Richard Sakwa: The Russo-Ukrainian War: Follies of Empire

Richard Sakwa is a professor of Russian and European Politics at the University of Kent, and is widely recognised as the leading Russia scholar in Europe. Sakwa discusses his new book: "The Russo-Ukrainian War: Follies of Empire". https://www.rienner.com/title/The_Russo_Ukrainian_War_Follies_of_Empire Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: https://glenndiesen.substack.com/ X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen 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're joined by Professor Richard Sakwa, one of the top Russia scholars in Europe, to discuss his new book—yet another one. You keep putting them out quite consistently. The title is *The Russo-Ukrainian War: Follies of Empire.* Thank you for coming back on.

#Richard Sakwa

My pleasure.

#Glenn

So I was wondering, in your book, what are the main findings and arguments? And could you also explain how you use the term "empire" in relation to the conflict?

#Richard Sakwa

Yeah, that's an ideal question because it sets the framework. I've been thinking a lot about how to frame the discussion we're going to have today, and indeed the bigger picture around this war. Building on what I write in the book, my main—if you want to put it this way—my main value added, if one can put it like that, is an attempt to provide some sort of conceptual framework for this conflict, and indeed for international affairs today, which clearly are in a state of extreme turbulence. The way I'd like to conceptualize it, to formulate this, is as follows.

I've been arguing for some time that a distinction needs to be made when thinking about international affairs today—between, on the one hand, the international system, and this builds on

English School thinking, and on the other... The international system, of course, is the United Nations–based charter system established in 1945. And that itself is under unprecedented challenge. The United Nations has been largely marginalized and, for a few years now, paralyzed in its ability to negotiate and manage crises. But within this international system, which has lasted 80 years and is under unprecedented challenge today, we have a number of competing models of world order.

And so, you know, everybody's saying, "Oh, the international order is collapsing." What do people mean by that? The language in which so much discussion takes place today, in my view, is confused and mixes up many things. So we have, on the one side, this system—that is, the body not just of the United Nations, but of international law, norms, and so on—which frames what is legitimate and what is not legitimate in international politics. Then we have, at the level of international politics, models of world order. We used to have the Soviet system as a model of socialist internationalism, which has collapsed, of course.

But on the other side, we had what was established after 1945—the US-led transatlantic alliance system, later called the rules-based order. I call it the political West. The enormity of what happened after 1945, in the establishment of this alliance system with a core group of about a dozen states—all the European ones, Canada, Australasia, of course, and Japan—forms this political West. But the core is the North Atlantic Alliance. And what this has done is transform the quality of our various states. You know, there's a lot of discussion about how membership of the European Union changes the quality of the member state—Christopher Bickerton, Phil Cunliffe, and others have written about this.

But I'm arguing a bit more broadly than that—that membership in this Atlantic alliance system, of course, has done a lot to prevent Western European states from developing their own separate security and defense policies. It's all been within NATO, at the core of this political West, with the dominant relationship with Washington over all these years, and so on. And this political West has two faces. One of them is the commonwealth face—delivering public goods, the supposed appeal to democracy, freedom, and all those good things, like free trade. But the other side is the imperial face. That's where the empire comes in.

So this political West has two features—this model of world order. And of course, after 1989, instead of considering that it had done its job and could now go quietly into the night, it radicalized. We've talked about this before in a number of ways. It expanded—NATO expansion, EU expansion, and ideological expansion—to cover the whole world as a universal. So this rules-based order, this US-led political West, began to challenge the universality of the United Nations system. You have a substitution of a sub-order—the political West, the Atlantic West, call it what you like—for the genuine universality of the United Nations system, the charter system. That's the first model of world order. The second one today is the anti-hegemonic alignment of Russia, China, and a number of other states.

Now, again, it's not quite clear. They're not counter-hegemonic, because that would simply mean being the opposite of the US-led West. It actually sets itself up in defense of charter universalism, yet at the same time it also has its own, if you like, expansive ambitions—let's call it an empire, but of course in an entirely different way. Just for the sake of completeness, there's a third model of world order competing today: the Global South, this non-aligned movement, the spirit of Bandung and the Global South, which says, "Look, not just a plague on both your houses, but we want nothing to do with your houses." They're more than swing states; these are countries focusing on development and alignment, also committed to the Charter. And the fourth model is the one emerging today—this Trumpian disruption, which is also undermining everything.

