

Interviewer: Welcome to Office Hours, presented by the University of Pennsylvania's Office of University Communications. Through this series, we bring you candid discussions with some of campus' great minds. Dialogue that is a little more unbuttoned than you might find in a lecture hall, and, yes, maybe even reminiscent of those quirky chats that you've had with your favorite professor during office hours.

Interviewer: Today, we knock on the door of Kristen Ghodsee, Professor of Russian and East European Studies, and author of the new book, "Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism," and other arguments for economic independence. It's one of eight books that Ghodsee has authored, product of a curious and questioning mind; one that isn't afraid to comb through the histories of those who lived under 20th century socialism, looked at what worked and what didn't, and asked, as any inquiry academic does, "What can we learn from this?" But she's also more than a mind. She's a personality who has done an astonishing amount of traveling, loves watermelon, and still uses a typewriter. For now, though, we start with the hot topic of her book. What's the deal with women, socialism, and sex?

Interviewer: So I think I have the general concept of what you're saying in your book, "Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism"-

Kristen Ghodsee: Mm-hmm (affirmative). "Why Women Have Better Sex".

Interviewer: Have.

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah, have.

Interviewer: Got you.

Kristen Ghodsee: It's a different ... Yeah.

Interviewer: General idea being that under that system, they had more ... They had, I guess, less stress and could have more brain space to enjoy the pleasures that come with sex. Is that kind of the overall?

Kristen Ghodsee: Actually, the argument is much more about economic independence, which is the subtitle of the book-

Interviewer: Right.

Kristen Ghodsee: And other arguments for economic independence. It's also about the state playing a role in supporting women's caregiving responsibilities in the home, so through things like childcare and job-protected paid maternity leave, and other sorts of policies that are put in place to support women and their dual roles as parents and workers. It's partially that. Certainly, I think it's important to remember that these policies were not only implemented in Eastern Europe,

but they've been implemented in Western Europe, and certainly in Scandinavia, so this is a set of policies that has been pretty broadly implemented, it's just not in the United States as much.

Kristen Ghodsee: When you support women, when you value their caregiving responsibilities, I think it reduces some of the pressure on women, and it also gives them a certain amount of economic independence, which makes them less economically dependent on men. That's sort of the argument. I think the thing about stress though is really interesting, because one of the things that's been really wonderful about the book coming out is getting letters from people in Eastern Europe or people who grew up in Eastern Europe, or seeing posts that people forward me about comments on certain articles. There was, recently, a New Yorker review of the book, and one of the top posts was from somebody who basically said that the word "stress" didn't exist in her country when she was growing up, and in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Communism, this was her comment, "All of the newspapers were talking about this thing called stress that nobody had ever experienced before."

Kristen Ghodsee: I do think there's a part of this. I don't address it much in the book, but there is a part of it, that in a less sort of crazy, competitive capitalist economy, people are less stressed. They're not working three jobs, they don't have student debt, they don't have mortgages, they don't have this sort of, kind of crazy credit card debt that we carry-

Interviewer: The basics of living.

Kristen Ghodsee: Basically, exactly. So yeah, you have more time to spend with your friends, you have more time to spend with your lovers and partners, you have more time to spend with your parents and kids; I mean, this is just relationships writ large. So I do think that in a society where everything is commodified, and particularly in the contemporary United States where I think relationships are increasingly being commodified, whether that be a romantic relationships or friend relationships with different apps like Bumblebee FF or whatever. Suddenly, friends are something that you make on a commercial, for-profit platform.

Interviewer: It's shopping.

Kristen Ghodsee: It's shopping. It changes the way that we relate to each other, I think. I do think that there's something about creating social safety nets that make people happier and make people more willing to share their time with their loved ones that we're sort of forgetting, we're losing. Which is, sort of, I think, not such a great thing.

Interviewer: But are we remembering it again with people like Alexandria-

Kristen Ghodsee: Ocasio-Cortez?

Interviewer: Yeah, right.

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah, I mean, I certainly think she has ... Well, and not only ... To be fair, Bernie Sanders really started the-

Interviewer: Sure.

