

The West's Biggest MISTAKE | Prof. Alastair Renfrew

They keep portraying Russia as a power-hungry mad-dog. But the truth is that whoever the leadership in Moscow (or St. Petersburg) was, the one thing all leaders wanted above all, was security. Security from centuries of invasion. Just how to communicate that to a West that is hell-bent on claiming the Kremlin is an expansionist power? Professor Alistair Renfrew of Durham University discusses the West's long-running misunderstanding of Russian security policy. He examines Russian fears of invasion, the civil war intervention, NATO expansion, Georgia, Ukraine, the Minsk process, failed peace talks, and Europe's rearmament. Renfrew argues that Russia's policy is mainly defensive and warns that Europe is taking risks without a clear path to peace. Find Alastair on Substack: @alessandrodelguado & Alastair's Novel: www.faktionbooks.com Support us here: Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Merch: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction 00:00:54 Why Russia Is Misunderstood 00:04:53 Soviet Fears and Foreign Intervention 00:09:50 Allied Intervention in 1918–22 00:13:16 The Lasting Impact of World War II 00:17:15 Why Russia's Message Is Ignored 00:26:55 Georgia and the Provocation Trap 00:31:17 Minsk, Donbas and the 2022 Talks 00:35:11 Who Gains From the War? 00:42:59 Why Europe Is Rearming 00:49:58 Can Russia Avoid a Wider War? 00:53:42 Where to Follow Alistair Renfrew

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies, today with Dr. Alistair Renfrew, a professor of English and Comparative Literature at Durham University.

#Alastair Renfrew

Alistair, welcome. Hello, delighted to be here, Pascal.

#Pascal

Glad to have you. You are another one of the wonderful minds that I recently met when we had this great conference in Pskov, Russia. And you have a different approach towards Russia, although you are also coming from Russian Studies and so on, but you are also a professor of literature. And you kind of said that one of the things that irks you is that you think there's a lot of misunderstanding—not just Russophobia, but misunderstanding in the West about Russian foreign policy. Why don't we start there? Can you give us a little bit of your overview on the misunderstandings?

#Alastair Renfrew

Yeah, I mean, Russophobia is clearly linked to this historical misunderstanding. You know, just a little bit of a kind of prelude to my background. I describe myself as an ex-Russianist. I was a Russianist for 20 years, and I'm someone who kind of lost interest in Russia, if I can be that frank. In the early 2000s, the rise of the statist, borderline authoritarian modern Russia wasn't nearly as interesting to me as either the Soviet Union or the transitional period. But what has kind of provoked my interest, and this is fairly obvious again recently, is the current conflict and the circumstances that led to it.

And a kind of reconfirmation to me that, just as we have failed to do at various periods over the long history of relations, particularly between Britain and Russia—but I think it applies more broadly, both at the level of elites and at the level of public consciousness—we really don't understand Russia enough or its motivations. Now, to frame that specifically in terms of foreign policy, which was what your question was, the fundamental thing to communicate is that Western countries—Britain in the 19th century chief among them—have consistently interpreted a defensive strategy on Russia's part as an aggressive or expansionist policy. That, to me, is the heart of the matter.

That explains, you know, many historical standoffs between Russia and the West, and we can perhaps talk about those in detail. But it also fundamentally explains how we got to where we've got to in the Ukraine conflict. Russia—and we can go back as far as you wish—I mean, this really is, as well as being the kind of cornerstone of foreign policy, I think it's also deeply ingrained in the Russian psyche, this defensive mentality, this sense that Russia, the Russian state, is perpetually under threat, encircled. And that produces a kind of entrenched attitude of mind, which is then interpreted outside Russia as a manifestation of aggression or territorial ambition.

#Pascal

I mean, this is, I think, very, very important because the view also of Stalin and of other leaders of the Soviet Union was that they were trying to expand, right? But what we see actually, also when we go to the archives—and others like Jeff Roberts and so on would back that up—is this inherent kind of defensive thinking of Stalin, of how to make sure that he would not be attacked from either side. Actually, if you go further into the 1930s, he was very worried about the Japanese, very, very worried, because it split his forces so much. And also later on, with the occupation of Eastern Europe, basically, it's not something that he was content with as a status quo, right? Because it drains the Red Army, the forces—it spreads them so much.

