

# Richard Sakwa: Russophobia Is Leading Us Toward War

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 the history of Russophobia and how it continues to undermine European security. Buy Diesen merchandise: <https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok> Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glennDiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: [https://x.com/Glenn\\_Diesen](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](https://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, dear friends. Professor Richard Sakwa from Kent University joins us today to discuss Russophobia and a paper he recently wrote on this topic. So thank you for coming back on the program.

## #Richard Sakwa

My pleasure.

## #Glenn

Was it in 1836? That's almost 200 years ago. Richard Cobden. Sorry?

## #Richard Sakwa

1936. Sorry, 1830.

## #Glenn

Let me correct myself. In 1836. Yeah, almost 200 years ago, yeah. Not 100 years, 200 years. Richard Cobden, this is when he published his very famous pamphlet on the cure for Russophobia. And he essentially argued that this irrational fear and/or hatred of Russia was quite detrimental to the British. Of course, this was before the Crimean War in the 1850s. Again, a key point is that there were many rational reasons for Britain to be concerned about Russia, but he pointed out that there was a significant irrational component. And indeed, that's where the phobia comes in, looking at the cultural and political aspects as opposed to the conflicting interests.

And essentially pushing Britain to pursue conflict when it wasn't necessary. And also, he made some comments about British militarism and imperialism, also taking advantage of this hatred of Russia, again, often at Britain's own peril. Now, as you said, exactly 1836, 200 years ago, but now we're seeing 200 years later, and Russophobia is still a topic of interest for good reasons. That is, we tend to often have a very irrational portrayal of Russia, and Russia also plays a key component in the politics, I guess, of the political West. However, before I start stepping on any of your points, I was wondering, how do you interpret Russophobia, or how do you unpack this concept?

## **#Richard Sakwa**

Yeah, just my first point would be to say, and I'm quoting others, that whether Russophobia is the correct term, because clearly a phobia, compared to, say, for example, a fear of spiders—arachnophobia—and so if you do have a fear of spiders, you don't usually go out of your way to annoy spiders or to attack spiders. You just let them get on with it and try to keep out of their way. So, and I'm quoting somebody, it's not my point, but it was the view that in some ways a better term would be more analogous, not to phobia, but to misanthropy or whatever sort of miso, from the Greek meaning hatred of. So it isn't just a phobia of Russia; it's almost something deeper—a hatred.

So therefore, perhaps a more accurate term would be miso russos, or miso Russia, in one way or another. Because Russophobia is more than, as you've suggested in your opening comments just now, more than just a critique of Russia, more than just an opposition, say, based on national interest, which is fair enough, because you refer to the 1830s, and of course that was at the height of what Arthur Connolly later called the Great Game, the conflict over Central Asia, but also larger questions. This came after the Polish uprising of 1830–31. Another analogy to contemporary times is that, of course, the Polish diaspora, after the crushing of the Polish uprising, spent the rest of the 19th century agitating against Russia, just as our Ukrainian, Polish, and other Baltic friends do today.

So there are certain patterns that reoccur. So that's, in a sense, the first one. But the second point I'd make is that Russophobia is bound up with something else, because the depth of the attempt to negate Russia today is unique. It's unprecedented. When before—certainly not in the First Cold War, not even at the height of 19th-century conflicts—were basically diplomatic ties not formally cut, but effectively no diplomacy, no dialogue, the banning of Russian sports teams, the cultural negation, the critique of anybody in the West who actually says, well, look, one doesn't necessarily have to adopt a Moscow viewpoint.

But to say there is a logic to Russian actions, which is more than an irrational pathology, which is often how it is described. So what I'm now arguing is that contemporary Russophobia is bound up with something else. And, you know, for convenience, call it the Cold War. And there's been a recent article, a really good one, in the Montreal Review, which basically argues about a long Cold War since the Bolsheviks took power in 1917. The first Cold War was the Red Scare, which followed during the Russian Civil War and into the early 1920s.

In fact, the United States only recognized the Soviet Union in 1933, under Roosevelt. So that's the first Cold War. Then you have the classical Cold War from 1947 to 1989. And then we have the third Cold War, which began as the Cold Peace after 1991, then became a really hot Cold War, if I can put it like that, after 2014, until it became the hot war in which we find ourselves embroiled today. My argument now is that these two things—the Cold War and classical, enduring, deep-rooted Russophobia, the sort identified by Cobden and in your book on Russophobia—they amplify each other, they feed on each other. And that's why we have this intensity.