Kristen Ghodsee: The conversation, but I think that Ocasio-Cortez and people like Rashida Tlaib are really kind of fueling that conversation again. But particularly for young people and women of color, I think that she is injecting into the public discourse a really important conversation about higher marginal tax rates and what it means to mitigate against extreme inequality in our country in 2019, and what we can do with resources that we have, rather than ... You know, building a wall. Maybe we should fund higher education or help people who are sick, or help children who need care, help older people who need care.

Kristen Ghodsee: There are lots of people, there are lots of things that we can do with the resources that we have in our incredibly wealthy society, but we haven't had that conversation in a really long time. And so I do, I am quite optimistic that the new Congress is going to put a lot more of these kinds of questions into the national debate.

Interviewer: Do you think they're approaching it the right way? Is there any critique you have of the conversation they're trying to have about injecting socialism into our public discourse?

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah. I mean, I don't know if it's a critique. I think it's more of a worry. I think there's a big generational divide, and I think that older people, but particularly people of sort of Nancy Pelosi's generation; the Baby Boomers and older, they hear the word "socialism", and they only think negative things. They don't like that word. They're very uncomfortable with that word. It reminds them of Stalin and the Gulags, and the purges and the famines. I think that for younger people, Ocasio-Cortez, I believe, was born in September or October 1989, like a month before the Berlin Wall came down.

Kristen Ghodsee: So, she's so young that she doesn't even know what socialism means with regard to 20th-century state socialism in Eastern Europe. And I think younger people hear the word "socialism", and they're excited by Scandinavian social democracy, and are excited by different types of policies that can be put into place to redistribute income in this country, sort of Bernie Sanders' platform. I think that, sometimes, the debate is working at cross purposes, because older people hear the word and think one thing. Younger people hear the word and think something completely different, and let's face it. Demographically, the Millennials are about to overtake the Baby Boomers. I believe by 2020, they'll be a much bigger voter base. If you put together the millennials and Generation Z, demographically, they're coming into their own in terms of political power, in terms of an electoral power.

Kristen Ghodsee: And so, there's a lot of consternation on the part of our older leadership. I believe that median age in Congress is like, 65-

Interviewer: Consternation?

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah. Serious consternation. That these young radicals are going to destroy our economy or whatever. I think it would be good ... That's part of why I wrote the book, and part of why I teach the class as I teach it. It's to sort of have a conversation so that younger people can understand the historical background for why older people have this negative view of the word, but also so that they can understand the varieties of socialism; that it's not just East European State Socialism in the 20th-century, that there are these other models of so many different things that fall under that rubric.

Kristen Ghodsee: If you look up the word "socialism" in the Oxford-English dictionary, for instance, it very clearly says that it relates to any sort of social policy that supports redistribution and social justice. It doesn't necessarily just mean "state ownership of the means of production" anymore. I think that that's a change that sort of the older generation didn't get the memo on, and the younger generation did, but has not been very good with communicating with the older generation. People like Ocasio-Cortez, I think, out there in the public sphere are trying to have that conversation, but she's running up against this incredible wall of people who are just horrified at the word.

Interviewer: Right. Is there a country that you think of in particular that is a good example of having merged capitalism and socialism?

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah, so Norway, I think, is probably the most interesting case. A lot of people will say, "Oh, Scandinavia is socialist," and then the Wall Street Journal or Forbes will say, "Oh, sorry Bernie. Denmark is not socialist, it's completely capitalist. It's a social market economy," or something like that. Then people like Bernie will say, "Okay, well then if it's not socialism, let's just have what Denmark has, and let's take those policies and implement them in the United States."

Kristen Ghodsee: Then when you take the policies and you try to implement them, people scream, "Oh my god, that's socialism!" Right? So it's a real problem, an equivocation about how we use the word. But Norway is a really interesting case, because in the Norwegian case, 30% of employment, of total employment in Norway, is federal employment. It's government employment, and of the stocks listed on the Oslo Stock Exchange, 37% of them are owned by the Norwegian government through this sovereign wealth fund that they have, and they use the revenue generated from the sovereign wealth fund to pay for their social safety net.

