

Europe and the Crisis in Ukraine: Is the International Community Facing a New East–West Conflict?

Gregor Gysi

Gregor Gysi is Chairman of DIE LINKE faction, head of the opposition in the German Bundestag and former Chairman of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). This article is adapted from a text he gave before the Israel Council on Foreign Relations on June 11, 2014. The event was held in cooperation with the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Israel Office.

If I had told someone in 1985, when I was a citizen of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), that some thirty years later, in 2014, I would be speaking in Israel, about an independent Ukraine, he or she would have told me to immediately admit myself to a psychiatric hospital — and the truth is that I would have accepted that suggestion and gone there voluntarily. Yet, here I am, and that fact alone demonstrates how strange the world is and how unexpected changes can be. Even in 1989, I would not have thought it possible to experience the dissolution of the GDR, yet it happened. And, in relation to the ongoing Middle East conflict, that is a very important point to remember. Sometimes, whether positive or negative, unexpected things happen. I am not here to lecture to you about the Middle East. That would be presumptuous; you know more about it than I do. Instead, I will focus on Ukraine.

Ukraine has been transformed into a venue of geopolitical conflict, to its own detriment. But what lies behind this conflict? Ostensibly, the former East–West conflict no longer exists, and this is not about the emergence of a new Cold War, because the Cold War was a conflict of two systems. We should all be glad that the Cold War is over. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that during that period, at least we had clear structures. There was the American sphere of influence, the Soviet sphere of influence, and a few countries that viewed themselves as neutral or non-aligned. Everything was well-knit.

One side was allowed to wage war in Vietnam, the other entered Afghanistan and invaded Czechoslovakia. They mingled in each other's spheres of influence for the most part verbally, and not militarily. We all remember the Cuban Missile Crisis and the question of whether we were about to see the beginning of World War III. Ultimately, that standoff was resolved.

I say this for the following reason: During the Cold War, an Osama Bin Laden would have been connected either to the American or the Soviet secret service,

and if he was really out of control, an “accident” would have removed him. Today, these people are free-floating forces, and nobody is really responsible for them. Since that time, the two world powers have seen a noticeable decline in influence. Russia once dominated the other parts of the Soviet Union and all of East Central Europe, but today it has very little influence in Central and Eastern Europe, including even certain former Soviet republics.

The US has its own backyard—Central and South America—in which it was once dominant. Initially, the only exception was Cuba, followed periodically by Nicaragua. That was difficult enough. Just look to Augusto Pinochet as a reminder. Today, however, Washington has lost influence in large parts of Central and South America, and many Latin American countries are turning away from the United States.

So, the two superpowers have lost influence. And US President Barack Obama—whose greatest weakness is his weakness—is now suffering from the fact that suddenly a situation has arisen in which both former superpowers are struggling to maintain their influence and gradually expand it again. This was quite clear in Georgia, and the ensuing tensions between the US and Russia. It was evident in Syria, and the conflict between the US and Russia. It is now more obvious still in Ukraine.

Today, Russian President Vladimir Putin says: “I must draw boundaries here,” and Obama replies by saying: “No. It is not up to you to draw these boundaries.” Since there is still no system of understanding—and I am opposed to it because I believe in the self-determination of peoples—there is no real order. In other words, there is no structure upon which we can rely. The only thing that is fairly certain is that NATO will not station troops in Ukraine and thus there will not be a World War III. Otherwise, the outcome of this conflict is relatively uncertain.

My party and I are not uncritical of Russia. Of course, we have very old members who have a strong penchant for the Soviet Union, so much so that I have had to remind them that the USSR no longer exists, and that although Putin may be many things, he is certainly not a leftist. I have also had to break the news to them that that there is no socialism in Russia, only state capitalism. Nothing more.

Nevertheless, we need to see this conflict as one in which there does not seem to be a diplomatic solution. At the moment, there is no outstanding political personality who could somehow bring about a solution. I do not even see a celebrity Plan B, which could lead to a solution in some conflicts. Like many people, I, too, had illusions regarding Obama and his presidency.

We have, so to speak, to make do with two weakened superpowers that are only still strong in one respect: their military might. The war Russia waged in Chechnya was not only wrong, it was also chaotic. People asked: "What kind of army is this? Can't they manage even this type of conflict?" Then, in Georgia, Putin showed the world that his army was again functioning properly. In the first forty-eight hours of the campaign, he managed to achieve what he wanted and then the army was withdrawn. But the West never understood that Putin would send such a signal.

