zero and climate change in Europe and the United States, and the way in which a combination of collapse of international cooperation around these kinds of issues, the kind of cooperation we have with the Paris climate talks, combined with increasing populism at home, and rising prices, cost of living crisis at home, is producing a huge headwind against what were already pretty inadequate attempts to deal with rising global temperatures.

Yeah, absolutely. Well, anyway, you'd be pleased to know, Roy, that because I know you've had a few critical things to say about Sadiq Khan on the podcast down down the last few months, but he sent us a message after our last podcast where we both supported him on who les thanking us for that. I congratulated him on his win in the High Court, and I said, keep going with the green crap, I said, to which he replied, we call it saving the planet and saving children's lives. I thought that was a nice way to put it. Take that, Cameron. Very good. Right, let's have a break. Thank you. Welcome back to the Restless Politics with me, Alistair Campbell.

And with me, Rory Stewart.

Now, Rory, your friend, Yuval Noah Harari, I listened to it in the car with Fiona, coming back from seeing some friends earlier today. And she was sort of just vituperative, not about him, by the way, but about what's going on in Israel and sort of saying this is kind of, this is worse than anything I even realized was going on. And why aren't people more exercised about this? And I do think that given normally Israel gets way more coverage in our debate than other countries of a similar size, the scale of this perhaps isn't yet fully understood. 100%. And I thought, I mean, I really encourage people to listen to it. So, Yuval Noah Harari, famous public intellectual wrote this book called Sapiens that many, many people have read.

25 million people.

25 million copies, yeah. And actually a fantastic children's book that we've been reading to our kids too called Unstoppable Us, which is a lovely, lovely introduction to human prehistory and other things. But he's become an activist around Israel. And I thought it was a wonderful, kind of passionate. Well, one of the interviews I think that was most striking, I loved the Paul Nurse one, which we did last week, which people haven't listened to should definitely listen to. But I definitely think this is one of the most powerful purely political interviews that we've done. And then next week, we'll get into some of his broader ideas.

Well, the first episode is out now. Second episode will be out on Monday, August the 7th.

And if you can't wait until next Monday to hear that part of our exchange, you can listen right now by going to [therestispolitics.com](https://therestispolitics.com). Should we go to Niger?

Yes. I mean, and let's just do the transition maybe into this, which is to say that, you know, we've been talking in the first half about the way in which prices, cost of living, climate are having these profound impacts on European politics and particularly creating

## [Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right

new forms of right wing politics, the AFD in Germany, backlash is now happening in Britain. But of course, all of this is much, much more profound in Sub-Saharan Africa as we frequently remind listeners. Sub-Saharan Africa has gone from 170 million people living in extreme poverty, by which we mean people living on under \$2.15 a day. That's people who can't meet their basic necessities, can't put regular meals on the table to 470 million people today. And of course, those are people who are far more affected by changes in fuel or food prices than anyone can begin to imagine. And in Kenya, for example, wheat prices are up 30%, sugar prices are up 60%. And this has been exploited politically, partly by people associated with Rila Redinga, who was the opposition leader in Kenya, in a whole series of riots and demonstrations in which more than 30 people have been killed. And it's also been coinciding with William Ruto, the president, trying to double the fuel tax and also trying to get national debt under control, which is a story partly linked to China, \$64 billion of national debt, three times what it was a few years ago. So I'm just starting with Kenya because Kenya is often seen as one of the great success stories, a more moderate, low-middle-income country. But things look much, much worse when we move up towards the Sahel, which is then, and of territory, on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean, right there across the Red Sea, where there's been a coup in Niger, and which over to you. Well, just on that broader point from West to East, one of the, I think it was the New York Times, did a map, and they shaded in the countries that have had a coup of some sort in recent times. And it goes literally from West Coast to East Coast in a single band, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nounizhia, Chad, and Sudan. And this one is, I don't know, I don't know what to make of this, because you've got, so just to tell people what happened if they haven't followed this, the elected president, Mohammed Bazoum, he was the first elected president to follow another elected president in the country's history.

First democratic transition.

