

Dimitri Lascaris - One Handshake At A Time



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Dimitri Lascaris was one of Canada's [leading](#) plaintiff-side securities class action litigators, representing plaintiffs in class actions against multimillion dollar companies before he retired at the age of 52 to devote the remainder of his life to peace and social justice activism. Mr. Lascaris is a member of the Green Party of Canada, and in 2020, he finished second in the party's leadership race. In April 2023, Mr. Lascaris visited Moscow and Russian-occupied Crimea and engaged in a fact-finding expedition to better understand the views of Russians in the context of their country's recent invasion of Ukraine. Shortly after Lascaris returned to Canada, at the behest of the Canada-Wide Peace and Justice Network, he engaged in a nationwide peace tour, calling for his government to stop fueling the war in Ukraine. In this interview with Pitasanna Shanmugathas, Lascaris discussed the views of the Russians he spoke to and his experiences during his trip to Russia. He also explained why he subsequently engaged in a Canada-wide peace tour, shared his thoughts on the censorship and ridicule he faced for his decision to visit Russia and embark on the Canada-wide peace tour, and offered advice to the social justice minded law students.

This interview has been edited for the purposes of flow and concision.

Pitasanna Shanmugathas: *Mr. Lascaris, on April 1, 2023, you landed in Moscow for the first time in your life. Ten days later you were on a train heading to Russian-occupied Crimea. To readers who might be curious, explain why a Canadian born and educated man like yourself decided to visit Russia especially in the context of the country's recent invasion of Ukraine.*

Why I went there was not for personal profit. I paid money out of my own pocket to travel there—I was not paid a dime for anything that I did or said while I was there or after I came back to Canada. All the articles I have written about my time in Russia, I do not even solicit donations on my [website](#), nor have I accepted any for the writing of those articles. I went there for one purpose and one purpose only: because I feel we are living through the most dangerous moment in human history. We are on course for a nuclear war. And by the way, a [poll](#) that just came out showed that most Canadians agree with me that we are on trajectory for a nuclear war with Russia. And I, as a matter of conscience, felt I had to do something to try to facilitate a dialogue with this country with which we are at war, and that's why I went. I don't purport to be able to solve this war; I am just one citizen; I am one voice. But I thought, I am in a position to go and try and stimulate some sort of a peace dialogue and if I can do that, I am going to do it.

What were some of the takeaways you had while in Moscow, as well as other parts of the country, in terms of the views Russians held with respect to their country's invasion of Ukraine? Are Russians supportive of Putin's invasion of Ukraine?

First, let me say, I didn't conduct any kind of a poll. I did speak with dozens and dozens of people from across the socioeconomic strata of Russia—people who were university professors, people who were journalists, volunteers in charitable organizations, just people I met on the ground. But, of course, I don't have any kind of scientific polling data to offer you. I can only relay to you what I heard. And, of course, it may be that some of these people didn't feel free to speak, although they were speaking to me in a private setting, not publicly. So, my feeling was that, for the most part, people were telling me how they really felt. What I heard consistently was that NATO is at fault for this, NATO constitutes an existential threat to Russia, this war is an existential threat to Russia. This is not primarily a war between Russia and Ukraine; it is primarily a war between NATO and Russia which is being fought on Ukrainian soil.

The people doing the fighting and dying on behalf of NATO are overwhelmingly of

Ukrainian origin, effectively [being used as] cannon fodder for a NATO war. That was the view expressed to me over and over again.

Interestingly, I never encountered hostility. No one expressed hostility to the peoples of the West. What they feel is that the governments of the West are acting in ways that are profoundly contrary, not only to the interests of the people in Russia, but [also to the interests of] the people of the West themselves. [They believe] this is going to end very badly if people don't come to their senses.

Overwhelmingly, I heard support for what the Russian Federation's government has done, which is reflected by the way in polls. You go to the polling of the [Levada Center](#) website, which is, by the way, very critical of Vladimir Putin, their polls show that currently support for the President is in excess of 80 percent in Russia. If there was criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin, it is first and foremost that he should've acted sooner rather than wait until NATO built up the Ukrainian military into a formidable fighting force. And secondly, that the military under his command was not being aggressive enough in bringing this war to a rapid and successful conclusion for Russia.