It's undermining the Charter system, so it's actually escaping. You know, it's the sixty-six international organizations that Trump has left in the last few months, including about half of those within the United Nations. But it's also that Trump is defecting from the political West itself, and of course riding roughshod over the rights of the Global South. We see this in Venezuela, Iran, and elsewhere. So this fourth model of world order is a power-based model. Everybody talks about the return of great-power politics—well, that never really disappeared. But what's unique now is that it's purely power-based: simply, "I'm bigger than you, I can do what I like." It even shows contempt for its own allies, let alone its enemies. So that's the larger context in which we can then drill down and place the Russo-Ukrainian war.

#Glenn

But as you say this, you present these concepts—the hegemonic bloc versus the counter-hegemonic bloc. I'm wondering if these concepts themselves—well, I was thinking about why it might be difficult to discuss them, because you and I have spoken about that in the past as well, the difficult climate for discourse. You know, let's say we look at international law. It seems as if Western dominance after the Cold War gave some reasons for optimism. Indeed, when we tell the story now across the West—what happened with international law after the Cold War?—there's this assumption that the rule of law would strengthen capitalism under our control. We would also allow for elevating the role of liberal democracy—so, human rights—and having a more, I guess, civilized international system as well, rules-based, a way of transcending the past.

So this is kind of the natural consequence if the West gets to rule on its own. This is more or less the argument for why we shouldn't have a multipolar world after the Cold War—why it's better for the West to rule. But when you look toward other parts of the world, they would see it very differently. They would say, well, when there's no balance of powers, when there's only one center of power, you can't have international law. Why would this one center of power constrain itself? It's simply not going to happen. That's why I was wondering how we conceptualize this, because we tend to assign roles for ourselves and for others. So, in short, when we address the world as it is now, we often tend to define it as, you know, the liberal democracies trying to have order and structure and peace.

And then you have all these rising authoritarians—Russia, China, Iran, and so on. And, um, this is kind of the challenge. But if you look at the way you conceptualize it, it would take things in a different direction than just saying, well, the West is a hegemonic project and the natural balancing will be the counter-hegemonic movement. But is this why we end up with these very simple narratives? Because I've noticed that's a key theme around the Ukraine war as well. Whenever people try to discuss the different motivations, the actions that were taken, the risks involved, it always runs into the problem of these very simple narratives—like, we can't give the Russians what they want because then you reward their aggression, or they'll never stop, they want their empire. I mean, do you see this problem as well?

#Richard Sakwa

Yeah, absolutely. So, two aspects before we move on to Ukraine. This political West—or the West itself—you're absolutely right, after the Cold War in particular, there's this dualism. As you say, on one side the idea was that with the end of the Cold War, we could finally see international law emerge. But at the same time, we see the absolute travesty of the illegal attack on Iraq, the destruction of the Libyan state, and what's going on today. So, in other words, double standards are absolutely inherent in the way the political West, or the U.S.-led alliance system—the so-called rules-based order—has worked.

And as for double standards, you know, one side of it is this Commonwealth side, and it really was a commitment to liberal values—good, international law—which, of course, most of us, I'm sure, would endorse as long as they stuck to it. And that's why the attempt by the political West to do these good things separately and through, you know, using the United Nations as an instrument, was occasionally to offer legitimacy to its actions. But when legitimacy couldn't be offered, it just acted outside the UN system, which undermined the very principle of law it was ostensibly fighting to uphold. And that, of course, discredited the West in its entirety.

So it's a systemic issue—the structural issue of these double standards. And of course, that's been very visible in how it has undermined diplomacy, where diplomacy and law in places like Iran and Venezuela are used as a cover for illegal actions. I mean, I don't want to start a whole new debate, but of course, it was the West—the U.S.-led West—and now it isn't even the West; it's just the United States on its own. That leaves its Western allies in a quandary, as we've seen in the United Kingdom, over whether to allow the bases to be used or not. So now it's going it alone and setting the agenda, substituting international law with this entirely power-based model.