You know, they said, call it misogynist—this hatred of Russia today is so prevalent, so overwhelming, accompanied by, as I said, an attempt to negate a whole civilization, a whole country. Accused even, for example, Ursula von der Leyen quite rightly said the other day, people can't go around invading other countries. She had in mind, obviously, 2022. And of course, you know, we can debate that endlessly, but very few endorse a war of one form or another. But of course, she seems to have ignored the fact that there have been many other wars of unprovoked interventions, dating back all the way to the bombing of Serbia in 1999, and obviously the attack on Iran on the 28th of February this year.

So, in other words, there's something going on, which we use the word Russophobia to describe. It's an inadequate term, but the phenomenon itself needs to be analyzed, as I say, amplified by an enduring Cold War. And just finally, to say that the Cold War—this third one—is basically after the end of the classical Cold War with Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s. The decision clearly was taken in Washington that Russia's too big, too untidy, too baggy, too dangerous, too nuclear-powered, and so on, to be accepted into the political West.

That this was an impossible project, despite the liberals, despite many pro-Europeans, who, by the way, remain a very significant lobby in Moscow to this day. I've just come back from the IMEMO Primakov Readings, and I must say that the discussions there were reflective. I mean, a very lively debate about Russia's place in the world, and the pro-European voice is still quite strong in the corridors of power in the Kremlin. But joining the political West was impossible. A US-led military alliance established to counter the Soviet Union—it was impossible. In short, a lot of factors come together in this enormously potent, damaging, and pernicious phenomenon which we call Russophobia.

## **#Glenn**

Well, it's interesting that it's not just, I guess, one variable, because if you look toward the beginning of the 19th century, that is when the Russians defeated Napoleon. To some extent, you know, this ended the rivalry between the British and the French as these competing maritime powers—not to Russia's advantage, because then it would be easy for them to unify against the Russians. And of

course, during the same Napoleonic Wars, the Russians briefly sent this Cossack army toward British India, which kind of changed, I guess, threat perceptions in Britain as well. That is, the challenges didn't necessarily have to come from maritime powers.

It could also come from this militarily expanding Russian land power. But it's interesting what you said about the Poles as well, because this adds to it—that is, they had their own, of course, conflicts with the Russians. And many people call this a testament of Peter the Great, which is, well, a fraud. But it's often cited as a foundational text for Russophobia because it was very much based on Polish anti-Russian sentiments, and it was pushed towards the French. And essentially, the argument is very similar to what we hear today—that is, the Russians will always seek this incremental expansionism with the ultimate objective of dominating Europe.

So in other words, the Polish struggle with Russia was a struggle for all of Europe, something that should unify everyone. And it does sound similar to what we're saying today—that is, the Ukrainians, their fight is our fight, because once the Russians are done with Ukraine, who's next? You know, it's this big monster that doesn't have security concerns; it just has this unending appetite for more territory and domination. And as you said, it's very difficult to push back against this with competing arguments, because either you repeat the chants or, again, you'd be dismissed as a traitor almost. But how do you see this fake testament of Peter the Great in this historical role of Russophobia?

## **#Richard Sakwa**

Yeah, I mean, indeed, it is one of the cornerstones, just like the equivalent on the Jewish side—the forgery by the Tsarist secret police at the end of the 19th century. Yeah, so indeed, this is one of the models. It really does feed one. I mean, I can identify, say, four major paradigms in which Russian behavior is interpreted today. The first one, feeding on, in part, this so-called testimony, but so much more, is the imperial model—that Russia is an intrinsically expansive, imperialistic, and despotic power. So it's not just expansionist, but it's a classic despotic power internally.

And then it tries to export its autocracy abroad, which is a very powerful model. And it's constantly referred to that this imperialist element was disguised in the Soviet years, assuming that ultimately it was communism that was expanding. Today, that communist overlay has been stripped away, exposing the real essence of Russia. That's the first model. The second one is an interesting argument, and that is touched on by the first one, but this is the regime type—that Russia is primordially autocratic, despotic. Obviously, the Poles would definitely say this, that they're anti-liberal.

And there's much to support that argument, though, of course, within Russia, the debates continue quite phenomenally. This is, I think, the big takeaway, as the Americans would say—my takeaway from my recent visit—is just the intensity of the debates within Russia. So the simple idea put forward, for example, by Michael McFaul in his latest book about democracies versus autocracy, that is such a massive simplification. On the one side, Russia's autocracy—yes, it's an authoritarian

system, no one would question that, a highly managed political system, etc. Yet within that, also, it's a highly personalized system, but it's not personalistic.