I am sure there is anti-war sentiment in Russia. I am sure there are people there very critical of Vladimir Putin and do not support this invasion. But those people are frankly a minority based on everything I heard, everything I saw, and based upon the polling done.

During your trip to Russia were any of your preconceived notions about the country, in general, challenged?

I should say, I was born in the early 60s, so I am a child of the Cold War. The image that I had of Russia was a grey, drab, dilapidated country, unclean, heavy police presence, oppressive atmosphere, privation—grocery store shelves lightly stocked or not stocked at all, people standing in lines waiting for things—those are the images I grew up with of Russia—a very menacing country. I saw none of that when I was there.

I should preface what I am saying by acknowledging the limitations of my experience. I was only in central Moscow and then I took a train from central Moscow to Crimea.

And I went all over Crimea but the vast majority of that vast country I did not see. So, I am just talking about what I saw. What I saw in central Moscow and Crimea

is a society that is very well organized, clean, I saw very little police presence, uniformed police, the metro system in Moscow was world class, the traffic was very orderly, the buildings were majestic, the grocery store shelves were full, the department store shelves were full, I saw no signs of economic crisis, and people were friendly. I think I was bit of an oddity for them because there are so few people from the West in the country nowadays. People from the West are basically avoiding Russia like the plague—so it was unusual for a lot of people to suddenly find themselves sitting across the table from or meeting in the street somebody from North America and people were curious as to why I came to Russia in the current circumstances. But certainly, there was no hostility—which is something I anticipated, I would be met with at least some hostility, but they were very warm, very gracious, very open to talking about the situation in their country.

During your trip, you met some pretty interesting people such as [Sokol](#), a sniper within the Wagner PMC, a Russian-state funded paramilitary organization, as well as [Genadi](#), a Russian veteran of the Ukraine war. I imagine it takes a great deal of bravery to interact with such characters. Talk about what were some insights you gained from speaking with these military individuals.

They were two very different experiences. Genadi, this interview was setup for me by my translator, whom I hired in Crimea. She is a partner of an American documentary filmmaker by the name of Regis Tremblay, who now lives in Yalta, Crimea. She asked me if I wanted to interview somebody who volunteered and had gone to fight for the pro-Russian rebels in the southeast of Ukraine. I said, “Sure.” So, I sat down with him for half an hour. The interview I conducted with him took place at a school for disabled children because his daughter is disabled. With the help of my translator, I asked him why he went to fight. He said, “I’m sixty years old. I served in the military decades ago, but I hadn’t served in many years [since] the Soviet era.” He said that when the invasion began in February of last year, he sat down with his wife and discussed how he could help. He underwent some military training and enrolled in the territorial defense force in the Donbass. He clarified that he didn’t go right up to the frontline but was in the trenches, helping to defend the territory of the Donbass. He said, “I did this because I feel that these people, to me, are Russians living in the southeast of Ukraine who are fighting against the Ukrainian military, and they are under threat. I felt I could help in some way. I don’t regret having done it. I felt it was my duty, and it saddens me to see what is happening. I don’t think there is any

prospect of the Ukrainian military winning this war. I view Ukrainians as my brothers and sisters, but their comedian President [Zelensky] is bringing ruin upon their country, and I hope that stops.” Interestingly, I asked him what he would say to the peoples of the West if given an opportunity to speak to them, and he said that people look at Russia as a threat since it has recovered economically and politically since the devastating Yeltsin era, but they shouldn’t view Russia as a threat. “If Russians feel there is an existential threat on their border, they have no alternative but to act.”

My experience with Sokol was a different experience. I was on a train travelling from Crimea to Moscow and wasn’t anticipating it was going to be full of Russian soldiers.

