

Dmitry Polyanskiy: Peace Requires a Pan-European Security Architecture

Dmitry Polyanskiy is the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OSCEs. Polyanskiy argues that Europe needs a pan-European security architecture based on indivisible security to avoid more war. Please like and subscribe! Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennndiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glennndiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glennndiesen> Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

#Glenn

Welcome back. We are joined again by Dmitry Polyanskiy. He was formerly the Russian representative to the United Nations. Now he's the ambassador and permanent representative of the Russian Federation to the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. So, congratulations on the new position, and thanks for coming back on. Thank you very much. I wanted to ask about the OSCE and the potential for pan-European security, because there's an interesting interview with President Putin from 2016—about a decade ago now—in which he said the following about European security: "We have done everything wrong. From the beginning, we failed to overcome Europe's division. Twenty-five years ago, the Berlin Wall fell, but invisible walls were moved to the east of Europe."

This has led to mutual misunderstandings and the assigning of guilt. They've been the cause of every crisis since. So again, this goes back to the main challenge we had after the Cold War—that is, how do we move away from bloc politics and toward a common pan-European security institution that would, I guess, be based on indivisible security and help mitigate security competition? We do have the inclusive pan-European security institution of the OSCE, established after the Cold War. So, given that this is where you now work, how do you view the OSCE in terms of being able to bridge some of the divisions that have grown over the years and the hostility—especially at a time when it seems we might be marching toward a major war?

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

Well, I think it goes without saying that the OSCE is now in very poor shape. And you've already listed the main reasons why we are where we are. Indeed, after the end of the Cold War, there were high hopes pinned on the OSCE to become a true pan-European security organization that would either embrace NATO or substitute for NATO. But for us—I mean, for the Soviet and later Russian

side—in the run-up to the arrangements that led to the end of the Cold War and the reunification of Germany, it was absolutely clear that after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, there was no place in Europe for NATO in its existing form. But those hopes were dashed, unfortunately, by the pace of events.

And instead of transforming into something pan-European and embracing Russia, NATO tried to grow for its own agenda. It still came to the conclusion that it needed an enemy to justify its existence—and that enemy, the obvious one, was Russia. That's how it all went wrong. And the OSCE then, instead of being the embodiment of our hopes for what the world after the Cold War would look like, became some kind of ombudsman for the countries east of Vienna, as if nothing bad ever happened west of Vienna. All this was, I would say, rather patronizing and sometimes condescending. So we criticized this organization a lot.

And still, we had hopes that our relations with NATO, our cooperation within the framework of the OSCE, would help us—still—to shape something based on indivisible security, to find another agenda apart from NATO's expansion to other countries. But again, we were disappointed. We made several very serious attempts, as you all know. I remember Vladimir Putin's chilling speech in Munich in 2007, when everybody, for the first time, I would say, heard the Russian position and Russian concerns in a very structured form. Then there were a number of attempts, including the last one within the framework of diplomacy, which we made at the end of 2021, when we proposed a draft treaty on European relations. But it was not taken seriously by NATO or by the U.S. at that time.

And it led us to where we are right now. So that's why the OSCE, regardless of being a very good framework for any dialogue on European security, hasn't yet been used to exploit its potential to the fullest. It's still kind of a dormant structure, I would say. My task is really to check what kind of dialogue it's possible to reach in the OSCE. So far, the picture, I would say, is very negative, because the OSCE is totally swallowed by this toxic atmosphere—by the bloc positions of NATO and the EU—and everything that's put on the table is accompanied by the "Ukrainization" of the agenda. Russia is blamed for all the sins that have been committed on Earth since its founding, and all these things. So, of course, it's not a serious ground, not a serious starting point for any meaningful conversation on European security architecture.

#Glenn

Well, this criticism of the OSCE—that it's essentially the West of Vienna now policing the East of Vienna—wasn't how it was conceptualized. The whole effort to bring together the East and West of Europe really gained momentum in 1975 with the Helsinki Accords. That laid the foundation for the post-Cold War security architecture, the Charter of Paris for a New Europe in 1990. Then, in 1994, it was transformed into an actual institution, the OSCE. It had all these principles of no dividing lines, sovereign equality, and indivisible security. So it wasn't supposed to be one side policing the other.