By that I mean the distinction is that institutions work, that this isn't just simply corrupt kleptocracy. Systems work. For example, the Prime Minister, Mikhail Mishustin, is in charge of a government which is remarkably effective. Vladimir Gelman talks about bad governance, and sure, there are plenty of bad governance elements in it. But the system—and you just need to go to Russia, to Moscow, and also Pskov, where we were not long ago, and elsewhere—and say, well, this is actually not a badly governed society. In Moscow, I didn't discover, I didn't encounter—for a British person, it seems to be an obsession—a single pothole.

Of course, if you come back to England, as so many people say, welcome back to the third world. It is shocking—the state of our roads, the state of our public sphere, the state of the physical environment with graffiti, with dirt, with rubbish scattered, and so on. And you go to Pskov, you go to any Russian provincial town nowadays, and Moscow—it's well governed. In other words, the democracy-autocracy element disguises an enormous amount within that. You know, how is this system governed, and how well governed? How much does it deliver public goods, and so on? Russia's far more advanced than the United Kingdom.

I don't want to do us down because we've made huge developments in this sphere as well. But in terms of digital and e-governance in Russia, there's now this thing called what used to be called MFC, multifunctional centers—now "My Documents"—where you can go in and get support, computers, and suchlike to fill in your pension forms, to fill in tax, and so on. Anyway, that's the second paradigm. The third one is a civilizational one. This is, in other words, Ukraine now, Poles earlier, are holding back the barbaric Asiatic hordes. This really does touch into, you know, this sort of post-colonial debates and the sort of Orientalism of Edward Said.

So, as you say, there are a lot of elements in which that testament is just one little element in a larger discourse, which is trying to describe this hostility, in effect, which we need to unpack. In a sense, is the hostility so much a European versus Russia thing, or is it a United States versus Russia thing? Because what we've now discovered is that this political West, the collective West, isn't united on this. The United States has always been a separable part of the political West. And of course, as we see with Trump, and as we saw with détente earlier, there can be moments of détente. And it seems it's the Europeans who are imbued most deeply with this Russophobic spirit today, rather than Washington.

## **#Glenn**

This, I guess, simple heuristic that it's either a liberal democracy or autocratic—like this is the only prism through which we see the world. It is quite unique, though, in the West. We tend to do this with all conflicts. I mean, we don't need to know where any countries are on the map. If there is a conflict emerging, all we hear is, you know, this is freedom versus terrorism, civilization versus the

barbarians, liberal democracy usually versus authoritarian. I mean, this kind of simplistic binary view relieves us from having to know any of the background, the history, or even geography. But it just seems like this is effective because it's built so deeply into human nature. That is, as human beings, we're rational individuals, but we're also group animals.

That is, we organize in groups for security and meaning, and it's in the instincts of people to define our group as, you know, good. Us, the out-group or the other, would be bad, essentially. It's a good way of upholding internal cohesion. And it just seems to me that the Russians have always been the ideal out-group for Western Europe. That is, you know, they are the bad guy to our good guy. They were essentially, you know, the Asiatics or the Asians in Europe. They were the barbarians to our civilization. They were the East to our West, you know. And indeed, if you go all the way up to World War II, the way Russia and Russophobia were framed often was in terms of ethnicity, the Asiatic component as signifying the barbarism.

That was kind of very central if you listen to a lot of the political speeches. But when the Cold War began, it looked like it transformed a bit to ideology because then it naturally fell into this binary divide. That is, they were the communists to our capitalism. They were the authoritarians to our democracy. They were the atheists to our Christianity. So it became a natural divide. But after the Cold War, it seems as we redivided the continent yet again with NATO expansion, we had to also come with this renewed division along ideological lines. So now, of course, everything is presented as liberal democracy versus the autocratic system.

But as George Kennan said back in the 90s, this is a horrible way of understanding the complexity of European politics and the idea that you can just draw a line and pretend as if, you know, Poland, the Baltic states, all of these are somehow much more democratic. And, you know, this is the big divide to understand the differences between them and Russia. It doesn't make much sense. But I did want to ask, though, because you mentioned this new focus on ethnicity, and that's an interesting part of what Ukraine brings into this, because how they usually define themselves as being distinctive from the Russians, since Kievan Rus is, you know, they are the successors of Kievan Rus, and the Russians are essentially the successors of the Mongols.