For some 28 hours, I found myself on a train with Russian soldiers of all stripes and shapes and ranks. There was a dining car and I went into the dining car. I sat down in a booth designed for four people. There was one person sitting—a young man, late 20s maybe early 30s, he gestured at me to come sit down with him. He was drinking some Armenian brandy and looked kind of drunk. He started speaking to me in Russian. I can’t speak a word of Russian. He got up, approach me, and whispered in my ear two words, [in English], Wagner and sniper. I did a sort of double take when he said that to me and then he sat back down. As soon as he sat down a young woman sitting two booths away from us, happened to speak fluent English and was Russian. I decided to interview him—and since the woman was fluent in English—I asked her if she would be prepared to translate if I interview this man. She said, “Yes.”

I asked [Sokol] how he came to be in Wagner. He told me he was in the middle of serving a sixteen-year prison sentence in a Russian penitentiary for unspecified crimes he committed in the Russian mafia. One day last year Yevgeny Prigozhin, the titular head of Wagner, came to his prison and took the hardened criminals, gathered them in the courtyard, and there Prigozhin made him an offer. The offer was you can come and do six months of military service in Wagner, you might end up dead, you might end up wounded, or you might end up unscathed and leave a free man or you can stay in prison and serve out your sentence. If you come to fight for Wagner, not only will you be a free man, but you will be paid well for your efforts and you will potentially be regarded as a hero and will have an opportunity to pay your debt to society in an honorable way. Sokol said that he took up the offer not only because he wanted to defend his country but also

because the money was good—he was candid about that.

So, he said that he went to the front, was a sniper in Bakhmut. At that point in time, when I spoke to him, Bakhmut was on the verge of falling to the Russians. It has since fallen to the Russians, but it was still being heavily contested and, by all accounts, it has been to date the bloodiest battle of the war—unimaginable casualties and destruction has been visited by the combating sides in that particular battle. He said that what he saw there was unimaginably horrible—the violence and destruction were beyond his contemplation. He didn't want to tell me in much detail what he saw.

Although he did tell me one thing, which I have no way of verifying whether it is true, he told me that he had seen children whose throats had been slit by Ukrainian soldiers—I have no way of verifying whether this is true—but that was the one gruesome detail he was willing to share with me.

As I was talking to him and he was telling me all of this, there were four very large Russian soldiers sitting in the booth next to us, one of whom was apparently a senior officer in the Russian military, and they became agitated at the fact that I was speaking English and asking this man questions. One of them looked at Sokol and said to him in Russian, “You talk too much, shut up.” At that point, he stopped talking, and the conversation ended.

*Your decision to visit Russia, to engage in this fact-finding expedition, was met with a great deal of vilification and denunciation from a number of Canadians. Elizabeth May, the current leader of the Green Party of Canada, to which you belong, took to [Twitter](#) to denounce your decision to visit Russia, claiming it does not reflect the views of the Green Party. Additionally, *The National Post*, a prominent conservative publication in Canada, interviewed you and published [a front-page hit piece](#) about you and the nature of your visit to Russia. Talk about your thoughts on the vilification you faced from Canadians due to your choice to visit Russia.*

I saw that tweet by Elizabeth May. First of all, I don't speak for the Green Party, I never purported to speak for the Green Party. I speak for myself and only myself. Whenever I say something, some criticism of Canadian government foreign policy, somebody from the mainstream or the right of the political spectrum will tag me on Twitter and often times say this man finished second in the Green Party leadership race in 2020, and immediately I will point out that I do not speak for the Green Party. I speak for myself and only myself. So, I have no problem with

Elizabeth May saying that Mr. Lascaris does speak for the Green Party. I say that myself. But when she went onto say that we do not agree with him going to Russia at a time of war [my response to her](#) on Twitter was have you gone to the United States in the past twenty years? Of course, you have. You have probably gone there repeatedly. Did you think that you shouldn't go to the United States after Bush launched a criminal war of aggression in Iraq, engaged in torture at Guantanamo and in black sites around the world? And then Obama comes along and says I'm not going to hold any of these people accountable and himself embarks upon a murderous drone war where countless number of civilians, including children, were killed by American drones. She went to the United States, without question, she did that and so did millions of Canadians who would take a dim view of anybody who travels to Russia. So, this is the height of hypocrisy, there is no reason why you should get criticized for going to Russia at a time of war any more than a Canadian who goes to the United States when it is waging a war of aggression. I categorically reject that criticism.