And diplomacy is dead in all of that, and has been for quite a few years. Of course, all of that applies directly to the root causes of the Ukrainian conflict, and I mention that a little in the book—that the failure to engage, any engagement with Russia, was considered appeasement, or seen as capitulation, or as giving credibility and legitimacy to Russia. Which is an extraordinary position, because diplomacy, in my understanding, is precisely about engaging with adversaries and dealing

with differences. Diplomacy between allies, of course, exists, but genuine diplomacy—the summit kind—is something else. And this brings us to a final point: at the heart of the United Nations system is a vision, and of course, the counter or anti-hegemonic alignment of Russia, China, India, and their BRICS partners, and so on, is a notion of sovereign internationalism.

So when people say, like those old defenders of liberal internationalism, "Oh, you want to go back to Westphalia," I say, no. You know, this idea of Westphalia where states just bump into each other like billiard balls—no, we're talking about Westphalia plus national sovereign states, but engaging in internationalism and multilateralism. And that's the model of multipolarity, which you mentioned earlier, rather than the way American commentators nowadays say to Putin, to Russia, and to China, "You wanted multipolarity—well, guys, this is what you got at the end of it." You've got this. This isn' t multipolarity, what the United States is doing. And that's why I argue we have to have conceptual clarity in all of this.

Multipolarity includes a vision of multilateralism, a commitment to sovereignty, and internationalism—working together on common issues, as opposed to the liberal globalism at the heart of the old political West, which is itself fading. And so, liberal globalism, in my fourth model of international politics today, is simply a power-based model. You know, all power is always going to cloak its actions in something benign—in, you know, the sheep's clothing of one form or another—claiming it' s for the public good. But of course, that's just a cover for a rather brutal, power-based kind of international politics.

#Glenn

But if we look at these different types of international systems—which we never really, well, which we fought a little bit over after—all these different world orders.

#Richard Sakwa

There's no international system of world orders—yeah, world orders.

#Glenn

I remember back in 2014, before the Ukrainian government had been toppled—or during the riots—there were these references to Ukraine's "civilizational choice." Either it falls into the camp of the West, which would mean liberal democracy, freedom, and peace, or, if it falls under the dark hand of Russia, then it goes back to failing to develop. On the Russian side, it's all very different. Do you have a hegemonic system where they redraw new dividing lines, or do we have something inclusive? It just feels like… of course, none of this has to be completely genuine. Like you said, there's a tendency for all countries to think in terms of power, but then to clothe themselves in values afterward. But do you see the present Ukraine war as being fought over competing world orders?

#Richard Sakwa

You're absolutely right that the cloaking of this has a civilizational element in it—that Ukraine presents itself as the last bastion against those so-called neo-Soviet and neo-communist imperialist hordes to the east. That old language, of course, is why this conflict—in some ways the Russo-Ukrainian war—has such deep roots. It goes back to the shaping of Ukrainian identity, the shaping of Russian identity over the centuries. And of course, it's going to have this cultural overlay. That's why, very much, there's the Polish-Ukrainian angle, which obviously goes all the way back to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. But my point on that particular issue is that civilizational talk is compounding the issues we've just discussed.

Once you start talking about civilizational elements, it destroys dialogue—it destroys diplomacy—because civilizations are not entities that engage in diplomacy. You are what you are, and you have to defend it against those who are not part of your civilization. It's a sign of collapse. And indeed, in this vision of world order today, if you're talking about the clash of civilizations, it of course goes back to Samuel Huntington in our modern epoch, but also to the liberal imperialism of the 19th century—the whole "civilizing mission" and everything. And it's non-dialogical, if you like, as opposed to this vision of dialogical politics, where we engage in dialogue and, through dialogue, we all change—rather than what you've emphasized many times.

This sort of teacher–pupil relationship is that we are the font of all knowledge and virtue, and you are evil and ignorant and must be taught. That model, of course, has been dominant in the political West since the end of the Cold War—and, indeed, for centuries before that. So you're absolutely right about this civilizational element. I don't just say that; this civilizational dynamic in the U.S.–Ukrainian war frames it as a broader NATO–Russia conflict. And of course, that means if it's civilizational, it's existential—it's about existence itself. And in Russia, you have an equivalent debate, at least since 2012, when Putin defined Russia as a "civilization state," which I have always questioned.