So they're this barbaric, Asian, you know, barbarians threatening the gates of Europe from the east. And again, that's why a lot of the comments about Russia suddenly become ethnic again — all these orc references. But you see this kind of still smaller, but gradually getting some headway into Europe again. That is, we're beginning to see Russia almost through this ethnic lens again. At least you hear this from the Baltic states especially, but also the comments about the DNA of Russians. How do you see this? Do you think this is a possible way of rising, of looking at the other again? Because it's not a very positive development.

**#Richard Sakwa**

No, that's yet another of the sources of this hostility towards contemporary Russia. I mean, before going on, just to say absolutely, I think we should be absolutely clear: any debate we have about Russophobia doesn't mean to say that we cannot make legitimate criticisms of the system, its policies, and anything else. That's normal. But what we are trying to identify is the abnormal level of hostility. We can't even have debate and dialogue with a European partner, which, of course, is one of the reasons why we find ourselves in this war at the present time. And one of the things which feed into it is precisely what you've just suggested, and that is the Eastern Galician perspective, which has been very hostile to Moscow, to Muscovites, calling them Muscali and so on for the last few hundred years.

A virulence which, of course, is historically rooted in the Polish Commonwealth Empire, which encompassed that part of the world — today's Western Ukraine — and of course then as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. That is definitely one of those features. In other words, this Galician — let's call it this — this Galician hostility towards Russia, which in part was understandable because these were two empires, that is, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, against the expanding Russian Empire. So you can understand the logic of it, but today it's turbocharged. And what has actually happened is that, as with the Polish diaspora in the 19th century, their own particular grievances have been given a massive platform and amplified by the institutions of NATO, by the institutions of the European Union.

And the same goes for the Baltic republics. I mean, they have legitimate complaints and grievances — who doesn't? But instead of, after the end of the Cold War, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the European Union acting as a mode of reconciliation and overcoming historical grievances, which of course are absolutely legitimate — I mean, these historical features are there, and in Poland in particular, over the Katyn massacres and so on — these are things which we should not hide under the carpet. They should be discussed, but in a balanced, informed, historical manner. But instead of which, they've become, if you like, mimetic — that is, they've become part of, if you like, the DNA of the political West, which is now built on hostility to Russia. One other point you mentioned, you know, again, going back to this democracy versus autocracy line.

In part, one of the causes and consequences of this conflict today is that in Europe itself, we now find the continent, the western part of the continent, trapped between, on the one side, what I call and have been calling for years, democratism. That is the view that there are some things more important than democracy. For example, in Ukraine, joining NATO was considered the democratic thing to do, even if there was a popular majority against it. That was one of the astonishing things, as with the votes on the European Union Constitution — it's the right thing to do, even though the people oppose it. That's democratism.

And, of course, the Romanian election in December 2025, which was basically stripping a candidate, and the Moldovan elections recently. That's on the one side. You have democratism, by the author. On the other side, you have illiberalism, which again undermines constitutionalism, undermines the

rule of law. The previous government in Poland, for example; the previous government in Hungary, the other one. So, in other words, in part, in challenging Russophobia and in challenging the structures of hostility, it's also a question, a need, not simply a knee-jerk reaction to support those illiberals if they happen to be favorable to Russia, or vice versa, opposing them as democratism does.

But indeed, standing on a genuine platform of democracy, which is, you know, free, fair elections, the independent, impartial rule of law, the access to free, impartial media, and so on. These are classic liberal postulates. And, you know, I would say that's what we need to do. Of course, liberalism itself, again, another way of looking at it, is that we had Cold War liberalism, which clearly became quite instrumentalized in conducting the Cold War against the Soviet Union. But today, the legacy of that continues. So, in other words, we need to look at ourselves and understand the pathologies of the political West, which generate the conflict on the other side.

Of course, this doesn't exculpate anything that Russia itself may do. But you're absolutely right. Once this ideological layer was stripped away, and they attempted to put this pseudo distinction between autocracies and democracies, as if there's not a spectrum—or multiple spectrums—of good governance versus bad governance, effective delivery of public goods against ineffective delivery of public goods, which can be measured in terms of child poverty and general poverty levels, access to pensions and health care, and so on and so forth. A more complex vision is where I think this debate needs to be located.

## **#Glenn**

Yeah, well, even Richard Cobden made this point in 1836. He was quite critical of Russia's imperial ambitions, but that didn't prevent him from also recognizing British militarism and how the fears of Russia were exaggerated in order to fuel British militarism. It just seems like there shouldn't be a contradiction—the ability to recognize that both sides do bad things. But these days, it just feels like everything is a football match. That is, you have to cheer for the right team. And we all get captured by these narratives. Well, and again, it's not an unreasonable concern, for example, from Poland or the Baltic states, that they could be dominated by Russia.