Today's Russia is portrayed, again, as being neo-Soviet and also a neo-Russian empire that just wants to expand its territory. But I think if you actually look at everything that the Russian foreign policy elite tells us, nothing could be further from their thinking. What they want is to secure the Russian borders. Can you maybe give us your interpretation?

#Alastair Renfrew

I mean, absolutely. The period that you referenced there, the 1930s and the Stalinist period, that, of course, is prepared by the moment of 1917. And what most people outside Russia, even educated people, don't choose to recall, if they ever knew, is that the Russian revolutions of 1917 were followed by an extended conflict, sometimes referred to as a civil war, sometimes referred to as a revolutionary war. And during that conflict, Russia was invaded by expeditionary forces from Britain, Germany, France, Austria, the United States, Canada, and Japan. There was a significant Japanese force on Russian territory in the years between 1918 and 1922. And this prepares, you know, if we think in terms of kind of, you know, Marxist symbology, you know, the revolution is made nominally in the name of world revolution.

And that policy quickly transforms into socialism in one country, which in itself is a manifestation of a defensive stance. And that defensive stance is a product of the sense of being encircled and embattled. And since the Civil War of 1918 to roughly 1921, 1922, Soviet foreign policy—we can talk about Soviet foreign policy as distinct from contemporary Russian foreign policy—was basically conditioned by a very realistic fear that the Western powers would continue to seek to undermine the stability, security, and unity of the Soviet Union. So that prepares almost everything that happened between 1921–22 and the outbreak of the Second World War. Everything during that period has to be interpreted fundamentally in the context of a defensive strategy, rather than the rather cinematic sense that we're sometimes given of Russia or the Soviet Union as an expansionist power, hell-bent on exporting socialist revolution.

It made certain movements in that direction through the Comintern, largely. And we know that there was support for, you know, trade union movements, socialist movements outside of Russia. But that's secondary to the defensive stance. The defensive stance is where we have to think—we have to begin to think differently about how we understand the motivations and the strategic priorities of Russia. During the Soviet period, before the Soviet period, I think that also held sway, and we can talk about that if you wish, but certainly since the Soviet period, certainly since the moment in 1998 when post-Soviet Russia realized once again that the Western powers, the NATO powers, were not necessarily its friend and ally in this process of transition from socialism to a market economy.

#Pascal

I mean, this is one of the fascinating things, right? In one of his final speeches, Gorbachev actually alluded—you know, he took over all of the jargon. He also said, like, you know, we haven't learned how to use freedom yet. Russia started using it—the Soviet Union first, and then Russia started using the language and the jargon of the West. But somehow then, at some point, had to understand that they would never be let into NATO and NATO would not dissolve. And that, of course, then creates the security problem all over again. And Gorbachev's great thing was the common European home, right? As in everybody secured together.

And he had reasonable grounds to believe that this could work because he just saw how, over a period of 50, 60 years, these arch-enemies, France and Germany, made up with each other and

managed to become, you know, an economic unit basically. So it's not unfounded. Maybe you can speak to that. But before that, can you—because I actually belong to the people who were utterly unaware that between 1918 and 1922 there were expeditionary forces—can you talk a little bit about that? And, you know, it goes hand in hand, of course, with the first Napoleon and the Crimean War and then the First World War, you know, all of these waves where Russia was one of the targets of destruction. But I wasn't aware of the '18 to '22 one. Can you just explain that history a little bit?

#Alastair Renfrew

Well, again, the kind of popular understanding of the Russian revolutions—and this is understandable to a large extent—but the popular understanding focuses on immediate events on one night in October to go to the absolute heart of the matter. The reality of the Russian Revolution is that it was effectively fought until 1922. And the expeditionary forces that I refer to from the United States, Canada, Britain, France, and Japan—I think the Czechoslovak Legion played a minor role in the Siberian theater of conflict. This is how unlikely it seems to us. But the point is, one of the reasons to call that war a revolutionary war as opposed to a civil war is that a civil war implies that it's an internal conflict.

