GISF Podcast Series
Evolving NGO Security Risk Management

Episode 1: Insights from a Security Manager: managing operations in complex environments

Total Time:	Speakers
40:54	Host: Tara Arthur (GISF)
	Guest: Mila Shutova (Christian Aid)

<u>Transcript</u>

Introduction to Series 00:10
In recent years, humanitarian responses have been complicated by compounding crises, such as climate change epidemics and pandemics and complex conflicts. In an ever-changing humanitarian and development space, we ask, what does the security and safety of aid workers look like? And what might it look like in the future? I'm Tara Arthur, from the global Interagency Security Forum. In each episode, I'll be speaking to guests about topics, such as the localization of aid, the ups and downs of community acceptance, and the role of security in a digital world. Join me as we unpack the evolutions of NGO security risk management.

Tara Arthur
Hello Mila, it is good to see you today. Thanks for joining us.

Mila Shutova 01:01
Hey, Tara, I'm so happy to be here. And I'm really honoured that I was asked to join this podcast and to speak on this topic. Thank you.

Tara Arthur 01:11
We're very excited to dive into today's conversation. But maybe we can just start with a little bit about yourself, you know, maybe a little bit about how you got into the sector and some of the roles that you've had that brought you to where you are today.

Mila Shutova 01:25
Sure. Yes, that sounds good. So my name is Mila, Mila Shutova, and I'm currently the security adviser with Christian Aid supporting their Ukraine programme team and Ukraine humanitarian efforts. Originally, I do come from a history background, more specifically, the history of the rise of nationalism in Europe, the Cold War history and Soviet Union history. This eventually evolved into studying civil societies, NGOs, in

both Ukraine and Russia, and also broader international development issues. In my entire professional career, believe it or not, I have been trying to move away from Eastern Europe. This just seemed like a natural area of expertise for me. And I did want to broaden my understanding of other geographies, and I did explore Central Asia and Middle East and African countries. So for a few years, I have been working with global NGOs on crisis management and security risk management in various contexts. And in last year, things have changed. As we all know, I found myself being pulled back and, frankly, unable to stay away from the current crisis, I have been supporting humanitarian efforts in the capacity in which I can, and using the languages. And in terms of what it means to me with the whole security risk management, and specifically Ukraine and supporting the humanitarian efforts, humanitarian organisations. I often remember my late grandfather, if I may share that briefly. So he used to tell me, and by the way, he was afraid of nothing. But he was always telling me that Mila, having no fears is actually not wise. But you have to know what to fear, and then act accordingly. Right. So I find this is the shortest summary of security risk management basically. And with that, like most other security professionals, I do try to do my best to equip those who help others to understand and to master the tools to remain safe, as safe as possible in various contexts.

Tara Arthur 03:42
That's very interesting experience. Thank you for sharing that, and what wonderful wisdom from your family passed on to you. That's wonderful to hear how that carries forward in to the work that you do today. And speaking of, and since you've mentioned some of the current contexts that you are operating and working on, why don't we go there a little bit. Let's talk about Ukraine in particular, and kind of the current trends that you're seeing the current challenges, and maybe even before we go down that road too far, let's take a look at what you feel as some of the critical historical context to understand and maybe help us understand what the challenges facing security risk management in Ukraine.

Mila Shutova 04:30
Yes, so this context is not different in the sense that it is unique because every context is unique in its own way. This particular context hasn't experienced this level of violence or insecurity or armed conflict in the past 80 years. So it's really important to understand how the organisations that go in and work there and try to help the people what they must pay attention to and how they can understand where the people are coming from. Because understanding a history of a context is always important. Having some awareness of it, you must understand what people views are, where they come from. It's all part of the acceptance strategy in the humanitarian world, in terms of the history of Ukraine and the region, specifically. So for many years, Soviet Union, when it was Soviet Union, it did remain a bit of a mystery to the rest of the world. And the Cold War ensured that there was very limited information shared, it was highly controlled, and people did receive very specific view of each other's lives and realities. And so after the fall of the Soviet Union, and for the past 30 years of independence of the former republics, including Ukraine, there has been massive transformation happening in all of these, these countries, each country following its own path, again, depending on its past, and current trends. And so from my experience in the region, what I have seen over the past 30 years, 20 years, 10 years, really, people's political views have been based on their economic situation, or on their personal well being. So they would always look at their situation, do we have electricity? Do we have heat? Do we have water? Do we have adequate medical care schools? You know, how do we deal with corruption issues, and corruption

has been a big issue in all of these contexts. So really, those informed the political views, and not the other way around. Ideology was very much further on the list of considerations for people. So, this understanding also that helps to understand people's mentality today. And also their resourcefulness, how they look at life, how they look at different events. And it's important to understand this context, by having this knowledge, what they've experienced before.