Indeed, if it was the end of the Cold War, if I was from Poland, I would probably prefer to be on the right side of the dividing lines of the re-divided Europe rather than having removed the dividing lines, simply because of historical memories and grievances. However, that being said, there also has to be a rational recognition that European security can't be based on historical vengeance, that there have to be some efforts to address the security competition. And indeed, this was the purpose of a pan-European security architecture. This is why we had the Charter of Paris for a New Europe in 1990. This is why we developed the OSCE. We recognized we can't just base security on dominance or perpetuating the weakness of rivals. There has to be indivisible security.

But somehow that all went away, and we all became Latvians, essentially. We all had to begin to embrace this idea that the Russians are just inherently bad, and the only way to have security is to

contain or defeat them. And because, you know, again, there's a counter-argument which can coexist. You can argue that Russia can be, you know, dominating and abusive of neighbors, but you can also say at the same time, Russia has legitimate defensive concerns. That is, none other than James Baker made this point in the '90s. He was making the point that if we now expand NATO, you know, to help the neighbors of Russia, we will do the exact opposite because it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Russia will see the creeping expansion of NATO toward the borders, and it will see a necessity to control the countries on its borders.

Again, I just wish it was possible to compare us and them, but it seems it's not possible anymore. If you make the same point, if Russia or China were to begin to creep into Latin America, set up bases in Mexico, this would trigger a massive American pushback against those countries. They would demand exclusive influence. They would act in a very brutal manner. So again, you can argue the Russians have good reasons to, or their thinking legitimately falls in the same line, but we can't even do this, which is why I was not surprised, but I thought it was interesting to hear the NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte at the NATO summit when he was making the point that Russia attacking Ukraine is completely crazy.

How can any country attack another one in the 21st century? But he didn't—I mean, it was absurd to listen to this, because grown-up democracies say they don't do this. How many wars have we been fighting now? It's just... But again, it didn't enter his mind. So I think it's because these are liberal democratic wars, so they are for values or something. They don't count as a war. So we can't compare ourselves with the Russians, it seems that everything they do, they do at best—they might do the right thing, but for the wrong reasons. This is essentially how it's viewed.

## **#Richard Sakwa**

That's right. There are two things there. First of all, the fact that he couldn't even see wider. I've used the word "hermetic," that it's closed, that the political West can no longer engage with the other and the concerns of the other, like George Kennan could, and you mentioned James Baker. That generation could. That generation who still remembered the Second World War, the spirit of Yalta and Potsdam, if you like, in which the great powers worked together towards peace and establishing the United Nations, and so on. That whole generation, that whole approach has gone—that pluralistic, open-ended approach—and instead of which we've got hermetic.

And so it's not surprising they can't see anything outside of their own ideological and their own closed character, including from somebody when there's a war. And it was still on the day of the Ankara summit when he said that they were bombing Iran again at this stage, quite apart from the war in southern Lebanon. The second thing is that, you know, going back to, or even Helsinki in 1975, but certainly Paris 1990, that historical question—for them, it's not just hermetic, it's a sort of ahistorical or decontextual, you know. And if we try to provide context, like you do, I do, and so

many of your guests do, then this context—oh, this is appeasement, this is, you know, and this appalling term, you know, Putin-Versteher, Russland-Versteher—understanding is considered almost treasonous.

It's an act of appeasement. It's absolute. I mean, when I first heard it, I couldn't believe anybody could seriously say that understanding is a bad thing, that we shouldn't be doing it. And of course, as for the invasion of February 2022, it was a shocking event. Absolutely. I'm still suffering from that shock, to be honest. It was a shocking event, but we understand the context and the reasons. And history did not begin on the 24th of February 2022, just as it didn't begin on the 1st of August 1914. You need to go back, and then you can look at the military alliances, look at the economic developments, and so on. In the same way, that's what we do today.

We're trying to understand how we got to that position in which Russia's security concerns had not been accepted—not just in their own terms, but the very idea of Russian legitimate security concerns was considered a threat, an act already, as it were, a Moscow talking point, that language. And which takes another point—the coarsening and debasing of language—the sort of language in which Joe Biden, for example, indulged, was appalling. A man, Biden, who allegedly was a foreign policy expert throughout his political career, and yet he indulged in the most crude language, which, of course, under Pete Hegseth and Donald J. Trump, has reached the absolute limit.