And actually, the conflict wasn't an entirely internal conflict. The conflict is better characterized as a conflict in which foreign powers attempted to undo the success of the Bolsheviks—the political success of the Bolsheviks. And, you know, I should say that I'm not a historian, but I'm someone who has relied on historical sources in my own work. But if you look at historical maps of Russia between the moment of empire and the establishment of the Soviet Union, there are some quite dramatic maps which demonstrate how little territory the Bolsheviks controlled.

You know, it's almost tiny, the part of the European heartland that was controlled by the Bolsheviks in 1919, 1920. And it's actually a miracle, in my estimation, that the Bolsheviks, the Reds, were ultimately successful in the Civil War. If you look at the dynamics of that conflict, a more likely outcome was victory for the White forces, including the expeditionary forces. So this, you know, people sometimes talk about the Russian psyche as being prepared by a long historical experience of invasion and encirclement. But here, deep into the 20th century, we have an example where Russia, in whatever form we conceive it—this kind of hybrid form between the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union—came very close to being conquered, effectively, by foreign forces.

#Pascal

Was it, I mean, in your estimation, was that actually just as dangerous at the moment, or even more dangerous than how far the Nazis came in '41, '42, when they almost reached Moscow? I mean, that was a huge land invasion, right? But the one around the 1920s was also pretty dramatic in that case, huh?

#Alastair Renfrew

It was extremely dramatic. The difference between these two examples, of course, is that the latter example, 1942, that's an example that still lives in the memory of a vanishingly small number of people who remain alive and experienced that. And, you know, you visited Russia recently, and anybody who visits Russia, anybody who has visited Russia at any point since the end of what they call the Great Patriotic War, will be conscious of that as the definitive moment at which this defensive imperative was confirmed. And again, we don't need to rehearse the scale of the sacrifice that Russia made in order to defeat fascism. You know, it's a... Again, outside of the American history classroom, I think most people understand that without Soviet activity on the Eastern Front, the outcome of the Second World War would have been completely different.

I mean, that's the most obvious historical fact, I think, that we can point to. So again, the need for a defensive strategy has been confirmed again and again and again. And it doesn't, you know, the key point that I would emphasize for your listeners is it doesn't really matter what the politics of the particular government we're talking about are. And this is a game we sometimes play with Russia — we adjudicate between more liberal or more authoritarian governments. We say Alexander I off against Nikolai I, or we say Gorbachev off against Brezhnev, or we say Putin off against Yeltsin. But it doesn't... The key point is not the content of the political program. The key point is the extent to which different governments have successfully prosecuted this defensive foreign policy.

I mean, Putin, to come to the present moment, Putin is a product, as we know, of the Cold War. You know, his entire psyche is immersed in this experience of a kind of geopolitical standoff, a sense of being encircled and embattled. Putin's politics, I want to suggest, are almost irrelevant. They seem irrelevant to me. Putin's politics are not my politics. But to adjudicate a figure like Putin on the basis of the content of his political program is absurd. Putin is fundamentally a Russian statist, and he occupies a role that many Russian leaders at different points in the historical past have played, regardless of their political orientation. It's almost irrelevant. The key point that I keep coming back to is to understand Russian foreign policy through the lens of what we might call a forward defense policy.

#Pascal

There are very good papers and studies about this, but the general image in Europe is of Russia as an inherently offensive state that tries to maximize its territory for whatever reason. And it doesn't matter how many times our Russian colleagues keep saying, I mean, just look at the landmass we have. I mean, it's difficult enough to manage this one. Why do you think we want more? And the many times actually that the Russians have just signaled that what they want is a security order, right? Because this would then bring stability. If you had a neutrality agreement for Ukraine and you had an order, even if it's Minsk and so on, that stabilizes the borders and secures the borders, then the Russian problem goes away.

But what we also see is the constant work, the constant working against that kind of security—securing the border and securitizing, on the other side, the border by making Russia vulnerable, by threatening Russia with a lot of missiles right at its border. And Russia then says, like, we cannot accept that. This is not our idea of security, of being eight minutes away from obliteration, right? So while, of course, we have the neocons and so on who duplicate this game and so on, why is it that the Russians are so bad at selling their defensive narrative?