Kristen Ghodsee: In Norway, you really do sort of have state-ownership of the means of production, or partial state-ownership of the means of production, and the wealth that's generated from that sovereign wealth fund is then plowed back

into the economy. Now, Norway is not a great example for us to emulate, because A, it has a lot of oil and gas wealth, and B, it's a very small, homogenous country in Northern Europe. I don't think that we can just sort of implement the Norwegian model. However, I think it's really important to look at countries like Norway, or look at policies that have been implemented in places like Finland or Iceland, or Sweden or Denmark, and see what we can take and what we can leave, and what we can implement. I think that the thing that people like Ocasio-Cortez are trying to get us to think about is ...

Kristen Ghodsee: Look, nobody wants to go back to the 20th century, and the policies that are implemented in small, homogenous Scandinavian countries are not necessarily applicable to the United States in 2019. However, that doesn't mean that we can't learn from them, and given that the many, many challenges that we're facing in the future, perhaps the most important of which is climate change, but also-

Interviewer: Of course, yeah.

Kristen Ghodsee: Extreme inequality. Those things are both being fueled, in some ways, by this underlying problem of capitalism, right? Why we need the widest possible intellectual and political toolkit available to us in order to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Sometimes, that means looking to the past, and sometimes, that means looking to countries as examples, even if those countries are not necessarily the same as we are, and having an open conversation. I think that that's what's starting to happen in the United States. I'm somewhat hopeful that it's starting to happen.

Interviewer: Yeah. Do we have any sense of what kind of sex they're having in Norway?

Kristen Ghodsee: You know, it is interesting. The problem with any kind of sexological research is, it's all self-reported data.

Interviewer: Right.

Kristen Ghodsee: Right? So, we're always going to have issues. It's not like, you know, you're going to get people into a lab and actually sort of measure what's going on. But we do know, for instance, that the Scandinavian countries are consistently ranked among the happiest in the world. Now, what that is related to; whether or not that's related directly to their sex lives is an empirical question which I can't answer. But I do think that it is really interesting to think about women's rights in these countries, and they are, by all measures, the most gender-equal countries in the world. Women have an incredible amount of autonomy and economic independence in these countries, partially because of the social safety net that's provided by the state.

Kristen Ghodsee: So what we do see is that women are not bound in marriage. They're not in these dependent relationships with men. If they are in unhealthy or abusive, or

otherwise unsatisfying relationships, they can leave them. And that creates very different conditions for at least heterosexual romantic relationships. I do think it's important to realize that there have been some studies that try to correlate things like sexual activity with gender equality, and those studies show that, you know, at least as far as the self-reported data is, the Scandinavians are having a lot more sex compared to other countries. They have sex earlier, and they generally tend to have ... You know, more security in their romantic relationship. But again, the empirical data is really hard on this because of the self-reported nature of any kind of sexological study. So, it's not easy to talk about.

Kristen Ghodsee: The one thing I will say though, is that Sweden ... I think it's Sweden. There was a report in the New York Times or the Guardian about this not too long ago. Somebody in the government of Sweden actually proposed an hour a week, I believe, where you could go home to have sex with your partner.

Interviewer: Oh wow.

Kristen Ghodsee: This was actually a proposal a couple of years ago. That's just something that you could not ever imagine happening in the United States, right?

Interviewer: That doesn't mean it shouldn't.

Kristen Ghodsee: Right.

Interviewer: You were talking off-mic about the sex recession story that the Atlantic did, and that was certainly a big theme, how people feel it's one more thing to add to their schedule or-

Kristen Ghodsee: Exactly.

Interviewer: You know, for kids today, they get pushed to do five million things in high school to get into college and get good grades, and get a good job, and then it becomes less of a priority. It seems like that's sort of ... Maybe that's not the exact approach to-

Kristen Ghodsee: Right, right, but it's just interesting that it was even floated as an idea, right?

Interviewer: Sure.

Kristen Ghodsee: People in the United States are under an incredible amount of stress, but especially young people. I have a teenage daughter, and I see the kinds of pressure around juniors and seniors in high school who are trying to play the college admissions game. And unfortunately, I don't think that pressure really lets up. Our students at Penn are pretty stressed, and some of them are taking on massive amounts of debt, and then they graduate and they have to pay the

debt back, or even if they don't have debt, they're graduating to a gig economy where nobody is going to have solid employment prospects.