Tara Arthur 07:08
That's very interesting. And, you know, how do you find that this is helping you with the work that you are tasked with right now? How do you feel that this historical knowledge is really kind of giving you some of the information to help you be responsive to the current situation.

Mila Shutova 07:27
So I do feel that, in this context, I have an awareness of various perspectives. And I understand the actors and communities behaviours, and why they do the things they do. And for any security manager or security professional, you really have to understand not only your relationships with communities, but also how they interact with each other. Because that can save you or harm you whenever you're operating and analysing the risks and the security risks. So really understanding that bigger picture, and then the linkages between within the context, but also larger linkages. So, diving into this example of Ukraine, and first actually zooming out onto the global level, even though every country in the world has their own centre of influence, and we are not Eurocentric in the world, as much as Europe might want to think that. But there are many interests, national interests and influences. However, this particular conflict does have a very wide economic and political, and consequently security, impact on other countries in the world. For example, I'm always looking at different perspectives and different parts and viewpoints. In African countries, for example, the private military groups influence or economic political influences, anti-Russian, anti-American sentiments, all that plays a role in the Middle East. Also, there's Israel, Syria, Saudi Arabia, what their role and support of the conflict of which side and how it affects their own populations and their own internal politics. And South America, the countries are divided, but not necessarily from the European perspective, divided for their own reasons, and for their own historical reasons, or economic reasons, whatever it may be in Asia as well, the big actors and there's South Korea, China, Iran, India, but then they're also the Central Asian countries that are undergoing a huge transformation societies are affected by what's happening in Ukraine and Russia right now as well. And they're watching, of course, to inform their own actions and societies and security. So down from the global level to European level. There's obviously the economic impact there is migration crisis. 8 million refugees From Ukraine in Europe right now, it's a cultural and social shift. And all these challenges also affect local security. In terms of the Ukraine, and frankly, the Russia level also, there is the psychosocial impact the major setbacks, economically, in terms of unemployment, protection, and also all the effects of war and dynamics between people even within the same households. It's something that we think that well, if somebody is on one side, or another side, that automatically determines where they come from, or what they are, that determines their profile. But that's also not the case.

Tara Arthur 10:39
So tell me more about that…can you unpack that part a little bit more.

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Mila Shutova 10:44

So I guess, in terms of humanitarian work, and this is something that I find many professionals and humanitarian organisations struggle with in the context of this conflict, it's not as easy to separate politics, and people. And this, I still find crucial, because it's important to have a position, it's important to have opinions, and it's very difficult to stay neutral personally, when atrocities happen and human tragedy and suffering. So, when we are doing humanitarian work, that's what we should focus on. We're focusing on the people and on the need, and on saving lives, protecting people. And really, it's important not to get sidetracked by the politics, and understand that there are victims, there can be victims on all sides. It's not just that, okay, if the people are on the side of the border, or on this side of town, they're good, or these are bad, you know, so it's really tricky. And I find that the humanitarian concept or principle of neutrality, impartiality, they are still very important. But they are becoming difficult for organisations to deal with, in the sense in this context. And sometimes there is this urge to simplify things, you know, into, to see things through one lens and one lens only.

Tara Arthur 12:11

I was thinking about what you were saying, and in terms of where people are getting their information. And in terms of this concept around neutrality, how are you navigating that in terms of how you capture the information you need to best serve the work that you're doing? So are you finding it challenging? Or do you find there are opportunities for you to really kind of navigate managing good sources for your information around this particular conflict?