#Alastair Renfrew

Well, I don't think they're bad at selling it. I think they're simply not listened to. I mean, if we go back to Putin, this really is an example worth, I think, dwelling on. Putin spent the first eight years of his leadership absolutely convinced that Russia should and could become part of a broader European and global security order. That was his clear conviction. And he made statements which I can recall causing my jaw to drop—Putin in 2002, in an early internet broadcast that's been memory-holed, I believe is the expression. No one refers to it anymore. He uttered the words that he could envisage a European Union of which Russia could be a part.

He said that in 2002, in March 2002. When I watched the evening news that night to see how it was reported, we were informed that Putin's wife was very interested in French cinema. The political dimension was just completely ignored. And that defines this first phase of Putin's experience as leader of post-Soviet Russia. He constantly reiterates this message, I think much to the annoyance of some of his political opponents at home. That comes as a shock to some of your listeners, to characterize Vladimir Putin as in any way naive. But there is a naivety to this early phase of Putin's leadership. And in my estimation, there is a naivety, in a general sense, about Russia and the Russians. And that comes back to your question about telling the narrative. I think Russians generally believe if we tell the West the truth about ourselves, eventually they'll believe us.

#Pascal

They will understand us, and we just need to clear up the misunderstanding. There's a misunderstanding. So what you need is the bridges—Dmitry Trenin in New York and everybody—and cooperation and so on. And, you know, it wasn't just Vladimir Putin. I mean, we probably need to reframe it as a naive moment. It includes people like Jeffrey Sachs, who couldn't believe that his country would help Poland get out of a currency crisis but wouldn't do the same thing for Russia. And he couldn't believe it until they laughed him out of the office. And still, even after that, he thought these were, again, misunderstandings. And only in 30 years' retrospect do we start to understand that there is a systematic... behind that, which at the time was just not clear. It wasn't even clear to the president of Russia. That's how unclear this was. Can you expand on that?

#Alastair Renfrew

Well, the only international politics is realist international politics. And belief and hope, the historical record tells us, are just cast to the side of the road. Serially, it happens again and again. You know, still in 2007, famously in his Munich address, Putin is attempting to communicate this message of integration. By 2008, and again, this has been rehearsed many, many times, Putin attended the Bucharest summit of NATO as a guest. You know, he was physically present. Was he?

#Pascal

I didn't know.

#Alastair Renfrew

He attended the Bucharest summit as a guest. And at that very same summit, the NATO countries confirmed their policy in relation to the accession of Georgia and Ukraine. And here we are. Now, in retrospect, that looks very deliberate. And in retrospect, it's also the end of a phase. It's the end of one phase and the beginning of another phase. You know, again, in many discussions of the current conflict in Ukraine, commentators remind us that this didn't start in 2022. It started in 2014. It effectively started in 2008.

#Alastair Renfrew

The preparation for the conflict began in 2008. And from 2008, we see a pivot in Russian foreign policy back towards this more realist defense imperative. In the years preceding the Ukraine conflict, the invasion in 2022, and the four and a half years since then, once again, the Russian foreign minister has told his Western counterparts, he's told the global media over and over again what Russia's policy is in relation to Ukraine, how that policy came into being, and what the logical underpinnings of that policy are. To anybody who listens, it's quite clear.

So we're left to speculate on why either political elites in the West or the broader mass of the public in the West don't appear willing or able to listen to this very clear message. And that brings us back to this prevalent topic of Russophobia. Some kind of blockage intervenes, some kind of programmed historical fear intervenes, and that historical fear in some respects is real, and in other respects it's manufactured. It's manufactured by the same political elites who are, according to their own policy priorities, simply not willing to acknowledge the defensive nature of Russian foreign policy.

#Pascal

You know, it's... I think we will still discuss this for a long time, but what is it that makes it so impossible for the Europeans to actually accept that Russia has legitimate security concerns, just like the Georgians have legitimate security concerns, just like the Ukrainians have legitimate security concerns? What is it that then turns around the warning that Vladimir Putin gave in 2007 at the Munich Security Conference? He warned, like, look, this is the path to ruin and rupture. We must

correct this misunderstanding. And his words today—everybody in the West points their finger at that speech and says, this is when they became belligerent, this is when they became aggressive. And we're like, no!

#Alastair Renfrew

It's a prediction. It's a warning that everything is going the wrong way. In 2008, Bucharest comes along.