Kristen Ghodsee: I do think that, yeah, in those conditions, it's really hard to take the time that's needed to build healthy relationships. Again, I'm not only talking about romantic relationships. I also think that this applies to friendships and relationships to our family. I think a lot of people get alienated. Parents are really busy, kids are really busy. There's an incredible sense that the quality of our personal lives has really deteriorated, I think, in this country, and it's showing up in declining birth rates. It's showing up in declining marriage rates. It's showing up in precisely this, quote/unquote, "sex recession", so that people are just less willing to spare the time that is necessary to sort of enjoy themselves, which I think is so sad, right?

Kristen Ghodsee: Because it's actually happening concomitantly with all of these Headspace app things, where we're all supposed to be dealing with self-care and meditating on our phones or whatever. Rather than sitting with an app and meditating, why not go out with a friend and have a cup of coffee? It's just an interesting ... But again, I think ... You know, I don't want to over-determine this, but I do think there's a way in which any sort of human contact which exists outside of the market is not really encouraged. Laying around in bed with your partner is not very good for the economy.

Interviewer: Not commodified.

Kristen Ghodsee: It's not commodified, so people lose the sense that it has value. You can't put it on your resume or your CV. It's not like going out and volunteering or it's not like posting pictures to Instagram for your friends and followers to see. I don't know. I don't want to sound hopelessly old-fashioned. I realize that sometimes, I do. But I just think that it's worth having a conversation about how, historically, the model of capitalism that we had has commodified our labor, and many feminists have written for a long time about how it has also started to commodify our affective resources, like our emotions, our affections, and our attentions. So that very rarely, can we have relationships or start relationships that aren't mediated by a market thing.

Kristen Ghodsee: Tinder would be the classic example, and she brings it up in that sex recession article, right? The fact that Tinder has gamified ... I believe the direct quote is that, "It is gamified dating." You're essentially interacting with people through this app, rather than just talking to people. Again, if I remember correctly, in the article, she says that for people to actually start up a conversation with a stranger is seen as kind of creepy nowadays.

Interviewer: The "creepification" of it, yes.

Kristen Ghodsee: The "creepification" of it, right? That just seems especially ... Like, on a college campus, where that's the whole point of being young and in college is just

talking to random people you don't know and meeting people outside of your comfort zone-

Interviewer: Or if you're at a bar, even.

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah! If you're at a bar!

Interviewer: Why are you there?

Kristen Ghodsee: Why are you there? Right. Why would you talk to me? Do I know you? That's just a really strange ... We've lost these sort of social spaces. I just read a review of a really interesting book about coffee shops in Europe, and how the coffee shop was this neutral space that was neither the home and neither the public sphere where strangers could meet and discuss, and exchange ideas. The whole argument of the book was that sort of democracy grows out of this sort of coffee shop culture. That requires that you talk to people, that you have conversations with people, and I think that's something that we've ... You know, I don't want to make this over-determined statement that democracy is failing because-

Interviewer: Well, now they're glorified work places.

Kristen Ghodsee: Which is right! People just go with their computers and they work.

Interviewer: With the exception of a place like, I think, sort of [inaudible 00:18:53].

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Locations will ... They don't even have Wi-Fi for that reason.

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah! So that you have to ... Well, then everybody's got data on their phone, so they're just looking at their phones-

Interviewer: Right, and now we have 5G coming. So, it's just all like that-

Kristen Ghodsee: I know, because now we can stream 18 seasons or whatever of Star Trek on our phones. Who is going to talk to anybody? I mean, I don't know. I could start a TNG re-watch, and never talk to another person again.

Interviewer: Totally.

Interviewer: So people can't see, but in your office, there's all these travel cards.

Kristen Ghodsee: That's right. Yeah.

Interviewer: So do you like to travel? Is that something ...?

Kristen Ghodsee: Yes, I do. That's something that I've done a lot in my life. I've been in a quite a few countries over the years, I think I've lived about 10 ... A decade, 10 years outside of the United States. A year in West Africa and Ghana, three years in Japan, and about two and a half, almost three years in Bulgaria cumulatively, and I lived about a year in West Germany in Freiburg, and then six months in East Germany, and three months in Finland.