What is really sad and troubling and alarming about the things being said about me in the media is that fundamentally what I am trying to impress upon my fellow Canadians is that we are at risk of nuclear Armageddon to a degree that is more worrisome than at any point during the nuclear era. And if we are truly interested in survival and the future of our children, we have to at least make an effort to find a negotiated solution to this war because it is spiraling out of control. There should be millions of people out in the street demanding an end to this war by negotiated solution. My message is fundamentally one of peace. You could disagree with my political analysis of the situation. You may say Lascaris is wrong to suggest that this war was provoked. You may say Lascaris is wrong to say Russians have some legitimate grievances. You may say Lascaris is overestimating the degree of nuclear danger but fundamentally nobody should contest that what motivates me to say these things is because I want peace. And why should anybody delivering a message of peace at an extraordinarily dangerous moment be subjected to the kind of abuse, vilification, and de-platforming I have had to endure?

Shortly after returning to Canada, at the behest of the Canada-Wide Peace and Justice Network, you made the decision to embark on a Canada-wide [speaking tour](#) titled "Making Peace with Russia One Handshake at a Time." What did you hope to achieve by embarking on this tour?

It was about breaking a taboo. It is a taboo in the mainstream to say that Russia does have some legitimate grievances. Yes, the war and invasion were a violation of the UN Charter and as such it should be condemned but it was also provoked, and the war did not begin in February of last year but began in 2014 when the United States government [helped](#) to orchestrate the violent overthrow of a democratically elected Ukrainian President who was trying to maintain good relations with both Russia and Europe. These are things that cannot be said in the mainstream discourse, and somebody has got to break the taboo in order for these discussions to take place in our society and I happen to be well positioned to do that. Why am I well positioned to do that? Because I am essentially retired from the practice of law. I practiced law for over thirty years. I am financially secure, so I do not have to worry about the economic consequences such as losing my job over saying these things. Secondly, I am a litigator, and as such, I learned how to examine evidence and explain evidence, particularly complicated evidence, to people in ways that are readily comprehensible.

I know how to defend a position. I have a lot of experience in understanding Canadian foreign policy because I have followed it closely for many years, so I am in a position to help break these taboos and if we don't break these taboos, I am afraid we are all going to end up dead because of a nuclear war.

On July 4th, you formally concluded your Canada-wide speaking tour. Talk about what you learned while traveling across the country speaking to Canadians. Furthermore, how did the attendees of your speaking engagements respond to your presentations?

The Canadians I met were overwhelmingly receptive to the message of peace and deeply concerned about what was going on and highly skeptical about what they were being told, because they know Western governments have habitually lied to us about war—they lied to us about the Vietnam War, they lied to us about the Iraq War, they lied to us about the Afghanistan War and so forth. The media cannot be trusted to tell us the truth about war, that is something a lot of Canadians already understand.

In terms of how I was received, virtually every venue was either full, sold out, or closeto full. This is in circumstances where we had to be very careful about disclosing the location of the venue, and the identity of the venue, because we knew that people would pressure the venue to cancel us. Because of our limited budget, in terms of advertising for the tour, there was very little we could do. It

was just word of mouth and social media. And the mainstream media completely ignored us—we put out multiple press releases in the hopes that somebody from the mainstream media would write about this tour. Despite this, we got extremely good turnout. In some venues, it was standing room only and sold out. The people who came out were, for the most part, highly appreciative of the presentation and felt it was an indispensable discussion that had to take place.

Over and over again, people were saying they didn't know a lot of the things I said in my presentation. When I made my presentation, I was very careful to rely on mainstream Western sources for things I am saying so I will pull up articles from Reuters, the Guardian, statistics from the World Bank, the IMF, and I did that deliberately because I didn't want anybody saying my sources are suspect.

Some people who showed up for my presentation were from the Ukrainian community, a minority of them were very supportive. Most of them were hostile. And they asked questions like anybody else, we didn't vet any questions, we conducted a vigorous Q&A. And we managed to engage with each other in a spirited manner.

During your speaking tour, you discussed six ways Canada should respond to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Talk about the six ways Canada should respond to the war.