#Pascal

And who tests the promise of 2008? Who tests it? Mr. Saakashvili tests it. Of course, the Russians do what you do when you get this attack and you have the war rolling on. And then the West immediately says, like, look, we told you this is exactly why we promised Georgia accession, right? Because the Russians are so dangerous. I mean, like, well, you're creating these self-fulfilling prophecies that the Russians actually warn about. They say, like, look, this is very bad. And then it happens and they say, look, we told you. Is it a form of confirmation bias that the Europeans are running on an industrial scale?

#Alastair Renfrew

Well, again, we might speculate on the psychological dimension of this, and that might be a conversation for another day. But as I say, something intervenes. There's a blockage, whether we can characterize it as a straightforward misunderstanding or whether there is something more profound occurring in the deep psyche of the Western powers. But you're absolutely right—2008, with the so-called Russo-Georgian War in the autumn, is really the beginning of a new Cold War. It's the first provocation. It's the first indication that the Russians have realized that they're not being listened to. And as I say, they're going to have to revert to what I've characterized as a forward defensive policy.

If we're provoked, we're going to respond to the provocation. Now, again, there's a parallel here with the preparation for the Ukraine conflict, I think, because from the Western strategic point of view, or from a certain cynical Western strategic point of view, this might look like a win-win situation. We'll provoke you, and if you accept our provocation, we've taken another step forward. If you respond aggressively to our provocation, we'll cast you as the aggressor. But what happened in Georgia in 2008, on a very limited scale—I mean, you know, it's a kind of minor tragedy, what happened in Georgia—and those temporary partitions in Ossetia and Abkhazia are still in place.

#Pascal

Yeah.

#Alastair Renfrew

If you drive from Tbilisi to the border, the agency from which you hire a car will give you a map and say, look, you mustn't take your car into this area, this area, and this area. And there's a transponder in the car, and we'll know. And, you know, this is absurd. You drive even from west to east in Georgia, in the low-lying country, you know, hundreds of miles from Ossetia, and you become conscious at a certain point that you are close to one of the partition zones. And that's been the case since 2008. Now, thankfully, in Georgia, the extent of the casualties in that so-called war was limited.

And the conflict, for better or for worse, stabilized around these partitioned zones. When we come to the period between 2014 and 2022 in Ukraine, we have the same tactic on a much larger and more belligerent scale. And one of the questions that is discussed retrospectively within Russia in terms of political strategy is, could and should Russia have responded sooner to the provocation of 2014? Now, one answer to that is, well, it did respond with the annexation of Crimea.

#Pascal

Right.

#Alastair Renfrew

But it didn't respond to the ongoing destruction of ethnic Russians who happened to be citizens of Ukraine living in Donbass. Russia exercised restraint for eight years while ethnic Russians were being killed in Donbass by their own government. So the provocation was much more extreme than Mr. Saakashvili's little adventure toward the Ossetian border. Now, I think, again, the point for the present conversation that we're having is most objective observers would characterize Russian policy in that eight-year period between 2014 and 2022 as one of restraint.

#Pascal

Yeah, but it's like, this is exactly what frustrates me so much with the narrative in the West, right? They, at this point, just completely, again, memory-hole that entire experience. And if they mention anything at all, they mention the Russian-supported separatists in the East, right? As if this was a deliberate attempt at already fighting a war in all but name against Ukraine, when in fact, if you look at the Minsk agreements—there were two of them—if you look at the development of the entire strategy of Russia, it was to keep the Donbass inside Ukraine, those territories autonomous with a veto over foreign policy, which de facto creates a neutral Ukraine, which de facto solves the problem. That was a very clear solution. And never, not in eight years, did Russia recognize these two self-declared republics, right? For very good reasons, because you don't want to sabotage your own defensive approach. And all of that is utterly, completely misconstrued.

#Alastair Renfrew

As late as April 2022, after the invasion, what you've just described was still more or less the Russian policy. Yes.

#Pascal

That's what they were willing to go back to in Istanbul.