Mila Shutova 12:41

Yes, this is very important information, and in general is key to many things in a conflict setting. It's particularly important and sensitive, and there is no such thing as neutral information, unless it's something like 'today's Thursday'. You cannot argue with that. And you don't think that's propaganda. But most information does serve a purpose in a conflict context. And the danger also that appears with compromising neutrality is when people try to pick out bits and pieces of information without having a full understanding, of a bigger picture understanding and really simplifying, as I mentioned, simplifying the concepts. And so, for example, language is important. And this conflict in this environment, I do find that my linguistic abilities do really help me and I do see the differences. Even if things are translated, they lose certain meaning and they lose certain connotation and certain sense. So, to continue with the example of language, as sometimes local language use to whether it's Ukrainian or Russian, it's important, but not in the way that many may assume. And that goes back to historical point as well. Ukraine is a very interesting example. And people there, they really choose what behaviour change they will adopt, and they choose what matters to them and what doesn't matter to them, and what signifies their support or their anger, and what doesn't. And it is based on personal facts, and it's also important to understand and sometimes not seeing things as black and white, if you know this, this language is bad, this language is good. Well, again, within the context…there are differences and in terms of the information neutrality or lack of information neutrality, that also goes back to the point of people's mentality and history, because in this context in this area, and as geography, people may be used to misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and often they can tell the difference. So you can also build these relationships as part of your acceptance strategy, but you can also use them as a resource. I personally, I

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value the local perspective very much. And I don't necessarily agree with it. But it's very important to know it and to understand why people say things that they say or try to impose certain points of view.

Tara Arthur 15:26
Real quick about what you were seeing in terms of their being able to discern the difference between the propaganda? How have you seen that play out for you? And, how does that link to the work around acceptance that you've seen as well?

Mila Shutova 15:41
It's interesting, because I guess there are certain behaviours that people are used to that they don't even think about in detail. So, coming from an external background of coming from another environment, we see things very distinctly. And sometimes for us, well, this is obviously propaganda. And we want to point it out. And we want to shout out and let everybody know that this is propaganda. But it's the people who are the audience of this propaganda, for them, they understand this propaganda, but it's not something that they think is a big deal. Because they are used to certain information channels, and where they get their information from or just what happens to be available. They know that it's something that well, can be taken with a grain of salt, or their obvious interests that they just understand, and they don't necessarily base their own opinions, or at least something that they voice inside their home or in their kitchen with their families. So there's really double standards, I guess, or not double standards, double reality almost that people don't make such a big deal. Misinformation disinformation. But it doesn't mean that they don't understand or don't know it.

Tara Arthur 17:03
That's very interesting. I guess I'll take you a little more down this road around information, and maybe go back to the earlier question a little bit through this lens in terms of how you're navigating the lack of neutral information, or the presumed lack of neutral information, perhaps, and maybe you can speak a little bit to that. And you know, how you are managing kind of the source of information from both sides of this conflict? And perhaps other conflicts, if you wish, as well?

Mila Shutova 17:32
Yes, definitely. So, in terms of managing and navigating, it really helps to know a couple of languages. So there are different points that I can pick out. And I can explain to my team, to other humanitarian actors that are not necessarily obvious. To be clear, I do not have access to military intelligence information. I am not a military expert, or political expert for that matter. But I do really go through dozens of reports, commentaries, analyses, whatever is available in different perspectives. And I focus on that which is relevant to my work as a security manager and to humanitarian work. So, I try to really strip it off all the colour and see the facts, and then understanding the background and applying my security mindset and knowledge, then I package these facts, to explain and to equip the team with so they can operate in this environment having enough and valid information, but factual without necessarily something that is not either accurate or really needs a lot more context. And so, it is difficult to get this reliable and quality information right now. And it is seemingly everywhere. But at the same time. You just always have to remind yourself to question Who is it serving? What is it serving and use logic and use

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really healthy scepticism and question everything, you know, but staying focused on the people and not on the politics.

Tara Arthur 19:13
Thank you for that interesting insights, I would ask you then, you know, the influx of information, it sounds like you have to comb through, what does that really mean for you in terms of having to look for security managers? And do you have any advice maybe or tips or suggestions for those who may not have the multiple language, opportunity to engage in shift through some of this, you know, influx of information that might be coming out and how to best discern it?