Words like "scum" are reflective of the language of Biden when saying, you know, talking of evil and "this man," meaning Putin, cannot stay in power. Well, that complete reduction to a totally personalized view of the world—Putin's Russia, Putin is doing this, Putin is doing that. But within Russia, there's a whole vast establishment, very long diplomatic traditions, a whole network of groups and factions and institutions, all contributing to the larger political debate of what policy should be. So, in other words—and a final point, sorry to go on, but just to say—that's why I stress this whole notion of the political West, that something has happened to us in the West. And I defend the West as a liberal, constitutional, democratic organization, and we have many achievements in that direction.

So let me be absolutely clear, this isn't simply a negation of our own experience. But what we want, and what I'm certainly arguing, is that we need to be aware of our own failings and to carve out a better West out of this. But this better West cannot be based on this Atlantic power system, on this political West established after 1945, headed and led by the United States. It's become a morbid, pathological thing. This political West—just listen to NATO, listen to the leaders there—it's intellectually sterile, geopolitically dangerous, and ultimately damaging to ourselves as much as anyone else. So it's time to move beyond this existing framework of Atlantic security.

How? Well, it's clearly impossible at this moment, but indeed, to recover some sort of pan-continental vision where we have to have security. You mentioned all those things earlier—from Lisbon to Vladivostok—to become post-American, but not anti-American, of course, but post-American. A new security order in partnership with the United States, in partnership with China, in

partnership with India, and someone else. We are living now in the second quarter of the 21st century, and yet we seem to be consumed by the hatreds of the 19th century, which led to the First World War, the Crimean War, and so much else that was bad.

Let's try again on a better platform. That's what I think this debate about Russophobia leads us towards—to understand our own pathologies, the pathology of this hatred, this unmitigated hatred, which, of course, is amplifying. They love it in Lwów. They love it in Galicia. They love it in the worst corners of Poland. Can I just stress, by the way, that within Poland there is also a very lively, vigorous debate? I'm getting all sorts of messages all the time from people in Poland who are absolutely devastatingly critical of the way that Poland has, in the past certainly, been a spearhead of this Russophobia.

Because within Poland there's also been a very long tradition of—let's not maybe call it Russophilia—but an understanding and engagement with Russian culture, politics, literature, art, and so on. And that's what's so devastating. We are facing, in Europe today, a full-scale shifting of the Russo-Ukrainian war to become a Russo-European war, which will destroy us all. And that's, again, we have to say, no, we don't want to go this way. And there are good people in Poland and Latvia and, of course, above all in Ukraine—above all in Ukraine. And this attempt to frame it as, as you say, the good, the noble Ukrainian against a barbaric, Mongoloid Russian is just such a degeneration. It's purely a political narrative and ideological casting.

Bottom line, in my view, is that this Russo-Ukrainian war is a devastating war between two great Slavic peoples—majority Slav, not just pure on either side, majority Slavic—two great Orthodox civilizations, so close in so many ways. And that, in part, of course, explains the intensity of the conflict, because they're so close. Ukrainian ethno-nationalists, of course, wanted to make special efforts to distance themselves, hence the suppression of Russian culture within Ukraine. But there's a huge constituency within Ukraine, and my book on the Russo-Ukrainian war is dedicated to them, *\*The Other Ukraine\**—those who are asking for a multilingual, multi-confessional, tolerant, pluralistic country with good relations with all of its neighbors.

## **#Glenn**

Well, let me ask a last question, because you mentioned this political immaturity. And you mentioned before also that people like Ken and Baker, they're gone now from the political scene. And while essentially implying here that we don't have any replacements. So again, this political discourse today is very different. And I was curious why, because—I mean, all the evidence seems to be there, but there's no accountability. That is, everyone knows that towards the end of the 1980s, we had been working since the Helsinki Accords to find a way for East and West to work together.

Our main challenge, many saw, was, okay, we have to replace the competing bloc politics with an inclusive European security architecture based on indivisible security. All of this was kind of common sense, which is why in the 1990s, when there was discussion about expanding NATO—that is,

expanding the Cold War military bloc instead of pursuing this security architecture based on indivisible security—it had immense opposition. You had letters from 50 leading American scholars, ambassadors, military leaders, all warning that this was going to end in disaster. You had, you know, through the years, the CIA Director William Burns arguing, oh, if we try to pull Ukraine into the NATO orbit, this will trigger a civil war and a Russian invasion—something Russia doesn't want to do.

