



**The Brookings Institution
The Current podcast**

“From the halls of the Munich Security Conference”

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Episode Summary:

With the annual Munich Security Conference now wrapped, Brookings expert Constanze Stelzenmüller brings back insights from the conversations that unfolded on the ground. In her conversation with Aslı Aydintaşbaş, Stelzenmüller, director of the Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings, reflects on the main stage speeches from Secretary of State Marco Rubio and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, and shares what she learned from reactions in the hallways.

STELZENMÜLLER: It was surprisingly energetic. Many of the Munich Security Conferences that I've attended in the past, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have been very glum and depressed. And this one was full of bustle and energy, even warmth. People were talking to each other about what needed to be done. And that very much included Europeans and Americans.

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AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Hello everyone. Welcome to *The Current*. My name is Aslı Aydintaşbaş. I'm a fellow at the Center on United States and Europe at Brookings Institution. And I'm here today with Constanze Stelzenmüller, the director of our Center on United States and Europe.

Welcome to the show, Constanze.

STELZENMÜLLER: Thank you Aslı. Always happy to talk to the citizen of a nation that respects the umlaut.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: We both have difficult last names.

You've just come back from Munich Security Conference. And we are here to talk about that. I've only been there maybe twice, when I was younger and working as a journalist and it, and it felt like, oh my God, this is a bunch of middle aged white man talking about NATO all the time.

And at the time it didn't seem all that interesting. But since then, I know Munich has changed and so has the world. So tell us what you saw last week.

[1:23]

STELZENMÜLLER: Yes, I have indeed been going to Munich for quite a while. And I've been there for some memorable blowups, right, about 9/11, of the Afghanistan intervention, the Iraq war, the Putin speech.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Putin speech in 2007.

STELZENMÜLLER: In 2007, exactly. This was different. For one, we all remembered the JD Vance speech last year, right, where he lambasted Europeans, and accused them of mistreating, as it were, or restricting the the freedom of speech of the hard right parties in Europe.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: He said the threat is not Russia. It comes from within Europe.

STELZENMÜLLER: Exactly. Right.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: And and that came as a shock to the system, of course. And you were in, you were there last year too.

STELZENMÜLLER: I was there, but I was in the overflow of the overflow, which is what is par for the course these days because there's so many people there.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Explain what it is.

[2:13]

STELZENMÜLLER: So maybe for those people who who have a hard time imagining what this is like. This is an old and venerable Bavarian hotel in the middle of town. At this point, the organizers have commandeered about five or six venues adjacent to it. Now imagine police not just from Germany, but from the Netherlands and Switzerland as well around it, and snipers on the rooftop.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Wow.

STELZENMÜLLER: And inside you have a ten-ring circus crossed with an Oriental bazaar. And and there is political theater taking place on the main stage that is mostly completely choreographed. And then around that is people trying to talk to each other and figure out what's happening and what they need to do, and maybe also doing business.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: It it sounds a little bit fun for someone who works in foreign policy and defense.

STELZENMÜLLER: Actually, yes. It has a feeling of summer school, except that it's, you know, in winter and it's cold outside.

But, there are about a thousand people. And at peak time between Friday noon and Sunday noon that means it almost impossible to get into the main stage rooms and difficult to get through the corridors. So, but that does mean you run into a lot of people serendipitously, which makes it fun again, as you say.

[3:20]

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: So, let's talk about secretary of state and his speech. As you said, JD Vance last year, you know, it it really came as a shock to the whole system, to Europeans, and the threat from within is actually what you have become as Europe was his message. But this year, Secretary Rubio's trip was meant as a reassurance to Europe. That's what the press corps traveling with him wrote even before he arrived in Munich.

So, what was your take? Tell us what he said, first, and then maybe how Europeans reacted. Were they reassured?

STELZENMÜLLER: So again, I wasn't in the room. I was somewhere outside.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: you were in the hallways or

STELZENMÜLLER: I was in the hallways yes ...

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: which is far more valuable than sitting there because you were able to get the reactions.

[4:08]

STELZENMÜLLER: Here's the thing: you can immediately see a video and soon after that get a transcript of the political theater that is scripted. And so you are much

better off trying to see the people that you otherwise wouldn't see, talk to them in the corridors, and so on. But since I was asked to comment on this for German National Radio, I did watch the video immediately.

I think, you know, it ... in defense of the people in the room who stood up and clapped, I think when you, when you are in the room, you get caught up in the moment. There was a big American delegation at the front that participated in the standing ovation. And yes, some European ministers did so as well, including German.

But I think as soon as the message of the content of the the Rubio speech sort of trickled into people's brains, people realized what they had been served, which was, as some one writer put it, JD Vance with maple syrup. There's different ways of describing it, but that one is memorable.

But my point being this: that Marco Rubio framed the alliance as a West that is a white, Christian, ethnonationalist project based on interests rather than values. And you know what? That leaves an awful lot of people out in Europe. Not just people of the Jewish and Muslim faith of whom there are many among our citizenry; it's, this is not just migrants. It is pretty surprising to the non-Western guests at the Munich Security Conference to hear that the American administration thinks colonialism, you know, was a great Western achievement. There are some allies that I think that the Trump administration wants to keep on its right side. That didn't work that way.