I think that was an understandable move, but one that undermines what, for me, is most important—it undermines the viability of a constitutional state. You have a civilization state versus a constitutional state. And within a constitutional state, you can have a battle for the rule of law, a battle for democracy, for human dignity, and all those other things. In a civilization state, you don't have that debate, because it's something else. And of course, we see that now very powerfully in Narendra Modi's Indian Hindutva ideology and the vision that you have to expel the Mughal influence of Muslims, and so on. So that is a fundamentally important dimension of this war, indeed.

#Glenn

Well, it seems, as you said, the Russians also have an element of this civilizational discourse, because initially a lot of the criticism they had toward the West and the post–Cold War policies was, I guess, quite rational—focused on the power structure. How should we shape the European security

architecture? It has to be founded on indivisible security, so we can't have any dividing lines. We have to avoid this zero-sum competition and manage competing interests. All these kinds of things are very uncontroversial and have broad support in the literature on how peace should be created. However, once one looks at Ukraine, you can say, yes, well, some of the Russian criticism reflects this.

That is, the Western efforts to create essentially a Europe without Russia have led to the, you know, de-Russification of countries like Ukraine, where people are stripped of their basic rights. So all this kind of follows a clear logic. But on the other hand, there's also this other aspect, where the Russians do have a—let's call it a paternalistic view of who Russia is versus Ukraine. And this has often been a criticism not just from Ukraine, but also from some elements in Belarus. That is, if the natural condition for this Kievan Rus—or for Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus—is that they're all one people, then the natural progression or development would be for them to fall under Moscow's rule to some extent.

I'm not saying that's what Russia tried to do, but this is kind of where the logic starts to lean. So I'm wondering how you see this—does that also fall under the idea of empire? Because there's this assumption that Moscow should have some say over what happens in these countries. And again, you can have two different perspectives. I think, just in terms of pure great-power politics, what happens on the borders of great powers is always in their interest. This is why I've always said it's a ridiculous proposition that what happens in Ukraine doesn't matter to Russia. It's like how what happens in Mexico will always be of interest to America—you can't just set up Chinese missiles or Russian bases there.

But there's something else there, though. This historical, you know, Kievan Rus relationship gives some imperial elements to it—or at least it seems that way in some of the rhetoric. And I'd say even in the justifications now, because… again, when the Russians went in in 2022—or actually, you can go back to 2014—everything was focused on the security structures, the system, and what the West had done in terms of toppling. But now, when I listen to the rhetoric, it's shifting more and more toward, "Well, this so-called Ukraine, they're not a real country. Lenin invented them," you know, that kind of logic. Do you see the same? Yeah.

#Richard Sakwa

Yeah, that is precisely the imperial element—why I say the followers of empire are pointing to that. There's this dualism in Russian foreign policy, which you could argue is an inheritance from the Soviet Union. In the Soviet period, and certainly after it, maybe even earlier, you had a dual foreign policy. On one side, there were normal state-to-state relationships managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—very high-level diplomacy, by the way, with a whole network of embassies. At the same time, you had the revolutionary side. Of course, it was much less active after Stalin, but earlier it was managed by the Comintern and so on. Elements of this, you could argue, have continued.

And the dualism today is that, on one side, Russia is punctilious in its recognition—well, before the war, of course—of borders under international law. When Putin first came to power, he spent an enormous amount of effort trying to regularize Russia's borders with all the neighboring countries—Estonia, Latvia, and so on—basically saying, "We accept everything as it is and renounce all historical pretensions." Of course, the Treaty of Tartu in the interwar period gave Estonia a much larger territory than it has today, and so on. It didn't work very well. But this is the dualism: on the other side, you have the whole rhetoric of *Russkiy Mir*, which is, of course, the idea of a much larger entity.

And the questioning, indeed, of this idea of Ukrainian identity as a "Little Russian" identity—sometimes it can be seen as neutral, but quite often it's denigrating and doesn't respect the development of the Ukrainian language and culture. So yes, there is this dualism, and that's just like in the political West: the Commonwealth aspect and the imperial aspect, false universalism, and so on. So indeed, that's why I'm always arguing. And of course, as the war develops, you have this emotional, civilizational side—just like in the First World War, when we denigrated the Germans as barbarians and so on. I mean, we in the Entente powers, and so on. So yes, there is this dualism. Just two things on that.