We had all this, you know. Merkel once referred to offering NATO membership to Ukraine as a declaration of war. We knew this. This was common sense. Yet suddenly comes 2014, and overnight Russia suddenly became, oh, it's all empire, it's just the Russian DNA, they want to dominate their neighbors. Suddenly all of reality, all our historical memory, everything went away. Even the same people forgot what they'd said a few weeks earlier. And then, you know, if we move on, we had the Russiagate years with Trump. Every headline for years was that I was an agent of the Kremlin until we found out, oh yeah, that was all fake.

And then we just forgot about it. And every referendum, every election that didn't support the internal cohesion of the West, you know, be it Brexit or the populist rise, everything was a big Russian conspiracy. No evidence required. Indeed, most of it was disproven. Then we had the Minsk Agreement. We know now that the Western countries undermined this for seven years. We know now that the Istanbul deal was sabotaged by the US and the UK. We heard it from the Turks. We heard it from the former Israeli prime minister. We heard it from the former head of the German army. I mean, everyone... This is common sense by now.

And of course, the Nord Stream came as well. This was also the Putin playbook to destroy their own energy infrastructure until we found out, okay, it wasn't Russia after all. We were told that, you know, saying that the Ukrainian government is corrupt, that's simply, you know, a Russian talking point. And then, of course, it's now acceptable. We were told that the fascist elements in Ukraine were Russian propaganda until the Poles became, suddenly after four years, worried about this. And one after another, all of these things which you weren't allowed to say are proven that, okay, it was correct after all, but... there will be no accountability.

And the people who said all the nonsense, the people who censored and smeared, they will still be there. This kind of horrible people still float to the top. And anyone who objected to it, they're still traitors because they didn't chant the right anti-Russian slogans. But... how do you explain this? Because sometimes I make the point in this country that Russia provoked this war, and I have the defense minister of this country call me a Russian propagandist, which is what the government here now does. It goes after academics. If you say that Russia is winning, they say, oh, well, they don't ask why or go for any metrics.

They say it's a pro-Russian argument. If you say that the sanctions won't work, well, that's pro-Russian. There's no argument. It's just either you chant for this side or you chant for that side. I mean, political immaturity seems to be a good way of describing this. So, yeah, long question short—okay, why? Why is it so? Because European politicians—we used to have great ones, the Americans

as well. Where are the diplomats? Where are the politicians? It's just, I look at the people representing us, and it's really just the worst. There's nothing there.

## **#Richard Sakwa**

Absolutely. The degeneration of European elites, leaving aside the United States, is absolutely shocking. The level of historical knowledge or understanding of geopolitical realities—you don't have to be a realist. You can remain an idealist in your defense of democracy and so on. But to understand that the world is a more complex element... So I suppose the first part of— I mean, it's an excellent question. Why? It is, of course, this false universalism of the political West, that this West claims to be universal, undermining the genuine universalism embedded in the United Nations Charter, which is based on sovereign internationalism, the 193 sovereign states. They can't accept that. The so-called liberal international order, the rules-based order, claims to be effectively the only effective and viable model of world order.

The Chinese, the Russians, the Indians, many African countries, and so on object to that. So it isn't just Russia, of course, and that's why we see the beginning of the emergence—let's call it the political East, or I can barely call it the global East versus the global West, along with the global South. Sure. So the first point is that the political West has become hermetic. And as a result of that, by the way, European elites, because they've been dependent and subaltern to Washington for so long, have forgotten—they've lost the capacity to think, well, hang on, what is, first of all, the national interest of Europe as a whole? And, of course, the national interest of the states that make up the political West.

The United States has always kept itself sovereign, kept itself separate from its own alliance system, but we haven't. We've bought into it so much, we've lost it. So that's the first point. The second one is a generational thing. I'm just quoting somebody who reminded me of Aldous Huxley. In the preface to the 1946 edition of his book, first published in 1932, *\*Brave New World\**, he makes this amazing point, which is so relevant to today. He says that following the Thirty Years' War, from 1618 to 1648, our generation for over 100 years were, after the savagery—you know, a third of the German population was killed in the Thirty Years' War—that for 100 years the political elites became conservative. By that he meant cautious, not politically adventurous, not militaristic, understanding the devastating impact of war.