[5:50]

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Well, it was really a strange speech in the sense that, I mean, first of all, seeing a standing ovation was weird. But also he called everything that's great about Europe, basically foolish ideas -- that's the expression he used -- including including open borders, globalization and

STELZENMÜLLER: rule of law.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: rule of law, he called

STELZENMÜLLER: integration

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: and diversity,

STELZENMÜLLER: and yep, diversity

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: and it's dedication to diversity. These are some of the things that make Europe and living in European cities great today. So people were not exactly reassured outside, but in the room there was this, as you said, political theater with standing ovation.

He did not talk about Russia.

[6:32]

STELZENMÜLLER: No. He did not talk about Ukraine except in the Q&A. He didn't really mention China. And so, as one of our colleagues, Tom Wright, pointed out in a

piece at *The Atlantic* this week, he really missed out on the the genuine challenge and threat to the alliance, which is the increasing cooperation of authoritarian great powers with each other -- Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. That was shocking to many.

There's also one more thing that I must mention as a German, which is a very loud dog whistle to the German hard right when he said, we don't want you to be shackled by guilt and shame. That is a very explicit illusion to the notion of *Schuld*kult, the "cult of guilt" that the leaders of the hard right like to intone.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: When you say the leaders of the hard right, I assume you're referring to AfD

STELZENMÜLLER: I am, yes.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: The far right party,

STELZENMÜLLER: yes, yes, correct

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: that JD Vance made a point of meeting in person last year. And then Rubio went on to Hungary after Germany, right?

STELZENMÜLLER: And to Slovakia, yes.

[7:31]

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: And Slovakia, meeting similarly sort of far right leaders. In one case Viktor Orbán. I know you're working a lot on the rise of far right in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. So the message, it was quite clear: demand for a political change of sorts in in Europe, "MAGA-fication" of of the continent.

STELZENMÜLLER: Well, it certainly looked as though Rubio was saying, these are our real allies. He said that working with Hungary, which has extremely close ties to both Russia and China, is an essential U.S. interest. How that computes for American interests, I think, is not for me to to explain. It mystifies me.

But it does feel as though both Vance and Rubio this year are saying the "real West" in Europe is the hard right. Those are the people that we share values and interests with. And that's very shocking to European viewers. And not just to them.

[8:29]

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Well, let's turn to a little bit of gossip to lighten this conversation. Munich also felt like a parade of Democratic hopefuls. I I saw that Gavin Newsom was there. Gretchen Whitmer. AOC of course. I think I may have seen Chris Murphy in one of the videos.

STELZENMÜLLER: Yes. Yep.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: So did you get a chance to listen to any of them? Was was there a buzz about Democratic hopefuls? Why were they, and what did Europeans hear?

STELZENMÜLLER: So, I think Politico counted a total of six Democratic presidential hopefuls for 2028.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Oh my gosh. We must be missing one or two.

STELZENMÜLLER: It was supposedly the biggest congressional delegation in a very long time. And there were Republicans there, and Democrats, and with a lot of staffers. And I, let me say the following. Again, I avoided going to see Newsom or AOC. I thought, you know, it's a bit early to be ringing in the presidential campaign, and this is not what I'm in Munich for. I did hear Senator Slotkin on on a panel in the main stage who was focused and and firm as ever. She, I think, just is a very, very good debater and it shows.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: She gave an excellent speech at Brookings a couple of months ago as well.

STELZENMÜLLER: Indeed, indeed. Remarkable. And I went to a lunch with a member of Congress, Jason Crow, which of course was off the record.

But I think what I can say is that I had the sense that Americans and Europeans, and this included conservatives, this included members of Congress, but also staffers, were really trying to actually reach out to each other, talk openly and sincerely with each other, and were very much aware that this is a moment of great risk for the international order.

[10:16]

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Now I want to turn to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine, who also made an appearance at Munich. He was also there last few years, I think. What did you hear from him? What was the buzz about Ukraine? Given that a few days afterwards, President Trump's envoys were in Geneva meeting the Russian delegation for negotiations to end the war in Ukraine.

STELZENMÜLLER: Let me phrase this phrase this a little differently. I wasn't in the room when Zelenskyy spoke because the room was so full that I decided to watch it on video afterwards. Again. But what I gather is that he told his viewers that Ukraine needed specific kinds of weapons, something we all know. He received a warm reception, he received applause.

The the point about Ukrainian attendance in Munich, I think is a different one, and you can only sense that when you were there. They had their own dedicated space with a ton of events going on that the Ukrainians put on either on their own or with German and other European partners. There was a an overall sense, right, and that's very distinct from what it has been in the years before the Russian full invasion, or even 10 years ago in 2014 when I joined Brookings at the height of what was then the Ukraine crisis.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: The Crimea, of course. The invasion of Crimea.

STELZENMÜLLER: Yes, exactly. The invasion of Crimea by by by by Russia.

And the sense is now that Ukraine is very much part of the European family. That when Europeans talk to Ukraine about Russia's attacks on Ukraine, we are discussing a shared security threat, but also a shared European destiny. That is really quite remarkable.