1. Robust humanitarian aid for the innocent victims of this war—delivered to them, not through the Ukrainian government, which is hopelessly corrupt but through non-governmental independent organizations that do this kind of work.
2. Robust protection and sanctuary for people who have fled this war.
3. An arms embargo on both sides to the war. We should not be providing weapons, nor should we be providing real time battlefield intelligence, as we are doing for Ukraine, to either side of the conflict.
4. We should not impose sanctions on any country—whether it be the Russian Federation or any other country—that has not been approved by the UN Security Council
5. We should ban our citizens from participating in the war as combatants. We have effectively done that for those who may wish to fight on the Russian side, for example, Canadians of Russian origin. But we have not banned people from fighting for the Ukrainian side—our government has encouraged that and there are Canadians fighting and dying for the Ukrainian side.
6. We should be offering our services as a mediator to try to bring the parties

together to negotiate a mutually acceptable compromise. As long as we are in this war up to our necks, we are waging a war against Russia, we have no hope of being viewed by both sides to the conflict as a neutral mediator. If we want to do that, we have to adopt the first five steps I have outlined, in my view.

If you look at the Economist, which is virulently anti-Russian and strongly pro-NATO, its intelligence unit has developed a [map](#) which shows the countries that are sending weapons to Ukraine and which countries are imposing sanctions on Russia. Those countries are almost exclusively from the West. Almost nobody in Latin America is doing this, including Mexico, almost nobody in Africa, nobody in the Middle East, almost nobody in Asia—in other words, the vast majority of countries, representing the vast majority of the human population, are not arming Ukraine, are not sending people to fight on the side of Ukraine, and are not imposing sanctions on Russia. So, what I am suggesting is mainstream on a global level, it is only in the West the position I have articulated is arguably an outlier.

I agree with everything you have said principally. However, I would suggest modifying one of your points. Because it is kind of counterintuitive to call for sanctions only if they are implemented by the UN Security Council because Russia is a member of the UN Security Council, so they are going to veto any sanctions. Wouldn't a better modification be no sanctions at all and just pursue the track of diplomacy?

If the UN Security Council felt this was an appropriate step to take, I would support it.

But they wouldn't [support it] because Russia would veto it, right?

Of course, they would. But who has used the veto on the UN Security Council the most? The United States government. The United States has gone hog-wild on using the veto in order to protect its own nefarious agenda so the problem here is that the veto power enjoyed by a select group of states is obstructing the collective action to keep the global peace. If the UN Security Council would never approve of sanctions because of the Russian veto, then we need to fix the UN Security Council. What we should not do is take the law into our own hands and start imposing potentially devastating economic sanctions to suit our own geopolitical agenda, which is what the West has been doing, in Cuba, Venezuela, they are doing it all over the world.

If we had a proper functioning Security Council, in other words, nobody has a veto, and it was just majority voting and they said we think this is an appropriate case for sanctions—I would support that. Absent that stamp of approval from the UN Security Council, we shouldn't be imposing sanctions—we are taking the law into our own hands, and when we do that, we invariably do it for the wrong reasons.

The venues which were set to host your speaking engagements in Winnipeg, Halifax, Montreal and Toronto cancelled your speaking engagement. I believe in Montreal and Toronto, the venues had to [cancel](#) your speaking engagement last minute because they were being pressured by a segment of the Ukrainian Canadian population. The venues [expressed](#) concerns about the potential for violence.

This is rare in modern Canada, the only other time I ever heard of such suppression of free speech, in an anti-war context, was in the 1950s when Canadians that were opposing their country's involvement in the Korean War were [stifled](#), partly due to the Cold War hysteria at the time. Could you please discuss the challenges and suppression you encountered during your speaking tour?

If you manage to whip the public up into enough of a hysteria, you can get them to tolerate a shocking degree of censorship. We are now in a position where the most fundamental right to free speech is under assault. It's not only about peace. If we manage to survive this war, which I think is highly questionable, given the trajectory we are now on—we need to go about the business of defending our right free speech and reviving the right to free speech because it is under assault, and we are on the verge of losing it.