When the Ukrainians like to posit this—the Ukrainian ethno-nationalists who dominate today in Kyiv—that these people, and indeed many Eastern Europeans, and this is one of the big critiques I make of the post–Cold War European order, is that we need to make a distinction between a European identity and a Western identity. Too often, those two are collapsed. Now, I've always said—and I'd declare myself as one of the last Gaullists in Britain—that I've been arguing for years and years for a kind of pan-continental European identity. You could say this goes back before de Gaulle, but, you know, the famous de Gaulle speech in 1959: a Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals.

Well, I would go further—all the way to Vladivostok—but that's another issue. Gorbachev, of course, spoke of a common European home. François Mitterrand talked about a confederation of Europe, and Putin had the whole Greater Europe project in the first decade of his time in power. But this European identity is always contested by the Atlantic identity. And this Atlantic identity is how the West was defined after 1945. That's why I call it specifically the political West. As I said, it transformed the nature of security, diplomacy, and human relations—the good side, the Commonwealth side, and the negative side, which is that within this relationship, the subaltern European powers are dominated by Washington's strategic concerns. So there are always these two sides. Again, that's why I find civilizational talk problematic—you can't have dialogue on the basis of civilizations.

Mohammad Khatami, the reformist leader of Iran, talked about a dialogue of civilizations, building on Kofi Annan's idea. And that's, of course, a great thing—dialogue of civilizations. Of course, there should be inter-civilizational dialogue, as many have argued. But it's a cultural element, whereas my slogan would be "a constitutional state at home and sovereign internationalism abroad." On that basis, we can have dialogue. On that basis, we can honestly disagree and then try to find negotiated

solutions. So this civilizational dynamic is... The final point is about the "one people" issue. Even in his highly contested July 2021 document—Putin's article about Russo-Ukrainian relations—he did talk about one people. And many Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians I've spoken to over the years have said, "Of course we're one people, but we're not going to be one state."

And Putin makes that point in that document: one people, not one state. Of course, then he questioned the borders of the Ukrainian state, going back to Lenin and so on. But that's a slightly different issue. The basic bottom line was always Ukraine. If Ukraine sticks to what it declared in its 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty and its 1991 Declaration of Independence—as a neutral state—then there's no question. But if it's going to become part, as you suggest, of an expanding political West, with its good sides and its bad sides, then that's another issue entirely, which puts the whole question of statehood into question. And of course, that makes this, for all sides now, an existential issue—this conflict.

#Glenn

Well, I often think about something that Otto von Bismarck allegedly said—that he always hears the word "Europe" coming from people who demand things they would never dare to demand in their own name. So it becomes a kind of universalist concept, something that diminishes sovereignty. And I also see a similar problem with the European project after the Cold War. What we essentially ended up with was a situation where European integration meant decoupling Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova from the largest European country, even though we knew this would unleash massive conflicts.

So... I guess what I'm getting at is that I feel the Russian concept of "one people, but not one state" has evolved or changed through this war. I think it began from that point, but then, of course, with the de-Russification—the discrimination against the Russian language, the Russian Orthodox Church, the culture—it became, to a large extent, an effort to permanently pull Ukraine away from the Russian orbit. And then, more or less, one got the impression from the Russians that the argument was, "Well, we gave you sovereignty over historical Russian territories. You had Donbass, Kharkov, Odessa."

These are Russian cities. And we accepted millions of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers living under Ukrainian sovereignty, and they went along with that. Now, especially coming from people like former President Medvedev, we often see him use terms like "the so-called Ukraine" or "State 404," just to question the entire legitimacy of the Ukrainian state. I understand that in war this kind of ugly language always develops, of course. But what do you see being destroyed by this war? What has changed? Because, you know, some things you just can't put back together.