There, there is just a sense of commonality that can no longer be ignored. And and I'm not saying that in a, to make a sort of, you know, a values point. It is also due to the fact that the Russians are committing so many overt acts of sabotage across Europe. That's also why it's shared.

The other thing that that was notable there was the presence of the Belarusian opposition. All right? Also Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was there, but also Maria Kalesnikava recently released from prison. And there, too, my sense is that they're received as part of the family.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Yet, Europe is not really at the negotiating table.

STELZENMÜLLER: yeah

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: in talks with Russians.

[12:47]

STELZENMÜLLER: Very true. And there is, I think, a pervasive sense among Europeans that what is happening between the U.S. and Russia is not in Ukraine's interest and is not in Europe's interest. And so we need to figure out things for ourselves.

European leaders were generally careful not to, sort of, you know, as we say in German, "tear up the tablecloth" in the transatlantic

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: trying not antagonize

STELZENMÜLLER: no

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: the American delegation or dignitaries.

STELZENMÜLLER: No. Chancellor Merz in his framing speech on the first day of the conference did say, you know, we have to improve our own defense and security in Germany and in Europe in either way, whether we become more alienated from America or where, whether we find a basis for working together again.

And he explicitly said, we cannot follow you in your MAGA culture war.

You know, Rubio gave that speech the following day all the same, which suggests a maybe a little bit of tone deafness.

[13:44]

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Let's turn to Germany and talk about where things are with *Zeitenwende*, a reality check, because you did talk about Chancellor Merz's speech. He's obviously been very forthright on European defense since he came to power

not too long ago. Where do you think his government is in terms of European defense and Germany's defense? And give it a mark.

STELZENMÜLLER: Sure. So what I always say is that we seem increasingly across Europe to be able to agree on the necessary policies among among experts and policymakers. We know we need to do more for our own deterrence and defense. We know that we are still very much reliant on our ability to to purchase weapons from the U.S. for Ukraine, and on Americans strategic enablers and the nuclear extended deterrence.

But there is increasingly a feeling of of queasy insecurity with regard to the trustworthiness of our American allies, as several people there put it bluntly and in public. And so there is a sense that the challenge may be broader than we think. And that, and that with the timeline may have shortened massively.

I had the general feeling at this enormous conference, there were about a thousand people there, that so many people were busy getting things done. It was really quite extraordinary. Very often, the MSC, the Munich Security Conference, has seemed purely like theater, with people sitting back there and passively consuming. Now I had the feeling that they were paying attention to the theater and to the messaging, but at the same time having conversations about what needed to be done. That was remarkable.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: So there's a lot more happening behind the headlines outside of the ... theater?

[15:39]

STELZENMÜLLER: Yes, and a tremendous sense of energy and and action. That is not to say that there's not always something more that we could do. And certainly there are two risks, I think: that our efforts at gearing up our European defense and deterrence sort of, you know, are met with forces of inertia like bureaucracy, balkanization, fragmentation of defense industry; and and that we ultimately aren't able to agree about the politics of the policy. Right?

I, and and there is where I think Merz's speech really fell short and where Europe really needs to deliver, and that is embedding this re-armament of Europe into a much larger project of competitiveness and growth. Only that will prevent the European hard right from painting this as a guns versus butter debate and saying here again are technocratic elites not paying attention to what the electorate really wants.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: So Constanze, is there one word to describe the few days you've spent in Munich?

[16:43] **STELZENMÜLLER:** Well, it was surprisingly energetic. Many of the Munich Security Conferences that I've attended in the past, especially after Russian, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have been very glum and depressed. And this one was full of bustle and energy. And as I just wrote in the in the introduction of our Center newsletter today, even warmth. People were talking to each other about what needed to be done. And that very much included Europeans and Americans.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: So before we wrap up, Constanze, any more gossip?

STELZENMÜLLER: Well, you know, one of the charms, if I dare call it that, of the Munich Security Conference is that again, you have all these serendipitous encounters and you run into events that you didn't think would be interesting, and suddenly they are.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: And into people.

STELZENMÜLLER: And into people that you know, and new people. And so I I had a lot of that.

I think in general, I would say there was a lot of new topics raised by President Trump's grab for Greenland. Right? In previous years, there would never have been a side event on the security of the North Atlantic with a Danish admiral and a German admiral.

There would not have been event that many events on a on Arctic and Nordic security. Also, I have never seen so many Icelanders at this conference.

And there are always something that may surprise viewers, there are always a lot of civil society and even religious dignitaries at this conference.

And perhaps I'll end on on this note. There was a Catholic prelate who was praising the Enlightenment and hoping that his Church would be a focal point for integration and inclusion in Europe. And I think that was a highly deliberate message as a counterweight to some of the things that had been said on the main stage.

AYDINTAŞBAŞ: Well, that seems like a really good place to end. Thank you for this wonderful and colorful conversation. And thanks to our listeners for tuning in. You can learn about all of this on our website, Brookings dot edu.

[music]

And my name is Aslı Aydintaşbaş. This is *The Current*.