Mila Shutova 19:42
Sure. Yes, it's an interesting question, because I actually thought, whether there is this overload of information, or maybe it is overload of information sources, but that the amount of information is the kind of information that is repeating itself. So, is it really something new information that we see? Or do 100 reports repeat the same thing in just 100 different languages? Well, sometimes, yes. So it's really understanding that right now everybody's posting everything. And something that I found interesting is actually in in this particular context. In Ukraine, a valuable source of information for me has been local social media channels. And this is almost… not embarrassing, but it's something that shouldn't be like that. It's almost backwards, because we stay away from social media, we know that anybody can post there. But knowing which channels how they act, or what they do, after some time, you really understand that they do provide facts, sometimes prior to the official announcements. And I do find out some information that is useful to me before it is available in any type of reports. So this is, of course, so you have to be very careful with social media and what's available and not build your SOPs or risk analyses based on social media. That's crazy. But you have to take it into account and really not disregard it, and use it. And in terms of some of the other things with obtaining this information or sifting through it, I find that these days, you know, all these AI tools and services, they're in high demand, specifically for the purpose of analysing through hundreds of sources simultaneously and providing you with a clear report very quickly, because time is an issue and all the humanitarian response is immediate, you know, that there is that demand. And for security managers, it is really difficult to absorb that much more information, which is not necessarily in the end always very useful to the operations, and can be a lot of just, you know, philosophising or political arguments. So in that sense, it's important to know which services you can use, and that will summarise the basic facts for you. And then from that, you can then build up your own analysis and package it for your teams and for the programmes. But one thing was information that I did find and with the reports that are good, many of them coming out, and that they are available through webinars, through briefings through all kinds of channels. But I find that they must be credible, and their reputation is very important. And what I mean by that is that sometimes I noticed reports, they provide the facts, but they also pass judgement on the facts. And even if I agree with that judgement, even if there is nothing wrong with that, it automatically makes them lose some level of credibility because they stopped being neutral and impartial. Again, it may be something that you agree with, but for the purpose of security advice and humanitarian support is very helpful, or is it a good thing?

Tara Arthur 23:19

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Well, let me ask you more about that. Because I think, you know, as we approach kind of this anniversary period of the specific conflict around Ukraine, talk to me about that essence, and maybe just some of the broader security risk management considerations. Are there specific lessons that you are seeing that we can learn from? Have you seen this, some lessons be applicable beyond?

Mila Shutova 23:47
It's crazy to think, first of all, that we are approaching one year mark, it's the professional part of me and the security managers who are dealing with this context, they have come to terms with it. But on a personal level, it's still remarkable and many people are still in shock. So, in terms of the lessons that we are learning, and I would say, based on the information, dynamics, it can come from unexpected sources, and good information can come from unexpected sources. Another interesting fact that I have been observing and many people can observe over the past year, is that history, which I always took very seriously, it gets rewritten. And it gets rewritten by many sides. And it's almost like storytelling in some respects. However, I'm still arguing very much so that it is still worth looking at. And it's still worth exploring. Also, in terms of this is not a new lesson. But this context is just emphasising this for all the security environments, contexts and work, the evolution of the security professional role and the profile, because right now, you're not just a technical expert, you're an analyst, you're an advisor, you're a field operative, you're a negotiator, sometimes you're an interpreter, sometimes you're supporting in some other ways on the ground or remotely. And really, the profile is growing. And right now, the security professionals are in demand in various contexts and the crises are just multiplying. There's a huge need and it's not new, but it's always evolving. There's constant evolution. In terms of also the concept of neutrality is something that I found interesting and not necessarily comfortable for many people or organisations. Because initially, humanitarian work, as I said, it should be neutral and should be impartial, however, with this conflict, and it's not just because of my personal connection, but many find it almost impossible to remain neutral. So is this something that we should discuss perhaps? Is this something to be addressed? In the future? Does it help us? Or does it harm us in evolution of security, risk management? So this is something that I'm thinking how things are changing based on this and more widely?

Tara Arthur 26:13
That is an excellent question. It's interesting, because you can definitely apply that question to other contexts, I believe. And I think you're right, that it's very illuminating and what you're, you're sharing, and I'm just thinking about what you noted as a personal connection? And what does that really mean for you as a security professional, having that personal connection, and recognising when you say, you know, the crises continue to unfold? And how do you feel about that? And what are you, you know, what are you best, staying grounded in around these issues?