#Richard Sakwa

Yeah, yeah, it is. As you say, emotions are running high—especially for Dmitry Medvedev. And that's, like, yes, as you say. If you like, the political contract at the end of the Soviet Union was that, as declared in Ukraine's statements at various points, it would be not only a neutral state but also a different kind of state—a tolerant, inclusive one. So the end game is clear; the question is how it's going to get there. Obviously, the one that Vyacheslav Chornovil and others in the 1990s called for—and even some later on—represents one of the root causes of this war: the division between two models of developing Ukrainian nationhood and statehood.

The first one is this—the way that I've been describing it, which people don't like as a term, but I still insist on it—the monist vision. And that is a decolonial vision: that after empire, we've got to get rid of not just the Soviet accretions, not just the communist overlay on Ukrainian culture, but ultimately de-Russify the whole nation itself. These are the super-ethno-nationalists, who, as Volodymyr Ishchenko argues, allied with the populists and the middle class who want to be with Europe in a liberal globalist model. So this monist vision is highly repressive, and it has been from the very beginning—it's been recognized as such for 10, 20, 30 years.

So it's had the strain of extreme Ukrainian—if you like, Galician—nationalism, as Nikolai Petro calls it, from western Ukraine, which was nurtured in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, under Polish dominance before, and so on. It's violently Russophobic. And that is countered by this pluralistic vision of Ukraine, which is multi-confessional, multilingual, pluralistic, and tolerant. And that is the Ukraine we want. In other words, my book on the Russo-Ukrainian War is dedicated precisely to this—to the other Ukraine. And the other Ukraine is the one that has been marginalized, humiliated, and exiled today. There are maybe three or four million Ukrainians in Russia now, in one way or another.

I mean, formally, technically, the figure is a bit lower, which I've noted. But that's the standard figure. And there are so many of these people in exile today, even now. Zelensky's former adviser, Oleksiy Arestovych, has made precisely this point. He's now representative of the Ukraine that we want to see, which is, as I say, multi-confessional, multilingual, and neutral, of course. That's one of Russia's war aims. But these are aims that may be Russia's, yet they're also, I think, to the benefit of the Ukrainian people. They twice voted for—well, after the Maidan coup, or revolution, or whatever you want to call it—twice voted for the peace candidate.

Poroshenko, in May 2014, presented himself as the peace candidate but immediately repudiated that position, partly under pressure from the ultra-nationalists. And Zelensky, in April 2019—again, people voted overwhelmingly for Zelensky as the peace candidate. So, in other words, there's a huge constituency within Ukraine for a more pluralistic, tolerant approach and for good relations with Moscow. Of course, it's going to be enormously hard to reestablish decent relations between Russians and Ukrainians after all this, on both sides. Both sides feel the hatred. Yet this is, again, another point for us as Europeans. And I would question Bismarck's statement—I mean, he was right, you're right to quote it—but today the role that used to be played, we used to do things in the name of Europe that you wouldn't do in the name of a nation-state.

In recent years, we've been doing it in the name of the West—things we wouldn't dare to do otherwise. What we're trying to do is what the European Union and the European integration project were at heart. One of the main goals was to serve as a peace project, to make sure that France and Germany could never go to war again. What we failed to do after 1989–91—the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War—was to do the same for Russia. And of course, it's going to be so much harder this time, after this terrible war. But that's what we have to do. For that, we have to rebuild the whole European security architecture. And, in a paradoxical way, Trump helps that—because Trump, of course, is Trump—and Rubio, J.D. Vance, and all those various speeches at the Munich Security Conference point in that direction.

What they're saying is that this "political West," by definition, has generated conflict. The expansion of NATO has created hard security lines across Europe, in direct contradiction to everything we promised and said we would do at the end of the Cold War—leaving aside whether NATO enlargement was actually promised or not. These are the questions that have to be answered. So, just to sum up: this conflict is, as you say, the conflict within Ukraine—between the pluralistic and the monist visions. The second one is between Russia and Ukraine, where the West has exploited those divisions in order to weaken Russia. Glenn Diesen made that explicit. The third dimension is this larger pan-European vision.