#Alastair Renfrew

Yes. So even after the conflict had broken out, Russia was still willing to sue for peace on the basis that Donetsk and Lugansk would remain part of the Ukrainian state but with autonomous status. So again, there's a consistency to this essentially defensive foreign policy. But as I said, it seemed more in line with the so-called strategy of the Western powers simply to ignore the underpinnings of that. And again, without rehearsing what happened in April 2022, I suppose we won't know exactly what happened in April 2022 until a few years after the conflict.

But, you know, again, an objective observer might draw the conclusion that even the Ukrainian government at that point was willing to accept that as a price for a cessation of the conflict. Now, again, we won't know until a number of years after the conflict is resolved. Goodness knows when that will be. How many lives have been lost between now and April 2022? A conservative estimate runs into the hundreds of thousands. It may be more than that. And the question, what we've characterized as the strategists of the Western countries, the NATO countries, the question they have to answer, I think, is what has been gained in exchange for casualties on that scale on both sides?

The answer to me is, again, as someone who's not a historian, who's not a political theorist—I'm a literary scholar—but the answer, from my perspective, to that question appears to be nothing. Nothing has been gained. We're no further forward in terms of a global resolution of this conflict between the legitimate security interests of Russia and whatever the strategic priorities of NATO happen to be. We're no further, we're no closer to a political solution. And in my estimation, we remain some way away from a resolution to the conflict itself.

#Pascal

That is absolutely right, although it presupposes that gaining would mean something beneficial to all parties. And we know that there are enough people in the transatlantic alliance, especially in the neocon circles, who don't think in those terms. They think in terms of how to maximize benefit on their side to the detriment of everybody else. And if you look at it from that perspective, what they gained is the permanent severance of European-Russian ties, right? No more Nord Stream, no more cooperation for the next 20 to 30 years at least, right?

So, permanent severance of Russia from the Europeans, dependence of the Europeans on the US, the strengthening of the military-industrial complex for the US. And let's not forget, these sick people, they think of sacrificing Ukrainians in order to bleed dry the Russians as a good thing. These sick people who stand in Congress and say, like, look, best investment ever. Like, the Russians are bleeding, the Ukrainians are doing the dirty work for us, and we have a booming war economy over here with all the weapon sales we do. Look, ka-ching, ka-ching. I mean, from that perspective, there is a large gain, actually, on that side.

But this is, of course, one of these cynical interpretations that especially, I would argue, people like Vladimir Putin, who actually believe that, you know, in the end, you need some sort of resolution, right? You're looking for some status quo that works—that wouldn't really ring very strong with them. Although it's weird to me because he himself said he knows these people, and he has seen a lot of presidents come and go and talk one way before they get elected and another way after they get elected. He himself says so. So it's not clear to me why it seems that he attaches so much faith to the possibility of constructing this kind of cooperative framework when it is the other side that obviously says, we don't want it.

#Alastair Renfrew

Yeah, I mean, it's one of the great mysteries of the conflict and the geopolitical circumstances that surround it—why Putin still appears to believe in a resolution of some kind in those terms. And there are many political voices in Russia who categorically just don't believe that anymore. And as the conflict progresses, one of the fears is that those voices become louder and more influential. But to return to your point of what is gained—and again, this might broaden our conversation out too much—but for what it's worth, it's clear that NATO, and even the Trump administration, if we can be that specific, clearly there are differences in the approach of the Trump administration compared to the Biden administration.

Many people have drawn the conclusion that Trump is kind of not interested in Ukraine. That may be true, but the Trump administration remains interested in Russia being tied down. And there have been many other events that have taken place since 2022 that might not have taken place quite so easily were Russia not tied down. And the second point is that, you know, Trump may not care too much about a resolution to the Ukrainian conflict, but it's not contrary to his broad interests to have Russian energy infrastructure destabilized by the Ukrainian proxy. If there's one binding thread—and it's a big if—if there's one binding thread that allows us to understand something about the strategy of the Trump administration, that binding thread has to be energy.

You know, what connects Venezuela and Iran? You know, when I woke up one day early in January and saw that the United States had—and, you know, it takes you a little while to absorb the reality of what's happened—the United States had kidnapped the president of a sovereign state in South America. Right. Once I got over the shock, I immediately came to the conclusion that there would be a war in the Middle East before summer. Because securing a particular flow of energy—Venezuelan

oil—was a necessary precondition for the adventure in Iran. And Russia is marginal to some extent to that great game, the kind of global energy wars, but it's not completely irrelevant.