Mila Shutova 26:52
It's a difficult one, because it's not something that I have figured out completely how to deal with this. On one side, I think that my personal connection to the context of Ukraine and into the context of the current conflict, and on various levels and various sides, it's benefiting me, in my work as security manager, it does give me more insights into the field work and into the higher-level concepts. However, it also brings on a lot more stress. And it's almost becoming personal in some ways, which I just basically have to leave that at the door every time I put on my security manager hat, and just support my team and support the

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people in the best way that I can. So, in that sense, really, the self care that security managers are really bad at becomes that much more important. So, it's something that it's work in progress, I find that people who are tied to certain contexts personally, may be better experts. However, they're also more susceptible and can be more vulnerable after some time. So that's a personal reflection.

Tara Arthur 28:11
Well, thank you for sharing that. And definitely, we acknowledged that hopefully, that can improve for not just you, but for all of them that need it to. And if we can do anything as well, I was just thinking about a comment you made, and how organisations view security, and the relationship you might have with others in the organisation to help you best do the work that you're being asked to do. So maybe you can talk a little bit about how your reflections and you can use the Ukraine context, or elsewhere if you if you choose. But how are you feeling about the resource allocation for security? In order to best do what you need to do, particularly in these complex environments like Ukraine.

Mila Shutova 28:59
There are actually two answers to this question. And well, there are many more probably, but I can think of two off the top of my head, but they do depend on the context. And in terms of Ukraine, I feel this has become much easier for security, to participate in, in the programme function and to be a part of the conversation or consideration when it comes to resource allocation and a significant part. Personally, I consider myself very lucky. I'm working with a team that listens to me, who is very open and appreciative of my guidance, my advice, sometimes I do need to nudge them and insert myself a little bit earlier in the conversation. But that's not because anybody's trying to exclude security. It's just a matter of me explaining the value that security can add. Right? And what helped me in the beginning working with this team one team member basically told me Well, you know, back to the information, there is so much of it, it's everywhere. We can sign up for more, we can get even more. But what does it all mean? So, please relay that, to me, that set me up for success in a way that this is my role, using my knowledge, my security mindset, to scan to pick out to package and to deliver the things that are important from the safety and security perspective to the team. And I do try to stay as aware and as up to date on all their objectives and plans and understand their priorities from the start. So, security can also align and be considered as early as possible. And of course, in previous experiences, and with other contexts, where security does need to kind of make its way into the front row, or maybe the 10th row or somewhere closer to the decision making. It's also it's mutual education and mutual learning, right? It's showing the value. For example, what I do, some of the support I give to the team is informal messaging, using various channels, then more formal briefings with the team then sit reps and different reports that include senior management on and really focusing on comprehensive risk assessments that I try to do together with the team and try to get them to brainstorm the risks. So they practice this security mindset, but also show me where the gaps are. And I think on both sides, not just operations or programmes side, but also on the security function side, to continue this work together. And unfortunately, as I said, it is dependent on the context. And on the specific crisis. Ukraine just happens to be at the centre of many organisations, partially because it's new, partially because it's a new humanitarian environment. And organisations are not necessarily equipped, they do not have the capacity to understand all the security risks. They have excellent programmatic expertise, but not necessarily security expertise in this context.

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Tara Arthur 32:14
Well, let's go there a little bit in terms of the wider sectors. So do you think that there are things that the wider sector were prepared for to respond to the Ukraine situation? Or were there things still to learn, or are things that we're still learning from Ukraine? And maybe another piece of the question is, do you feel that we're, you know, being more proactive in the Ukraine response? So just kind of getting your thoughts there and how we're doing? How is the sector doing? What can we do?