Interviewer: That's a wide spread.

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah, so I've been a lot of places, and I've traveled much more extensively than that. But yeah, actually living, you don't get to really know a place unless you're there for a good chunk of time. I really liked settling down and not doing the touristy thing, just trying to get a sense of a place. Yeah, it's something ... I think for me, you've got to really travel to understand the knowledge that you have about a place. It's just sort of academic, literally, if you're reading about it in a book, but you've never actually put foot to pavement, so to speak, or gotten lost in a foreign city.

Interviewer: Where did you have the most culture shock?

Kristen Ghodsee: Probably ... Wow, that's an interesting question. Different places for different things. I lived in a very rural town in Japan, so there was a lot of culture shock in Japan, which was coupled with sticker shock, because at that particular time when I was living in Japan in the 90s, it was very, very expensive compared to the West. Ghana was different. There was a lot of culture shock, but because it was a British colony, it was familiar in some ways, because, obviously, everybody spoke English. So there were certain parts of the culture that were very familiar, even though it was West Africa in the 1990s, so quite a few years ago.

Kristen Ghodsee: Whereas Japan felt a lot more ... A lot different to me when I first moved there, because I literally moved there as a working person. But then in other ways, Bulgaria in the 90s, immediately after the fall of Communism was also really strange. Not for cultural reasons, but because of a different economic system, or the recovery from an economic system. I think culture shock is one of those things that you feel differently in different parts of your life, and I was also married to a Bulgarian, so I was much more integrated into Bulgarian family life, and that was really kind of a culture shock, suddenly being a daughter-in-law in a Bulgarian family. Yeah, I was not very well prepared of that level of culture shock in your really intimate life.

Interviewer: Yeah. You said 10 years. Was there a point around that 10 year mark that you were just like, "That's enough travel, I'm ready to go back to the United States?"

Kristen Ghodsee: Oh, no. No, definitely not. I mean, I just ... I lived in Germany and in Finland all of 2014, 15, and 16. Those years, I was abroad. Basically, whenever I can, I try to move outside of the United States for an extended period of time, which is

easier for me, because I'm an ethnographer, and I have sabbaticals to do research, and also a lot of institutes that do the kind of research that I do will host me. That's exactly how I ended up in Germany. I ended up at different institutes. It makes it easier when you have an infrastructure that allows you to transplant abroad, although, I will say it's very difficult when I moved to Germany in 2014, I had a 13-year old and a dog that I had to transport, and a partner that I had to transport internationally. We had to find an apartment, and she had to go to school in German. It was a big deal. It was a lot harder to do it when you have a family than when you're on your own.

Interviewer: Hmm.

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Are you a dog person more than a cat person?

Kristen Ghodsee: I'm definitely a dog person, and I'm a very particular kind of dog person too.

Interviewer: Oh.

Kristen Ghodsee: I like Basset Hounds.

Interviewer: Oh.

Kristen Ghodsee: I'm a hound person.

Interviewer: Is there a reason?

Kristen Ghodsee: Basset Hounds are kind of anarchists. They don't listen to you, and you think that would be really frustrating, but I actually kind of like it in this really weird way, in a sense that when ... I've had three. When a dog obeys you out of sheer obedience, it's really sort of a pet. When a dog obeys you because it understands the command and has decided that it's a good idea, it feels more like a companion, and I've had a couple of very stubborn, strong-willed Basset Hounds who have pretty strong opinions, and they don't always listen to you. But when they do, you know they're listening to you because they agree. I know that sounds really weird, but if you've had a Basset Hound, if you've ever been around Basset Hounds, they vocalize. They have these really incredible vocalizations that they make, which kind of sound like language.

Kristen Ghodsee: Most dogs don't do that, and so it's ... I really like Basset Hounds, a lot. They're very difficult dogs though, so ... You know, as I get older, it may be harder to manage the anarchist dog.

Interviewer: Do you speak many languages?

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah, I mean, I do. Obviously, Bulgarian is my primary language these days, because I do all my research in Bulgarian. But I speak other languages more or less. These days, unfortunately, because I'm practicing less, I tried to learn German. I'm trying to learn German, but that's a really hard language. But I can sort of, more or less, make my way through. Especially reading stuff for research. It's not that hard. I have time.