US hegemony also suffered setbacks due to other factors. Its military intervention in Afghanistan was unsuccessful. Al-Qa'ida should have been exorcised and destroyed. Instead, it was only compelled to move across the border to Pakistan. According to the logic it has employed thus far, Washington should now invade Pakistan. The Taliban were never again supposed to wield power—and now there are talks with the Taliban to see if they are willing to return to government voluntarily. Drug cultivation in Afghanistan has increased dramatically in recent years—by 2,600 percent. The country is now the greatest opium exporter in the world. This all happened during the war. The slums have grown vaster. Where girls could never go to school, they still cannot go; where they were able to, some can go no longer. Nothing has changed structurally.

And where is the positive result of the Iraq War? Today, more people are dying there daily than under Saddam Hussein.

Of course, I also understand Israel's concerns. What will become of Egypt? What will become of Libya? What will become of Syria? These are all open questions. In none of these countries can we say that the US is currently achieving its goals. It is true that Obama delivered a major speech in Cairo in June 2009, and many believed that he would manage to solve the Middle East conflict, which of course he could not do, but he didn't realize it. He also said he would close the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, and it's still open today.

When I was in New York for the first time in my life, I saw a beggar. He wore two coats and, in commemoration of World War I, a yellow ribbon across his arm. I asked him, "Why are you wearing two jackets? It is not that cold outside." He told me, "I know, but if I fall asleep with the jacket lying next to me, it will be stolen. That's why I always put it on." I then asked him, "Can you tell me how you will benefit if the US wins the Gulf War? What will change in your life?" He looked at me with huge eyes and said, "Listen to me, we are *the* superpower—we *have* to win."

It then became clear to me what would happen with the Russian population if Russia were to be denied the status of a world power. Since Israelis and Germans

come from two countries that are not world powers, such feelings are a bit foreign to us. Of course it is different with Germans, who have always striven to be a world power, although the pursuit of that goal never brought us happiness.

There is an unpleasant side to politicians' lives. Sometimes, when they win, they cannot stop winning and become careless; this ultimately leads to defeat. When Germany was reunified, the government of the Federal Republic, in other words the West German authorities, could not stop winning. Since they could not stop winning, East Germans were alienated. It would have been much wiser for the West Germans to have said to their compatriots in the East that they were dismantling 90 percent of what they had in the GDR, but the remaining 10 percent was favorable, and would be adopted for the entire country. If they had said that, it would have raised not only the self-esteem of the East Germans, but West Germans would have had their own "unification experience."

The West was the victor of the Cold War, and could not stop winning; that was its problem. This led to the eastward expansion of NATO—to the borders of Russia. Mikhail Gorbachev said that the West promised there would be no eastward expansion of NATO but his contention is now being disputed. One thing, however, must have been agreed upon, and that is that no American, British, or French troops would be deployed in East Germany, even their weapons had to stay in West Germany. If Gorbachev had indeed pressed to keep the allied forces out of East Germany, why would he then have agreed that Western troops should be allowed into Poland and the Baltic states? Would he really have said, "You can come right up to my borders, just stay clear of this little piece of land in Germany on the way?" That would have been illogical. Hence, it must have been agreed that while formal NATO membership would be okay, the stationing of troops would not.

After accepting a range of countries into NATO, the next step was to deploy missiles in the Czech Republic and Poland. When the Russian government responded that this would endanger their security, the US government told them that the missiles were not aimed at Russia. The Russians, in turn, replied by asking whether if it were to deploy missiles in Mexico but say they are only aimed at Colombia, would they believe it?" The Americans said "No." So the Russians replied, "We do not believe you either."

But the missiles were stationed in the Czech Republic and Poland nonetheless, clearly aimed at Russia. Even the German government approved of that decision. Then Obama became president and said, "The missiles are pointed in the wrong direction." So that was changed, and the German government welcomed that decision, too.

However, when the Russian foreign minister then questioned his German counterpart as to why Germany had supported both decisions, including having the missiles pointing at Russia, no satisfactory explanation was given and Russia started mistrusting the Germans.