It's because, in other words, we need to save Europe from those geopolitical adventurers who dominate today and go back to a functionalist Europe. That is, you know, David Mitrany's vision of functionalism—where we start building trust, restoring energy links, for example, cultural links, universities, exchanges. So that third level, we have to do it as Europeans. The fourth level is, of course, U.S.–Russian relations, which maybe are going fastest in reestablishing rapprochement, and so on. They're very unstable, as we know—because, as we know, Donald J. Trump is an unstable genius in these matters, as he described himself. And of course, the fifth level is the civilizational one, which you just talked about.

#Glenn

Yeah, it's just that with Ukraine, up until 2014, the internal divisions seemed to be on a path where they could be managed. That is, you know, of course, you can maybe oversimplify by saying there were two Ukraines. In Western Ukraine, they essentially said, "Oh, well, in Ukraine we have one language, one ethnicity, one culture. The additional Russian aspect is just this imperial relic after all these centuries of Russian rule. So nation-building has to mean that we shed this away, get rid of it." So again, as you said, they aimed for a unifier around one, essentially one nation. While in the east of Ukraine, they would say something different: "Well, we're bilingual, we're bi-ethnic, we're bi-cultural, and this is what it means to be Ukrainian."

And the threat to this kind of nation-building would be those guys in the west. So they're the ones who, in Western Ukraine, want to essentially try to divide us. And that's why I felt Arestovych is an

interesting character, because he seemed to be pushing the Western Ukrainian idea. And now, of course, he's pivoted a bit by recognizing that, well, actually, we weaken ourselves tremendously by alienating half the country. But anyway, it seemed as if there was a pathway—as long as they didn't try to blame the Holodomor famine or something on the Russians, something that would split the population into victims versus aggressors—there would be a path forward.

That is, everyone had an interest in a sovereign Ukraine—an independent one—which meant that the Ukrainian identity had to be different from Russian, but not anti-Russian. That seemed like a reasonable compromise. But I think the problem was that, because we also have a divided Europe, not just a divided Ukraine, this is really what tore the whole country apart. When the West said, "Oh, we want a Europe without the Russians," we essentially allied ourselves with some of the most nefarious groups from Western Ukraine, who were ready to purge all of Russia out of society—which meant triggering a civil war. And of course, as Russia saw this as an existential threat, it also invited a Russian invasion.

So it just looks as if we... I'm just wondering to what extent, again, this can all be put together. A lot has changed, of course, since 2014. There's a lot of animosity toward Russia, but I'm also wondering how much popular Ukrainian sentiment has actually changed, because you can't speak very openly anymore about any affiliation. I mean, people are very unhappy with what has happened over the past 12 years. On the other hand, I think the hostility toward Russia will probably be quite fierce for many years to come. But my last question is: what is your solution here for Ukraine? Because we're talking about peace now in Ukraine. What is a viable, sustainable peace in terms of addressing the Ukraine issue as well as the wider European order?

#Richard Sakwa

Yeah. Before going to that, just to say you're absolutely right—it's too simplistic to talk in terms of two Ukraines. Because certainly before 2014, and I think continuing even afterwards, even the Russophone part of the Ukrainian national community was committed, or overwhelmingly so according to opinion polls, to the Ukrainian national project. So yes, there were electoral divisions between East and West, and that definitely existed. But the overwhelming commitment was to this idea, and that's what makes the tragedy so much worse, if you like—that they wanted a Ukraine. And of course, so many Ukrainians, and so many Russians who have elements of Ukrainian heritage in them, shared that.

And, you know, in so many cases—I use the standard example of one of our academic colleagues who lives in St. Petersburg, but his sister lives in Kyiv, and he's got two brothers who live in the Donbas. That kind of situation could be repeated endlessly. So this is not, again, about two distinct communities. People question that. But I look at the United Kingdom: we have many nations—the Welsh nation, the Scottish nation, Northern Ireland, and of course England. We're four different

peoples, four substantive national communities, yet one nation. And the way to manage it, as I've always said, is that the post-Soviet space and the British space can be compared—how to manage it through, of course, federalism, devolution, and so on.