Yeah, exactly. The first peaceful democratic transition since independence in 1960, independence from France. Now, the reason why, and I'm in France at the moment, and the reason why

this is causing quite a lot of concern in France is because we talked about, on a previous podcast, about Mali, where there was a coup there, and where the Wagner group had been very much to the four,

and the French were forced to move some of the troops that they had there who were involved in the counter-terrorism strategy in the entire region, move them into Niger. And they now have been coming under something of an attack. The French embassy in the capital was attacked.

Macron has been forced to make some pretty strong statements about what will happen if any French nationals get killed. And meanwhile, we've had the usual round, and I don't say that in a dismissive way, but there is a bit of a pattern to this. The United States have condemned this coup,

the European Union has condemned the coup, and the thing was announced, as these things often are,

with a group of men in military camouflage uniform.

Which, incidentally, subscribers can see on our newsletter. There's a great, great clip where you can see the man in the Air Force uniform reading out the coup and behind him,

## **[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right**

the presidential guard, all in their green uniforms, which we will share with readers. It was a very short statement. He said this, we, the Defence and Security Forces, united within the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland, you've got to love a national council for the safeguard of the homeland, and decided to put an end to the regime you know. This follows the continuing deterioration of the security situation and poor economic and social governance. So, we now have a guy, the president, who is basically locked up in his own palace for the time being, while they decide what to do with him. And this guy at Chiani, who was the head of the presidential guard, in other words, in charge of the president's security overall, he now has declared himself to be the leader. And meanwhile, lots of threats, lots of talks of sanctions, lots of very, very important people like Anthony Blinken, like President Macron, saying that this has to be reversed. But we've sort of seen something of a pattern in some of these earlier coups that we've seen. You have a military takeover, the borders close, men in uniform go in front of the cameras and say there's been a change. The African Union has an emergency meeting and it condemns. Then you have sanctions, then you have the EU and you have the US stepping in. Then you have a change to diplomatic relations. And then eventually, the world moves on, sanctions get lifted and the countries which stop the relations rebuild them. And along the way, the French get kicked out. And generally, the Wagner group comes in. So, Progression has come out and praised the coup in Niger and is already offering the Wagner group to go in and support. And this just comes off the fact that we're just four days, as we're recording this, off a conference held in St. Petersburg where Vladimir Putin was hosting African leaders and announced that he's shipping tens of thousands of tons of free grain to Burkina Faso, where there's been a coup, Mali, where there's been a coup, Eritrea and Zimbabwe, which are basically autocracies, and the Central African Republic, where, as we said, the Wagner group has a statue in the central square. So, and Progression has reappeared. And where they're currently holding a referendum to allow their favorite president to stay on for another eight years. Absolutely. And Progression, who was the guy that led this mutiny, has now reappeared on the margins this conference, doing interviews and meeting African leaders. He was photographed with some of the African leaders. So, he doesn't, I mean, Putin threatened all sorts of punishment to those who led the aborted march on Moscow, but he seems to be carrying on as per... Well, let me just take up your question of this theme of these coups and try to remind people a little bit of the sort of big broad pattern. So, all these countries, as you said, are in the Sahel, this huge band of territory on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. And it's a banner territory famous for incredible sunlight and heat. I mean, barely has any winter to speak of. It's an area that had a very strong population of nomadic pastoralists, people like the Tuareg, moving around with camels. It's a zone dominated, particularly on the western side by France. These were French colonies. And it's a zone which has been brutally affected by drought and more recently climate change and by a huge population growth. So, Niger, which is where the recent coup has happened. The average number of children born by a woman in Niger at the moment is seven. And these are mostly countries, most of the countries we're talking about here, with the exception of Sudan, are countries with populations between sort of 15, 25 million people, but growing unbelievably fast. So, if you're having seven children, the numbers by 2050, 2070 are staggering in countries that have very, very little fertile

## **[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right**

ground to support those populations. And what's happened here? Well,

The Niger is 25 million, isn't it?

Niger is the biggest at 25 million, below Sudan at 45. Mali is at 21 or 22. Chad's at about 17.

Guinea's at about 13.5 million. And the forecast, the population is 70 million by 2050 in Niger. So, it's going to go from 25 million, which is about a third the size of the UK,

just about the third size of the UK, to being larger than the UK population within 25 years.

Another reason, creating the conditions for something like a coup, massive economic pressure already, and real problems with unemployment.