Interviewer: Whenever you're writing or researching or preparing to, is there any kind of ritual that you have to kind of get in the mood?

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah, no, not really. I think I kind of work at all sorts of weird times. I do use a typewriter, which you think is a little odd. Some people think I'm crazy. I still write field notes on my typewriter, and I do some first drafts of articles and things on the typewriter because it helps me think.

Interviewer: It's the focus, right?

Kristen Ghodsee: It's the focus. It's also the inability to edit my own pros, so I can just sort of bash out some ideas and not really worry about what the words look like. They can be full of typos. When you write in Microsoft Word, it's constantly judging your spelling and your grammar with those little squiggly lines, and I hate that, because then I feel compelled to go back and correct it. When you're on a typewriter, there's no judgment. It's just words on a page, and especially when I'm working-

Interviewer: Well, it's judgment that you can't rebut.

Kristen Ghodsee: Exactly. It's judgment ... Exactly. It's a different kind of judgment. But for me, especially when I'm working through a sticky argument or I'm having trouble just kind of coming up with the structure of how I want to think about using evidence to substantiate a particular claim; writing it out on a typewriter allows me to not so much focus on the content and worry about the structure, just sort of the structural questions, which isn't something that you do very often in Word.

Kristen Ghodsee: Now, I have heard, some people swear by Scrivener, which I've never used. And apparently, that's a writing software that a lot of my colleagues use. I don't use it. I'm kind of an old-fashioned Microsoft Word person. But I do still use a typewriter for a lot of things, and I guess that's kind of ritualistic in a way, but it's not for everything. Obviously, I don't type drafts of my emails before I send them.

Interviewer: Sure.

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah.

Interviewer: What do you think is an overrated virtue?

Kristen Ghodsee: Patience. I set ... I think patience is an overrated virtue. I mean, it's good to be patient, but sometimes, I think people are too patient and too deliberative, and they don't make decisions, and they don't actually seize opportunities when they come. Or sometimes, they're just crazy things. If you think too much about them, you won't allow yourself to do. That's not really patience. Maybe forethought is the right word. I don't know. Obviously, I think obviously, good things come to those who wait. That's the saying, but sometimes, I think good things also come to people who just sort of rush in and not enough people just rush in.

Interviewer: Sure. What is a favorite Eastern European food for you?

Kristen Ghodsee: Oh, lots of things. Gosh, that's ... I really, really, really, really like Bulgarian Sarmi, which are rolled grape leaves, but their particular Balkan recipe that they make in Bulgaria, so that's something that I always get, especially if my ex-mother-in-law makes them for me, and I love hers a lot. Those are good, but very specifically to also Bulgaria in the summers, Bulgarian watermelon is the most amazing thing. You eat it with a white cheese that we would think of as Feta cheese. Watermelon with feta is the most amazing flavor combination-

Interviewer: Is there something different about this watermelon?

Kristen Ghodsee: It's really, really sweet.

Interviewer: Huh.

Kristen Ghodsee: And it still has seeds. It's very natural watermelon. It's so delicious. It's amazing in the summer, and so you can get it in almost every restaurant as a dessert, you can get fresh slices of watermelon with this really salty, white cheese, and you eat it together. It's really an incredible flavor combination.

Interviewer: Oh my.

Kristen Ghodsee: You can even make a salad, like feta cheese with watermelon. I highly recommend it.

Interviewer: People are listening to this during lunchtime.

Kristen Ghodsee: Yes.

Interviewer: What is a guilty pleasure for you?

Kristen Ghodsee: Guilty pleasure? I think probably comic books and graphic novels. I don't get to read for pleasure very much, because I read for work so much that when ... If I ever get a chance to read for pleasure, I want a different genre, and so for me, the graphic novel ... It's the perfect genre, because there's no way I can mistake

that for work. Yeah, I will spend a lot of time, if left to my own devices, with just a pile of comic books or graphic novels.