Mila Shutova 32:44
It's a good question to ask one year into the crisis to sort of assess things. I think, originally, it was a shock for everybody and the humanitarian crisis in Europe, in this new environment, and at such scale was something that was new. In terms of the risk in Ukraine. nuclear threat was something that not many organisations work with, deal with, or understand fully and still are not. However, in terms of other security risks, for an armed conflict for environment, they're not radically new in Ukraine. So, we continue understanding how we can apply the lessons or the experience from other locations, other geographies, and use that in Ukraine, and that's, I think it's a huge advantage. And many of my colleagues are much more knowledgeable in the sense they don't have issues with assessing the armed conflict security risks and preparing their teams and organisations. I think, also something that Ukrainian context, Ukrainian example reminds us, but is applicable to the wider humanitarian sector is that the specifics of refugee crisis. So in terms of what is a refugee and we really must remember that 'refugee' or 'Internally displaced person', it's only just one aspect of a person's circumstance, and it doesn't form their whole profile. Everybody is different. And right now 8 million refugees that are now in Europe and others elsewhere in the world, everybody's story is different, everybody's circumstances, situation, and this really we should understand that they may not need the support that we are providing to the refugees as a whole whatever that is, you know, it's really it's unique to different people, and also in terms of maximising the humanitarian efforts safely, something that humanitarian security sector is used to running in and helping right, away fixing the problem, providing a solution,n and making everybody as safe as possible, or ensuring that everybody follows the instructions. However, in certain contexts, that's not necessarily the best approach sometimes unless it's a life and death emergency, and there is something where you just have to run, go to the shelter. In other instances, it might be better to take a step back and to assess and to really not rush into doing things. And back to the Ukraine example, if people right now with the power outages, if they only have two hours of electricity a day during which they must wash, cook, see their friends, family, charge everything, hopefully, there's not another air raid alert happening at the same time in those two hours, maybe it's not the best time to push them to do a meeting or to decide what kind of support they want. Because they just have so many other things. And it's not the people just on the ground or the local responders, it's also our staff and ourselves. That just because we want to help right now, doesn't mean it's always the best, best who way of doing things.

Tara Arthur 36:15
That is very well said, and a really good token for us to take with us. And to that point, it would be great if you want to maybe share with us some things that you've would find really impactful in this moment that you think would be beneficial to others working in the sector right now. Maybe other security managers or other humanitarians trying to operate in Ukraine or other crises around the world, what are some things that you think are really important to keep in mind? Right now, today,

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Mila Shutova 36:47

I reflect on this a lot, and for myself or others for the future? And I think ultimately, we all want to know what will happen tomorrow? What will happen, who will win, when will the people be okay, when will they be able to return home? When can we get some sleep or any of those things and these things for insecurity, risk management world, they're important to be prepared to be able to respond and to evolve. However, we must also understand that being reactive and doing things right now, is not always, always smart. And we also have to understand that this is long term. And the questions that I reflect on personally are for example, when will the peace come? What will it be like? You know, what kind of peace? Will it be? Will it be peace in the sense that we think, or something else? And what the post conflict environment will be like, in any conflicts really, in any crises? Yes, you're dealing with a crisis now. But you also have to understand that the need will be there, after the crisis is over. And the need for the service for this help for resources will remain. So we are going through something through this hard phase of a crisis. We're right in the middle of it. In hindsight, things will become clearer. Sometimes, we have to be okay with uncertainty today. And we have to do the best we can but just not try to answer everything right now and help the people that we can help right now. But given that this is a long term, still taking care of ourselves, that becomes the utmost priority, that every day if we should remind ourselves to do.

Tara Arthur 38:39

Well, Mila, I think that is such an important point that hopefully we will all very much take forward. And you're absolutely right, taking care of yourself is really important part of being able to do your best. And we do hope that anyone who is listening who may be looking for resources or things like that are able to find some will list some and the notes from today's episode as well. But we encourage you to seek any support that is provided to you. And we just appreciate you Mila so much for taking time to speak with us today. We're looking forward to staying in touch with you and hopefully seeing you again in the near future. But just we'll leave you with any last words that you want to share, otherwise, we look forward to seeing you again soon.

Mila Shutova 39:34

I do want to share that I'm a huge fan of GISF and I'm so grateful to you guys and for the work you do. You have been instrumental in my path personally, but also in general, the community of best practice security practice. So please continue. Please do what you're doing and it's very much appreciated. Thank you. Thank you so much, guys

Tara Arthur 39:55

Thanks very much for that we really appreciate that Mila, thanks for being here with us today.

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