Huge problems with unemployment, huge problems with standoffs, often between these nomadic populations and the more settled populations. So, one of the things going on in Sudan, for example, which we've discussed on the podcast before, people remember, there are two figures in Sudan.

There's Burhan, who comes from this, who's the general who comes from a settled community in the Nile, sort of more upper middle class family. And against him, Hometi, who was a camel trader.

With the Janjaweed militia, who very much represents that other aspect of these sort of semi-nomadic peoples. And the same is true, a lot of these Sahel countries, sometimes it's a trade off between nomads and settled population, sometimes between Muslim and Christian populations.

But a lot of it, it's a fight over land at a time when climate change is causing more and more pressure. So, very quickly, a lot of these countries democratized along with a lot of

Africa through the 1990s. And then things began to go wrong. And they're basically triggered by the Arab Spring and the intervention in Libya. So, as Libya collapses, and that was an intervention in 2011, weapons start flowing south. Gaddafi had enormous weapons supplies. He was employing a lot

of Tuareg from, from Mali in Libya. They floated back home. Mali began to break apart. The French in 2013 set up a huge operation where they ended up eventually with four and a half thousand French

troops on the ground, trying to fight a counterterrorism campaign against these sort of al-Qaeda, ISIS elements in Mali. And at that stage, these other countries were still relatively stable. So, if you were talking about these countries back then, the cliché would have been Burkina Faso is a very peaceful place where not very much happens. Niger was meant to be recently, you know, one of the great democratic hopes where French and American troops were and where the president was getting an award from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation of the Stuff on Gender. Chad was meant to have this very strong, effective, reliable military. And gradually, since 2013, over the last 10 years, the whole thing has begun to fall apart. So, Burkina Faso, for example, went from being this sort of beacon of stability, went from zero attacks in 2013 to 516 terrorist attacks in 2020 as the French operations and the Malian operations began to push the terrorists into surrounding areas. And then the president himself was killed in an attack which he was doing with French troops in Chad and there was a coup d'etat and his son took over. And all these different countries began to fall in different ways. The only exceptions really to this is Guinea, where there has been less of this sort of insertion to attack. It seems to have been more coup d'etat against a slightly incompetent president, but the common theme is all these African militaries talk to each other and it's spreading like wildfire. And as you say, it's spread now all the way across the continent through the whole Sahel region.

And at a time of, we talked about this before, rising Russian and Chinese influence and perhaps

## **[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right**

declining American influence, even though America still obviously is a big player in some of these countries. But I just wonder whether Nigeria is a bigger force in this than we might realize. So, Niger is landlocked and if you look at the borders, it has Libya, as you say, to the northeast, Chad to the east, Nigeria to the south, Benin and Burkina Faso, Mali and Algeria. That's quite a collection of neighbors. And Nigeria represents roughly two-thirds, almost two-thirds of the economy of the whole region. And Bola Tanubo, the newly elected president, is giving an indication of wanting to be much more robust on the foreign policy front and has spoken out in the past. I know that, you know, things can change, but has spoken out against military dictatorships. And I wonder whether Nigeria is the one that's going to have to step up in this, because I was talking to some people in the French government yesterday who were saying, well, their hope is that actually this particular coup can be reversed, that these Puchests will be turfed out. Now, I don't quite see how that's going to happen of its own accord, but I wonder whether Nigeria is the key to making it happen.