Then he says that we've lost that, and that's why we had, for him, the thirty years of European civil war, 1914 to 1944. So it was again, and now we've got that same phenomenon after a couple of generations have passed, and even nuclear weapons seem to have lost their deterrent factor. That's the second point. The third one is that this is about memory or forgetting, as if history begins yesterday, with no attempt to contextualize. If you remember, Ernest Renan, in the late 19th century, famously asked the question, what is a nation? *\*Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?\** And he

answered it by saying, a nation is built as much on what it forgets as on what it remembers. And of course, in other words, memory is always selective. And to build a nation, you have to forget the bad bits and just highlight the good bits.

Now, this is exactly what the political West is doing. It's not a nation, but it's a bloc, and it needs to maintain bloc discipline. You have to internalize this suppression of accurate historical memory. First of all, of course, they're doing it vis-à-vis the Second World War, and indeed the whole evaluation of the Soviet Union. It's extraordinarily appalling resolutions adopted by the European Parliament, which are historically revisionist of the worst form. And of course, as you say, the Latvians, Estonians, Lithuanians, as if their own suffering, which was genuine, of course, has been absolutized, which, of course, the European Union should have tempered just as it did the conflict between France and Germany and made war impossible.

That was the challenge facing us after the end of the Cold War — to do the same with Russia, to bring it into a community of nations. But it couldn't do it because you've got this thing called the political West — this collective West, this Atlantic West, NATO, European Union, and all of that. Then the final point is one which perhaps goes beyond all of that. And that, if I may — look, I just made a note of it — the fact that we've got all of this. I'll go back to the great philosopher Vadim Tsimbursky. He wrote this famous book called *\*Island Russia\**, and he looks back at it in the big historical framework. And in this book and later revisions and collections of his articles, basically, he argues in terms that really do help us to put this all into perspective. He looks at Russia — a vast country, underpopulated — and therefore, how do you govern that society?

He always argued for maximum federalism, devolution, and so on. But Russia is surrounded by what he called the limitrof. The Romans called it the edge of the Roman Empire — the limes, the liminality, the edge, the frontier. And his Island Russia idea was that when Russia enters into this liminal space, this limitrof of Ukraine, Poland, elsewhere, it's in danger. Of course, sometimes it has to, but over Ukraine he actually was quite understanding that this was a sphere of vital security interest. But nevertheless, both for Russia and for the other side, that is the West, this has a huge danger — that this conflict over the limit, when Russia overextends itself, it's in danger of collapse, as we saw with the Soviet Union, as we saw with the Russian Empire. And so I think that Tsimbursky has got a lot to say to us today.

And more than that, he has now become the most representative figure of what, for me, is the most interesting intellectual current in Russia today, and that is, well, for convenience, let's call it the liberal conservatives. These are conservatives in all sorts of respects, in part defending the idea of a civilization state, but accompanied by constitutionalism, rule of law, and all the rest. And in my recent conferences in Moscow and in Pskov, this is the tendency we should really be listening to. There are people in Russia saying exactly what we're saying, condemning Russophobia, condemning Westophobia as well, and trying to say, look, we've got to find a way of managing this limit of Russia, which is also about a question of how we govern ourselves.

I talked about democratism, illiberal democracy, and, of course, within Russia itself. So I think that's where, you know, a more fruitful level of the debate goes. But as you say, the level of public discourse. Can I just say one final thing? This Tsimbursky line is very much opposed to what many others — the more militant, the radicals — well, let's call it the Dugin line of political philosophy, which is really quite remorseless in its attacks and, of course, also stresses the non-European character of Russian development, Eurasian development, and all the rest.

But just to say, this liberal-conservative line is a very, very... I would even go so far as to say it's the dominant line in the Kremlin. Therefore, this is why we're calling for dialogue and diplomacy. There are people there who are ready to talk, ready for peace. They want to put an end to this war. There's no popular enthusiasm for this war. There's no popular enthusiasm for anti-Europeanism. They're very critical of its policies and leadership. But in a profound cultural sense, now, Russians are Europeans. We've got to find a new foundation, a new framework to build a new pan-continental European community.

## **#Glenn**

Well, hopefully it won't remain, I guess, revolutionary or controversial to look at ourselves when one seeks to also mitigate the security competition. But no, the appeal of just looking at the world as good guys versus bad guys, I think, as I said earlier, is built into human nature. Yeah, it's quite destructive, as we have seen. It goes very much against how you resolve international conflicts — that is, to actually understand the opponent's legitimate concerns and find ways of having compromise. But yeah, hopefully we'll get there. So please keep on doing your excellent publications. I'm a huge fan. So thanks a lot.

## **#Richard Sakwa**

Thank you very much. Thanks.