So I think you're right. You can draw the conclusion that the United States may not be quite as interested in the forward strategy that provoked the conflict, but it doesn't have any particular compelling interest in ending the conflict, because an embattled and distracted Russia, with its oil production at least unsettled and mitigated, fits the broad strategy of the Trump administration. I realize I'm making the schoolboy error of trying to draw reasonable and rational conclusions about American foreign policy in the era of Donald Trump, so I apologize for that.

#Pascal

No, no, no, no. I mean, even if it wasn't intentional, if that's what the outcome is, then it is fair to point out that this is one of the things that one group in the United States does like, right? The people who benefit from all of these initiatives—well, energy ties that are being created and all of the money that is to be made with that. And we know the United States runs on money. And we see that. I mean, the president just earned one billion US dollars in the last year just by, yeah, by his wealth being strategically allocated by other people and benefiting from the geopolitical love he makes. So there are other people who do that too. And they will come out of this and say, like, well, it was a great time.

It was an awesome time. We made a lot of money out of it. And on the other hand, in Russia, you won't have that. In Europe, you might have a couple of elites who benefit from these transatlantic networks and so on and therefore are on board with it. But the large part of the population, of course, loses out. In Ukraine, they are literally asked to bleed for that and die in the hundreds of thousands for it. And that's the shocking aspect of the immorality of calling for the support of Ukraine, right? And being a friend of Ukraine while now the Europeans start even pushing people back, right? Military-aged boys and men who now have to go back and further bleed for this kind of racket.

#Alastair Renfrew

Yeah, when we displace from US policy back to the European theater, this is when it becomes, from my perspective, completely inexplicable. This is where we have to invoke, I think, psychologistic categories once again. You simply cannot make strategic sense of why the continent of Europe appears to be prepared to rearm in order to prolong the Ukraine conflict.

#Pascal

Or even extend it, extend it outside of Europe.

#Alastair Renfrew

Well, this is the kind of, this is the standoff, this is where we are. And again, from a Russian point of view, just before I come back to the Western countries, my calculation is that Russia has strategized this conflict in terms of—I think their conclusion is they can control the conflict in Ukraine. And again, going back to the key point about Western misunderstanding of Russia and the Russian mindset, I think the Russians are prepared, if necessary, to control that limited conflict for as long as it takes. I think John Mearsheimer described the most likely outcome as a messy Russian win.

And I presume what he means by messy is that it will run on for a number of further years and there will be even greater casualties. So Russia is prepared, I think, to dig in and can live with a limited conflict that it can control. What it can't control—you can't, strategically, you can't game an escalated wider conflict involving other Western powers. Russia clearly doesn't want that. Now, again, the European countries seem to understand that that is not what Russia wants. And that appears to be the only rational reason why they have concluded, therefore, that must be what they have to do. What Russia doesn't want is what we must pursue.

Now, the fact is that I don't think any Western European country has the military capacity to pursue an extended conflict with Russia. That appears to be close to irrelevant. And I was just about to say, I watched with a mixture of amusement and horror the celebrations of Bastille Day in France, where the foreign minister was making great play of the military participation of, I think, up to 27 countries. It almost reminded me of a May Day parade in Red Square in Soviet times. Hmm. But at the Arc de Triomphe, you know, this kind of theatrical military posturing. There is something awry in the strategic calculation of the Western European members of NATO. And I don't profess to understand that.

You know, from a British perspective, you may be aware of this. We're reminded every couple of months in the press. And, you know, you can tell the mainstream media move like a kind of flock of birds or a shoal of fish. The same message appears in numerous outlets at the same time. We are being prepared for potential conscription, the necessity of a conflict with Russia. And the irony is this is presented as defensive. Yeah. This is something that we are going to have to face because Russia is an expansionist, authoritarian, aggressive power. Um, and again, this is the heart of the matter. This is what I want to come back to. That may be a misunderstanding. It may be based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the orientation of Russian foreign policy, or it may be the latest cynical lie produced by security services who have a vested interest in maintaining the illusion of a live and present danger.