Interviewer: Yeah. Do you tend to keep up with new releases or do you go back in the archives and just pick out some-

Kristen Ghodsee: Both.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah, because, like I said, I don't often have a time ... I don't have much time for leisure reading, I am always behind the really cool series. But right now, there's ongoing that I'm up-to-date, so I'm eagerly awaiting the newest issue to come out, which is really fun, because this is a series that both my daughter and my nephew are really into. I know about as much about what's going on in this series that they do, which is really cool, because it gives me something to talk to them about, especially the particular genre of graphic novels that I'm interested in. They're really smart. They really kind of push the boundaries of the imagination, and I like that. They're very speculative.

Interviewer: Right. Yeah, no, for sure. Is there a social group that you have to kind of check in and talk about the latest with?

Kristen Ghodsee: No.

Interviewer: No?

Kristen Ghodsee: No, no. I think, in that respect, I'm very introverted. I just like to talk to my daughter. I don't talk to my nephew, but yeah. There aren't a lot of adults-

Interviewer: You'd be surprised.

Kristen Ghodsee: I know. Who are into these ... The comics that I read, or I guess they're called "graphic novels". I mean, when I was growing up, they were just called comics. That sounds infantile somehow, and the genre is way more advanced in terms of the artwork and story, and a lot more really great people are writing them. So I guess graphic novel is probably the appropriate term. But yeah, I think there are a lot of people who read them, but I don't know anyone sort of my age-

Interviewer: Yeah.

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you can invite three people to dinner. Who are you inviting?

Kristen Ghodsee: Any people?

Interviewer: Anybody.

Kristen Ghodsee: Alive, dead?

Interviewer: Alive or dead.

Kristen Ghodsee: Oh, god. That's really hard. Oh. That's really hard. I think it would be really fun to have a dinner party with Rosa Luxemburg, Claire [Ezetgen 00:32:39], and Alexandra Kollontai. Three very prominent socialist-feminist women from the 19th to early 20th century. They would be fun to talk to. I don't know if they would agree on everything, but it would make for a really interesting dinner conversation.

Interviewer: Yeah. What would you serve?

Kristen Ghodsee: Oh. That would be hard. It would have to be something kind of continental and German. I don't know. Maybe watermelon with feta.

Interviewer: There you go.

Kristen Ghodsee: That would be good, yeah. I'd have to import the Bulgarian watermelons though, and that might be hard, because they don't let fruit come into the country. I'd have to find some secret Bulgarian distribution chain for watermelon. That would be pretty funny. Or we could just meet in Bulgaria. There you go, we could meet in Varna on the seaside, and have a dinner party there. They'd be much more likely to meet me in Bulgaria than they would be to meet me in Philadelphia.

Interviewer: What kind of music do you often listen to?

Kristen Ghodsee: Okay. So I'm very eclectic in this respect. Very, very eclectic. I go from really vapid, contemporary pop music to Yo-Yo Ma cello concertos, to Johnny Cash, which, I love Johnny Cash. I'm kind of a huge U2 fan, but that's because I became politically conscious in the 80s, and U2 was sort of an 80s, politically conscious band, and I'm totally a Springsteen partisan.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Kristen Ghodsee: I worship in the Church of Bruce, like so many others. So yeah, like I said, it's pretty eclectic. It's a pretty eclectic mix. I listen to a lot of world music. I like Reggae. I like West African Highlife music, which is, again, it comes back to the Ghanaian time. K-Pop is really interesting, yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah. I'm really, really eclectic in this respect. Yeah, I would say if you looked at my record shelf, and I do still also have records, I'm a very analog person. I have

a lot of Springsteen and a lot of U2, mostly because I still have my records from the 80s. Yeah. Those were my-

Interviewer: Is there anything quirky that you collect just in general?

Kristen Ghodsee: Typewriters.

Interviewer: Oh, you collect typewriters?

Kristen Ghodsee: I have 38.

Interviewer: That you ... Do you use them all, or do you-

Kristen Ghodsee: Manual typewriters. Of the 38 that I have, I think 36 of them work, and I probably use a regular rotation of about six of them that are my favorites.

Interviewer: How do you know what is a good typewriter, or what is something that really catches your eye? Is there something you look for?