But it seems like NATO expansion was one of the reasons why the OSCE lost some of its relevance. However, do you see now that NATO, to some extent, is fragmenting? Obviously, within Europe there are some problems, and between the US and Europe there are some problems. More openly now, people are talking about the possibility of NATO falling apart. Does that open the door to having some institutional alternatives that don't involve bloc politics?

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

It's hard to make such forecasts at this stage. There's a lot of data to process, and very serious things are happening now in Europe, within NATO, and elsewhere. It's very premature to draw conclusions about where this will lead us. But in any case, I think several things are absolutely clear right now. One of them is that there will be no sustainable European security architecture without Russia. So it's a big mistake to try to build something against Russia. And this is the same mistake that NATO countries have been making for many, many years. Hopefully, this time we'll manage to see what might bring together our security concerns and their security concerns, and understand what was done wrong in the past.

You mentioned that many of these things are already in OSCE documents, but unfortunately there was some cherry-picking. Countries tried to prioritize the principles they wanted to emphasize and neglected the others that seemed less relevant to them. And of course, that brought us nowhere. The principles are there, the documents are there, but they're not working. So it's hard to speculate on what would be the right footing to start this maneuvering or these exercises, but there should be some right formula to follow. So far, nobody except Russia is really appealing to the others to start this serious conversation.

So far, my colleagues, especially those from Western Europe, are still absolutely overwhelmed by the Ukrainian agenda, and it's very hard to start a meaningful conversation about anything beyond—uh, before, I would say, 2022. For them, history starts there, in February 2022. If you listen to them, then this happened in a vacuum—all of a sudden Russia just decided to invade Ukraine, and that's why it's the starting point of their arguments. This is, of course, very shallow, to put it mildly, and it's a non-starter for any serious conversation on European security. So I hope that more and more countries will understand this, and it will push them toward engaging in something more meaningful, including through the OSCE platform.

#Glenn

But given that the conflict in Ukraine is now the main factor fueling tensions and also preventing any meaningful cooperation, do you think the OSCE could play a role—either in resolving the conflict or in putting in place post-conflict solutions? Or will it have to wait until this is behind us?

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

That's what I'm hearing from some of my colleagues, and they say they see no light at the end of the tunnel in terms of the OSCE playing any kind of role in the Ukrainian settlement. But frankly, I think this is rather wishful thinking, because serious negotiations on resolving the Ukrainian crisis are taking place elsewhere, not on the OSCE platform, and the OSCE is not involved there. Some countries have already started drafting contingency plans for possible monitoring of what they call, so far, hypothetical arrangements after the Ukrainian crisis is resolved. And of course, this is too premature. First of all, the OSCE has a very bad legacy here in terms of the Special Monitoring Mission, which was supposed to supervise the implementation of the Minsk agreements.

But instead of doing its job, it was a kind of biased structure that completely ignored the fact that Ukraine wasn't even planning to implement the Minsk agreements, and all the criticism was directed toward the Donbass regions. This left such a bad aftertaste that I really can't imagine how we could try to enter this river a second time. I think it's the wrong direction to go—to plan any meaningful efforts from the OSCE, I mean, in terms of monitoring and post-conflict resolution. I wouldn't speculate on what it might look like, because I'm not in the direct loop for negotiations. But what the OSCE can do, and what we expect from it, is to start a serious conversation about the European security architecture and to analyze what went wrong, how to mend it, how to make amends, and not repeat the numerous mistakes made in the lead-up to the Ukrainian crisis.

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Well, often it's confusing because a lot of officials walk around wearing different hats. For example, in 2003, the Dutch chairman of the OSCE, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, sent a paper to Russia arguing that the peacekeepers in Transnistria, or Moldova, should be replaced with OSCE forces because it's an inclusive security institution. However, since the OSCE doesn't have a military force, it could outsource that to the EU, which essentially meant replacing Russian peacekeepers with EU ones. And once he stepped down from that position, he became the NATO Secretary General.

So it does—well, it makes some sense. It makes it very difficult to have a clear pan-European security architecture if it can, at any time, just devolve into—or revert back to—bloc politics. But for this reason, is there, on a conceptual level, an interest in the concept of indivisible security when you speak with your Western colleagues? I mean, just the basic principle that security should be based on the idea that one side shouldn't increase its security at the expense of another.