The problem in all this, and this is why I evoke the psychologistic, is how that misunderstanding or deception, whichever we conclude it is, on the part of political elites, is transmitted to the broader public—how the broader public can be made to believe in or invest in the idea of the necessity of a conflict with Russia. Now, public opinion is a notoriously kind of slippery thing. You know, everybody's got a view on what public opinion is at any one time, but we don't quite know what

public opinion is going to be until it's tested publicly. And I would hope, at least in the British context, that if and when it is tested in relation to some kind of conflict with Russia, British public opinion will fall on the rational side of the argument. But that's speculation on my part.

#Pascal

Yeah, I mean, hope dies last, right? But it's a pretty precarious moment when we also see just how then also, maybe this is where it ties in with Russophobia, how this, even if we assume that it's a misunderstanding of Russia itself, how that then is politicized and then translated through propaganda and Russophobia into something politically useful. Because what you need is, you know, you're just in the bell curve. You need just the middle part that basically goes along and everything's fine, right? You will have enough conscripts and whatnot in order to do whatever kind of policy you're envisioning as long as you have the middle part, right, of the polity. 50–55% is enough, more than enough, in order to drive it further. You can even do with less. Again, Mr. Zelensky was elected in 2019 on a peace platform to do peace with Russia, right? And he overwhelmingly won that one. And still, that was not enough in order to kind of change the course of the ship that already had a certain direction.

It's landed us where it is. The question, maybe the last thing I will ask you, is your assessment of where Russia is today with its understanding of how the West works. Because again, you alluded to people like Mr. Karaganov, who are saying, like, look, we need to nuke Europe in order to reestablish deterrence. We still have Mr. Vladimir Putin, who seems to have a completely different strategy when it comes to the drone war and says, like, look, we're winning on the battlefield, we're not going to squander that, we're not going to give the Europeans a Europeanization of the war. But in return, there's no other way but absorbing certain shocks and dealing with them. Where do you think the understanding is of, let's say, Russia's central part, of how to deal with the fact that the Europeans are utterly unwilling to give them a security arrangement?

#Alastair Renfrew

Well, here I think there is, paradoxically, cause for hope. Because if we accept the premise that I've offered—that Russian foreign policy, historically, through different governments and different political orientations, has been fundamentally defensive—if that is true, then that's the basis for hope that that will continue to be true. And that's my estimation. I think, as I said a moment ago, the Russians have reached the conclusion that they can control a limited conflict in Ukraine, but they are unlikely to be able to control the variables of an extended conflict with the broader NATO family.

Therefore, we might conclude that, you know, whatever noises are made—and these noises have a kind of, they have a structural function, don't they? You know, the late-night chat show or the former president who's extremely active on Twitter is able to say things that respectable representatives of the current government are not. I think most of that is noise. And sometimes there's noise produced in anger, which is understandable. My estimation is that noise is not liable to

inform strategic policy and that Russia is likely to maintain its fundamentally defensive foreign policy, even in the face of increased provocation.

Now, again, as we discussed briefly in terms of the preparation for Russia, the Ukraine conflict puts them in a difficult situation where they may have to find ways to deal with and make limited responses to further provocations without escalating. But if I had to put my money on escalation or non-escalation, I think I would put my money on non-escalation, and we would have this core Russian foreign policy of forward defense to thank for that rather than any enlightened strategy on the part of the West and the NATO countries.

#Pascal

I really like that analysis. And let's end on this positive note, because we can put our hope into the basket of, like, Russian rationality and not the West getting back to sanity, which seems farther away than ever. But let's end it there. Alistair, people who want to follow you—I know you also write under a pen name—where should they go to read from you, read about you?

#Alistair Renfrew

They'll find me on Substack as Alessandro Del Guado, which is my literary pseudonym. And they'll find my novel, Kuchorin. That's a name any of your Russian listeners will recognize. Whether they buy their books or on the website of the publisher, Faction Books. Alessandro Del Guado. Don't ask me why the author of a faux Russian novel of the 19th century has an Italian pseudonym. It's a long story.

#Pascal

We will cover that one in another interview another day. For now, Alistair Renfrew, thank you so much for your time today.

#Alistair Renfrew

Thank you very much, Pascal Lottaz. Thank you.