Kristen Ghodsee: Well, first of all, I always look for the ones that work. I collect typewriters, I've collected them from ... I have them from all over the world, so that means they have different keyboards. I have a Cyrillic typewriter that's from Bulgaria, I have a lot of Latin typewriters, but they have different keyboards. America is QWERTY, German is QWERTZ. I think the French are AVERTY, so different type of typesets, and then I have regular font typewriters, and I have a cursive font typewriter, which is an Hermes 3000.

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah, it depends on my mood. For some things, I either use really old, 1920s German Urania that I use a lot for field notes. When I'm doing journaling, I usually use the cursive typewriter. Sometimes, I'll use the Cyrillic typewriter for things. Yeah, but the smoothness of the keys is a big thing, because manual typewriters, your wrists start to hurt if you type for too long. But also, the keyboard, right? Which, because I don't know how to touch-type, I am still a kind of a hunter and a pecker. It doesn't matter if I'm using a French, or a German, or American keyboard, because I just look at the keys anyway.

Kristen Ghodsee: But yeah, sometimes, it's really just based on my mood, and I have to admit, I do have one electric. Which, I really hesitated to go electric, like Bob Dylan going electric, you know? But I bought an electric typewriter because they're a lot easier to use if you're writing for a really long time, like if you're drafting something substantial, it is really bad for your wrists, all that pounding. I have a Corona, I think it's a Coronet, which is an electric. It's a bright blue electric typewriter, and I really like it. It took me a while. It felt like sacrilege for the longest time, and the other thing about it is it hums.

Interviewer: Oh.

Kristen Ghodsee: So when you have a manual typewriter-

Interviewer: A humming keyboard.

Kristen Ghodsee: Yeah, it hums.

Interviewer: Typewriter.

Kristen Ghodsee: It hums at you, and you know, for a while, it just felt wrong that it was humming. But now, I really like the hum, because when-

Interviewer: It's a white noise for your writing.

Kristen Ghodsee: It's white noise for your writing, but also, when you're typing on a manual typewriter, you have the type, type, type, type, type, ding! Right? You get a little ding when you finish a line, it's like a little reward, right? Then you move to the next line, right? But if you-

Interviewer: Get with it, Microsoft Word! Give us the ding!

Kristen Ghodsee: Exactly, you've got to have a ding! Every time you get to the end of the line, it's like a little celebration at the end of a thought. But then when you're not typing, it's just silent. Nothing happens. Whereas with the electric typewriter, when you stop typing, it's like, humming you to keep working. It's like It's waiting. It's a ... I don't know. It's a different sound, and I actually have grown to like it, the sound of the hum with the clicks and the ding. It's just a totally different sensory experience to write on a typewriter than it is to write on a keyboard.

Kristen Ghodsee: Which is why I have a mechanical keyboard that works like a typewriter.

Interviewer: Oh!

Kristen Ghodsee: With my computer, you can see it over here. It clicks.

Interviewer: So it does, yeah. I like to end every conversation with, "What gives you hope?" It can mean anything you want it to mean.

Kristen Ghodsee: What gives me hope? I guess young people, probably? Youth give me hope. I mean, I have a teenager, and she obviously has a lot of anxiety about everything that's going on in the world, and the future, the uncertainty in the future in front of her. But it's also really interesting ... You have the benefit, when you're older, of having once been young. When you're young, you don't have the benefit of, well, obviously having once been old. For me being with my daughter and her friends, high-school age friends, and being around students, university students, undergrads; helps me remember what it was like when I was that age, and the uncertainty and the chaos, but also the immense possibility, right?

Interviewer: Sure.

Kristen Ghodsee: So that, to me ... Like the idea that every generation of basically human beings who have ever lived on this earth, have had that same cycle of really immense uncertainty and incredible possibility, even if it's very constrained possibility. It still feels like possibility when you're young, and that is always, in some ways, hopeful to me. It reminds me that the world ... The world will do what it wants, but in some ways, we are all just here, and we make of our lives what we can. Sometimes, it's very difficult and there are lots of barriers and constraints, and inequalities and unfairness, but at the end of the day, there's still something really beautiful about the human ability to persevere, despite the worst circumstances. I've seen some pretty bad circumstances, but people always manage to find a way to muddle through, which I think is pretty hopeful.

Interviewer: This podcast is a production of the Office of University Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. We hope you'll join us again soon for another session of Office Hours.