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

They're all aware that this principle is already in OSCE documents, and they fully understand that we emphasize this provision. It's one of the main building blocks—if not the backbone—of any framework we might see in the European space, hopefully after this conflict is over. But they openly prioritize other issues. They say there's freedom to choose any bloc, and then we get into this very futile discussion about what's primary, what's secondary, what to emphasize. It leads nowhere, because we can all see the consequences of this short-sighted, bloc-based approach to European

security. You were absolutely right to point it out just now. It's a major obstacle, because it was never meant for Russia to face NATO as a counterpart, or for NATO and the EU to take positions as blocs.

So it was always a conversation among individual countries, and it's no longer so. It's a big challenge, and we need to find a formula to accommodate our interests and European security interests to prevent such situations in the future. It's not an easy task. Nobody's saying the future is easy. It's an uphill battle that we'll have to wage, but we need engagement from the other side, because if it's only about blaming Russia for what has happened on our continent for many years, then of course it's a non-starter. They don't need Russia for this kind of exercise—they do it regularly within the EU and NATO, where Russia isn't present. So why create one more platform where we should be absolutely enslaved to this kind of agenda? I don't see any reason for that. We need to use this opportunity.

I understand that there are common positions in NATO and the EU, but nevertheless, there are very concrete, pragmatic interests in avoiding a new conflict in Europe. And you're absolutely right to say that the situation is very dangerous—we're on a very slippery slope here, or on thin ice, phrase it however you want. But we need to take action, we need to think outside the box, and walk any additional miles necessary to attain our objective, which is security for all—not only for Russia, but for everybody. So when people discuss the issue of providing security guarantees to Ukraine, I always ask: what about security guarantees for Russia? Who will provide those guarantees? And why do you think that if there are security guarantees for Ukraine but not for Russia, this construction will be sustainable? It's not. We need to have a bigger picture and find a solution to a broader issue, rather than simply talking about security guarantees for Ukraine. That's short-sighted, and it won't get us anywhere.

#Glenn

Now, it's concerning that people talk about security only in terms of deterrence and negotiation from a position of strength. Ideally, of course, we'd want mutual security guarantees. But you mentioned this slippery slope, and I get that. If you conceptualize the war in Ukraine as essentially the collapse of the European security architecture—something many people warned about in the '90s, especially in academia—they said that once we decided to expand NATO eastward, there was no logical stopping point until we reached Ukraine, and that would be a disaster, which many recognized. But we're on that slippery slope now, and we're hearing from various leaders that war is becoming a distinct possibility. I was wondering how you see this. Is it just posturing when you hear these statements from Chancellor Merz, or Starmer, or Macron? Is it for a domestic audience? Is it to keep the U.S. engaged on the continent? Or is it actual preparation for war? Because it doesn't seem like a war that anyone is prepared for—or that anyone actually wants.

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

You know, the line between posturing and actually preparing for war is very blurred. One might not even notice when crossing the point of no return, and that's very dangerous. So far, it seems more like posturing to many observers, and many people urge others not to take it too seriously because, well, Europeans love their children too—so why would they try to bring a military conflict with Russia closer?

But as of today—who knows what will happen tomorrow? The European population is clearly being zombified by this kind of campaign, where Russia is the source of all problems, the only enemy. Contrary to common sense, they say on one hand that Russia is too weak to take all of Ukraine, and on the other hand that Russia is strong enough to threaten NATO and plan an imminent attack. I don't know how those two things add up. So this is mostly, I think, the inertia of the elites who were there when this Ukrainian anti-Russia project was drafted and implemented.

And for them, it's very difficult to change the tide and look at this from a different perspective, because that's the only lens they have: Russia is the enemy, and Russia is responsible for what's happening. But I think we should also count on some public opinion in Europe. I see that many prominent figures don't agree with this kind of logic, which will inevitably bring us closer to a military conflict. Many people are calling to stop, to look around, and to try to identify the real obstacles—the real problems we have—in order to stick to a peaceful and constructive agenda, rather than one of looking at each other through crosshairs. This requires leadership, it requires boldness, and we should do it.

So far, again, the European allies in a number of countries are still propagating this image of Russia as an enemy—Russia as a threat—and it resonates in society. At some point, if it continues like this for a number of years, then everybody will just, you know, think that it goes without saying that Russia is an enemy, that it goes without saying Russia is preparing to attack NATO. These stereotypes are very vivid, and it's easy to implant them in people's minds, especially in the younger generation, which itself is not aware of what real war is. For them, it's more like a computer game than the real scourge of war. So it's dangerous, and it's a dirty game, I would say, which some of the elites are playing, because at stake is the question of European security—and they still want to continue this madness, this reckless rhetoric, which has absolutely no match on the Russian side.