But, of course, as you say, the division between this political West—this Atlantic vision of Europe—and this other vision, which by definition excludes Russia, exacerbated the internal representations of Ukrainian national identity. And it made it far worse. So how do we get out of this? Now, I actually think that this war has been an unmitigated tragedy—of course for Ukraine above all, but also for Europe, and for Russia as well, with the economic and social difficulties, the hardening of authoritarianism, and all the rest. So it's been an unmitigated tragedy on all sides. But to put something back is going to be far, far harder than it was at the end of the first Cold War after 1989, when for years before that we'd had academic exchanges and so on. We're in a far deeper hole today.

Yet how do we get out of this? Clearly, there are those four main elements—perhaps even five—that I mentioned earlier. There have to be elements of reconciliation within Ukraine itself: the pluralists, and many others, including the oligarchs as well. I'm not endorsing oligarch power, but in the sense that some of those oligarchs—like Zelensky, Firtash, and others—have for years been arguing that they want to see a reestablishment of economic and normal relations. So there is a constituency for that. And it happened, as I say, after the monstrous Nazi Germany—within ten years, relations between France and Germany were back to some sort of normality. So it can happen quite quickly, as long as you don't have an external force constantly provoking it.

As we know, the U.S. embassy in Kyiv—six or seven hundred strong—had been working since independence in 1991, effectively to poison relations between Russia and Ukraine. That, of course, the Trump administration, I think, would have had nothing to do with; they'd already demolished all of that. So that's why, you know, Russia put a lot of hope in Trump early on—though, of course, it was disappointed in all sorts of ways. In short, all those four or five elements need to be dealt with. Intra-Ukrainian peace—and I believe that's possible—to avoid a civil war–type conflict after the peace. In other words, the West has to support the defanging of the ultra-nationalist militias, the so-called Azov Battalion and whatever successor bodies there are. But these people will fight to the death.

These people are like the Freikorps, as they were after the end of the First World War in Germany. So this will have to be an international program to contain these ultra-nationalists. Otherwise, we're going to have a civil war that will spill over into Europe more broadly—and into Russia, of course. The second level is the restoration of normal diplomatic relations between Moscow and Kyiv—just normal dialogue, normal debate, dealing with the humanitarian legacy of this war in all its aspects. Maybe even some sort of truth and reconciliation commission. The third level is for Europe to act as a peacemaker, whereas right now it's doing the opposite, as we know—with the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and Kaja Kallas as the external affairs commissioner.

They're now in the fourth year of the war, with no concept of peace, no vision of peace at the end of it—which means it has to include Russia. Macron and Merz occasionally mention this. The fourth level, as I've already said, is that between Washington and Moscow you need a dialogue. Unfortunately, the Trumpian project is driven by contradictions. The neocons are still there—they're still feeding in Graham, Lindsey, and all the rest—whereas Trump's own instincts are not entirely clear. And the MAGA, America First crowd is now, of course… I mean, it's interesting how J.D. Vance, who represents that wing, has gone quiet recently because his views have been—well, and of course, the next target will be Cuba after this.

And so, ultimately, if you want to go back to the fifth level—civilization—yes, Western culture, Western civilization has to come to terms with its own failings. But that's a big issue. You know, Karaganov, our friend Sergei Alexandrovich, talks about the 500 years of Western imperialism and so on. So those larger issues are in the background. But more specifically, let's deal with this legacy of the political West. Let's strengthen its Commonwealth aspect, its positive aspect, and undermine this imperial aspect, which was always going to prevent Russia from joining the West after the end of the Cold War, and which, of course, generates conflict and war everywhere. So we need to look to the better angels of the West. A better West needs to emerge out of this.

#Glenn

Yeah, because a lot of the things you recommend now are difficult to achieve—like limiting the far-right groups in Ukraine, for example, after we not only quietly stood by but also financed and trained them for twelve years. But I think a lot of the... you know, to introduce some optimism—there's no appetite, of course, during a war to discuss these things, such as having a Europe where the largest country in Europe has a role. But if the war can come to an end, then, you know, it perhaps opens up again for some reason, because, as you said, a lot of the European leaders from Germany to France have been discussing this since the '90s. It's just... you know, you're not allowed to anymore. Ironically, though, to end the war, we should learn to discuss these things as well. So we'll see which comes first. Anyway, thank you very much for taking the time, and I'll leave a link in the description to your new book so people can order a copy and read it. Thank you very much.

#Richard Sakwa

Thank you. It's been a pleasure.