We were canceled in Winnipeg, Halifax, Montreal and Toronto. Two venues canceled on us in Winnipeg. The local organizers were just amazing throughout this country.

They managed to find a third venue in Winnipeg at the 11 th hour, so the event did actually go ahead. In Halifax, Professor Judy and Larry Haiven, they are professor emeriti at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, [organized an event at the university], and the President himself canceled on us eight hours after they made the booking.

There as well, the organizers managed to find an alternative venue. The Montreal venue was inundated with hostile messages, and they canceled at the 11th hour.

We were fortunate enough, the weather was reasonably good, so we took all the attendees to a nearby park. I wasn't able to do my PowerPoint presentation, but I did a 45-minute presentation over the shouting and insults of pro-Ukrainian protestors who were about fifty meters away, separated from us by the police. The only place where the [organizers] weren't able to find an alternative venue was in Toronto. The President of the Ontario Public Services Union, JP Hornick, canceled us at the last minute. Even though the tour was scheduled to conclude on July 4th, the local organizers in Toronto were so determined to make it happen they said come back to Toronto we are going to get you a speaking venue at the Toronto Public Library. They got me a venue there and I spoke at the Toronto Public Library on July 8th.

Now that you have wrapped up your speaking tour, what lies ahead on the horizon for you in your mission for peace?

The first thing I am doing right now is writing an [article](#) about the de-platforming. I'm identifying the culprits, I have a pretty good idea who they are, how they went about doing this, I've been gathering the details diligently over the past several weeks and I will tell the story of how a message of peace was repeatedly put under an assault by the enemies of free speech.

After that, frankly, I just need a break.

You were one of Canada's [leading](#) plaintiff-side securities class action litigators, representing plaintiffs in class actions against multimillion dollar companies. Despite still being relatively young, you chose to retire early from that extremely lucrative career to devote yourself fulltime to the cause of peace. What is some advice that you have for law students who are social justice minded?

You are going to be tempted to sell your soul to the devil. And most people who enter the profession with the best of intentions end up selling their souls to the devil, that's just the sad truth. I will tell you a story about my first year on Wall Street, the firm I worked for, I was a brand-new lawyer, just learning the ropes, and I took this job on Wall Street. Like many just out of law school, I had a desire to contribute to social justice, and the firm I was at, this is typical of big New York firms, they encouraged pro-bono work. They don't do this in Canada, by the way. In Canada, no significant law firm, to my knowledge, actively encourages pro-bono work for its lawyers, it is all about making money. I took on this pro-bono

case with two other lawyers representing an inmate in New York state who had been beaten savagely by prison guards for no reason. And we took that case to trial, we brought it up under federal civil rights legislation, and we won after the trial. I put in 500 hours, and the lawyers I did it with were people who their entire adult lives pursued the cause of social justice and were determined to contribute to social justice as lawyers. These two lawyers, seven years later, were both partners in major Wall Street firms and were no longer committing themselves at all to social justice. They became completely committed to making as much money as possible. Once you get into the legal profession you will be tempted to, for example, not speak out about injustice in this world—like what is being done to the Palestinian people, or this crazy NATO proxy war that we are pursuing, and to abandon your commitment to social justice in deference to the God of money. I cannot stress enough to young people in law school today that you will be entering into a perilous moral universe, and it will be a challenge to maintain your commitment to social justice and peace in this world. This moral battle is one you will have to fight.

At the age of 52, I was in a position, because of the success I was fortunate enough to have as a class actions lawyer, I didn't need to make money anymore. So, I said to myself I have an obligation to give back now. I could not live with myself if I enjoyed the profits because of my success as a lawyer but wasn't committing myself passionately towards the cause of justice and peace in this world. I just couldn't live with myself.

Byline

Pitasanna Shanmugathas was born and raised in Canada. Pitasanna's interest in foreign policy first came from reading the works of progressive thinkers such as Noam Chomsky and Yves Engler. While completing his post-graduate education at the University of Toronto in global affairs, Pitasanna decided to embark on a three year documentary journey starting in 2019 to explore the role of Canada's foreign policy in the international arena. Pitasanna has also worked in multiple organizations advocating for peace and disarmament.

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