Well, there's definitely an attempt, isn't there? So, Bola Tanubo, who runs, has just taken over ECOWAS, which is the sort of regional grouping dealing with West Africa, has threatened military action. It'd be very interesting whether that's followed too. And of course, there's huge sanctions being threatened by the US and the EU and others. So, the US had 1,100 troops in Nigeria, this country where the coups just happened, a massive drone base that cost hundreds of millions. The French had troops there, as you said. The EU had pledged to give Nigeria 1.3 billion euros to try to get it away from oil. And it's been a very important part for the migration conversations because many, many of the migrants flowing into Europe across the Mediterranean are coming from countries like Nigeria. So, the European Union's been trying to put together these very generous development packages across that region. When I was the Africa minister, 2016, and I was writing the UK's New Africa strategy, which I think is still on the books as the UK's Africa strategy, our major shift was to try to shift more towards the Sahel, which is this region. We were opening a couple of new embassies in the Sahel to try to concentrate more on what had traditionally been a French area. But I also would like to sort of remind us that, you'll remember, when I was saying that Mali had been a great defeat for the French, we got a very, very defensive, aggressive response from one of your friends in France who got in touch and said, no, no, this is outrageous. The French have triumphed in Mali. How can worry suggest otherwise? Unfortunately, it's been repeated again and again. The French have now been humiliated in Mali, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, in Chad, and now in Niger. That whole Sahelian Francophone Africa is now full of people in most recent Niger literally attacking the French embassy. You can see online, people attacking the classic embassy front, their security place with stones going through the front door. And Russian flags going up, not because the Russians are behind this, but because Russian flags have become the great symbol of anti-Western move and a huge humiliation. Also, we don't talk about this enough, but for the US. One of the people who is trying to resist the coup was making the point that the Russians have been part of the exploitation of the territory before this in terms of sort of trying to get the mood going. So, you know, I think we shouldn't overstate the influence of Russia, but nor should we should be understated. But what we can be clear about is that in all of these countries that we've talked about in that region, you have varying problems with Boko Haram, particularly in

## [Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right

Chad. You have problems with ISIS and Al Qaeda, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso. And, you know, the French have been a very, very important part of that security operation, which becomes much more difficult if, as per their leaving Mali, you are no longer able to run the same operations that you've been running relatively successfully in recent years. So, it is a massive challenge for them and for the Americans and for the United Nations.

And I guess there is a question on how successful these things really were. So, the Sahel had 1% of global deaths from terrorism in 2007. By 2022, it had 43% of all global deaths from terrorism. It's become the great global epicenter. And even as the French tried to suppress in Mali, and the Americans got very, very much involved, so there's something called the Trans-Saharan

counter-terrorism partnership with a lot of US troops, a lot of it undeclared. The US has been fighting in 13 African countries since 2013. And actually, the sum total of the results of what the French and the Americans has been doing has not been to get terrorism under control in those countries. Terrorism is now spreading ever more widely. And violence in every form is just developing

in different ways. So, we haven't talked much about the Central African Republic, which is where the Wagner group is, but there you've got Muslim fighters from the North, Christian fighters from the South, forming their own coalition. And a third of all the residents in the whole country have been displaced. And in Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, basically the military doesn't control their own territory. It's all run by these sort of self-defense militias. So, I'm a bit skeptical about the French claims that this has been a great success, even in counter-terrorism terms. Well, all of which plays into, particularly if what you're saying about the United States is right, it will play into those who are arguing for further disengagement from places like this, when actually what we probably need, I would have thought, is more engagement.

100%. That's the paradoxical truth. This is actually happening partly not because the world is engaging too much, but because the world is not engaging enough. There's a very, very clear relationship between the collapse of international institutions, populism, isolationism in Europe and the US, less and less international development money, and increasing violence, military coup, discrediting of democracy across the world. So, to turn this around, paradoxically, we need stronger global structures, more involvement, not less.

Yeah. While you were talking, I just looked up the point about the birth rate.

Are you googling?

No, I wasn't googling. I was looking at the research papers that I'd been reading earlier.

Is that okay?

Well, I don't know. It seems a bit tricky, having been telling me off for googling all the time.

No, I'm not. I'm giving you factual support for what you said earlier, because it's very dramatic. 49.2% of the population in Niger is under 15. 2.7% of the population is over 65.

That's pretty amazing, isn't it, when you compare that to...

It's completely amazing, particularly when you set it against countries like Japan, Spain, Italy. Russia, where they're getting older and older and older.

Yeah. Yeah. Okay, Rory. Well, look, we said at the top, we were going to talk about Sweden and Cranburny, but we've almost done an hour on Ulez and Niger.

So, shall we do... We have actually had quite a lot of questions about Sweden.

**[Transcript] The Rest Is Politics / 158. Sunak's net zero culture war, Africa's 'coup belt', and a new strategy for the German far-right**

Shall we do that as part of question time and say goodbye for now?

Great. Let's do that tomorrow.

Yeah. See you soon.

Bye-bye.