They will never find any of our politicians threatening Europe, saying that Russia wants to take all of Europe, that Russia wants to attack, or that Russia needs more territory. It's not true, because Russia has enough territory. It has never been about land; it has been about people—about human rights, the rights of Russian speakers, dignity, and the existence of Russia as a country. That's what's at stake—not territory, not something we want to take from European countries. There is absolutely no reason, no basis for such claims.

#Glenn

My last question is how you assess the time we're now entering, because it appears that things are changing fast in Ukraine. If you look at it militarily, economically, in terms of infrastructure—whatever categories one would measure—it seems we're moving toward the end. If it's not the beginning of the end, then maybe the end of the beginning, however one wants to see it. But what we often see toward the end of conflicts is the possibility of the war taking a different form.

That is, the losing side—which here would be NATO and Ukraine, unwilling to lose the fight—would become more desperate and, hoping to rescue the situation, might escalate in some way.

Meanwhile, the winning side, which in this case would be Russia, often takes much bolder steps. It could be hubris, or it could just be practical. For example, if it has the battlefield under control, why allow NATO drones flying over the Black Sea, picking targets in Russia? So both sides can be expected to change their behavior in terms of what can be defined as escalation. Do you see us moving into such a dangerous scenario?

#Dmitry Polyanskiy

It's hard to predict or analyze where we're heading, because modern wars are a mix of warfare and propaganda—this is a hybrid war. I believe many people in Europe still don't have a true picture of what's happening in Ukraine or in France. Zelensky and his regime are trying to present the situation in a very distorted way. On one hand, they claim to be making some gains on the battlefield, but it's very hard to prove that, and they don't seem to care about providing any proof. These are just simple claims. He needs to posture as a strong leader, as if he has everything under control, which is not the case.

Many people in Europe just don't realize that Ukrainians simply don't want to fight, and that this is now more like an army of slaves that Zelensky is trying to mobilize, because nobody is voluntarily joining the Ukrainian army. This is forced conscription. People are being caught in the streets and brought to this meat grinder without any real necessity. What's being done by the Zelensky regime right now is criminal toward Ukrainians, because if Ukrainians could have a say, I have absolutely no doubt they would support ending this conflict. They would support moving toward a resolution that could provide sustainable security for Europe and for Ukraine itself.

But that's not the plan of the Zelensky regime and his sponsors, because what they care about is preserving their power and avoiding elections—avoiding any possibility for the people of Ukraine to speak out and choose the path they really want. I still believe that this path will not be against Russia, but rather a neighborly one with Russia. And this is still possible, regardless of all the claims of Ukrainian propaganda. Otherwise, it's hard to explain why seven million Ukrainians have found refuge in Russia, and why it's so hard for Ukrainian forces to evacuate people from the eastern regions of Ukraine who don't want to leave their homes and who are not afraid of the advancing Russian army.

They are more afraid of the Ukrainian army. So that's why, you know, in this distorted world, some people simply might not have the right picture, the right analysis of what is happening. But those who know the real picture, those who really have their own sources, have absolutely no doubt that the position—the situation—of the Zelensky regime is absolutely hopeless. It can, of course, prolong its agony at the expense of the Ukrainian people. But no matter whether there is foreign assistance or not, whether the U.S. is with Ukraine or Ukraine is without the U.S., it's still only a matter of time.

It's a matter of time—of destruction, of human toll. But Russia is advancing, and Russia is on the way to implement all the tasks, the goals of the special military operation. With military means, yes, but Russia would prefer to do it through diplomatic means. And were it not against the interests—the core and vital interests—of the Zelensky regime, its henchmen, and Europe, the UK, and some other places, were it not for that, of course, peace would already have been achieved. And again, if the people of Ukraine had the opportunity to express their position, I have no doubt that peace would have prevailed a long time ago.

#Glenn

Well, I hope that you and your European colleagues are successful there in Vienna in advancing mutual understanding, diplomacy, inclusive security, and indivisible security. That would be ideal compared to the path we're currently on. So, thank you very much for taking the time. You're welcome.