Then came something more serious still—President George W. Bush’s proposal, in Bucharest, to admit Georgia and Ukraine into NATO. But then the European governments, including the German government, said: “No, that’s going too far.”

I think I can explain how Putin thinks. When the wrangling over Ukraine began, he said to himself:

Now Obama is president. He will not bring Ukraine into NATO. But who will succeed Obama? It could be a far-right Republican. Perhaps one who is even more hawkish than Bush. And if Europe is under pressure and takes Ukraine into NATO, then my Black Sea Fleet is suddenly in the middle of NATO territory. And NATO can decide what I can or cannot do with it.

Therefore, he decided to annex Crimea. I have said very clearly that this is illegal under international law, not because of Khrushchev’s decision to transfer the Crimea to Ukraine in 1954, but because there was a treaty between Russia and Ukraine, witnessed by the United Kingdom and the United States. The treaty provided for the transfer of nuclear weapons from Ukraine to Russia, and in that agreement, Russia recognized the territorial integrity of Ukraine, including Crimea. Of course Russia broke that treaty. But its decision was not inexplicable.

When the tug of war over Ukraine began, both sides made the same mistake. Putin said to Ukraine: “Either you sign an agreement with us or with the European Union.” And EU President José Manuel Barroso told Ukraine: “Either you sign an agreement with us or with Russia.” No savvy diplomat went to Putin and Barroso and said, “What is this nonsense? Why can’t Ukraine sign agreements with both sides?” Of course, they could not sign agreements that would be contradictory.

Viktor Yanukovich, the then-Ukrainian president, who most people regarded as democratically elected, had a majority. He went to sign the EU association agreement, but before doing so, he said he needed another €15 billion. When the EU told him that he would not get it, and Putin shrewdly called to offer him the money, Yanukovich backtracked and decided not to sign the EU agreement. That was the reason the conflict began to bubble up in Ukraine, and with American and Western support. At that time, Putin’s hands were tied because Russia had just hosted the Olympic Games in Sochi. Of course, he resented his inability to act.

I've always believed that a policy of sanctions is wrong because it only encourages stubbornness. There are wise old Americans such as Henry Kissinger who agree that the policy of sanctions is not an expression of a strategy, but rather the expression of the absence of one.

We need to remember something else about the Russians: They have always distinguished between countries that lie geographically close to them and those farther away. Russia has always sought to maintain its influence in nearby countries. It set up the Commonwealth of Independent States, and later the Community of Integrated States. Its latest attempt was the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Community together with Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

As an aside, it should be pointed out that until recently, Belarus was considered the worst country in Europe, ruled as it was by a dictator. Suddenly we hear nothing more about him. Why is that? Certainly, the man at the top has not changed; however, our strategic interests in relation to Belarus have and our objections have disappeared from the European agenda.

Returning to Russia, I would say that it will ultimately lose Ukraine. On the other hand, Crimea will never again leave Russia. Still, Russia does not want to see Ukraine divided. When I was recently in Moscow, I talked to the speaker of the Duma, the vice-president of the Federal Assembly, and the first deputy minister of foreign affairs. All three told me they do not want to see Ukraine divided.

Now, of course such an assurance alone is insufficient, because they could say one thing and do the opposite. What would be the logic in their making such a statement? They said, "If Ukraine is divided, there will be similar efforts by Russians in other former Soviet republics. Their lives are based elsewhere but they will want to claim that they belong to Russia." That creates an unmanageable process for Russia. If Putin accepts even one such request, it set off an uncontrollable process. Second, it would be very expensive.

Now the EU has to pay for Ukraine—and it will be very expensive, partially due to the fact that certain things are no longer working between Russia and Ukraine. And now, one could say, Putin is destroying his toy, Ukraine. I want to point out that the Russians have always accused the Americans of paying the protesters on the Maidan. Now I am told that the separatists are being paid by Russia. It is always the same sort of argument in relation to the ones you do not like.

So what happens now? What about the EU? I've already talked about the causes of the conflict, but I still have to go back a bit further. The eastern and western

parts of Ukraine, of course, have very different histories. First, there is the boundary between the Greek Catholic and the Orthodox Church, which has been underestimated in importance. Second, the people of eastern and western Ukraine behaved very differently during World War II.

I once had Arthur Brauner as my guest at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. Brauner was Europe's leading film producer. Though his offices are in Berlin, he actually was born into a Jewish family in Łódź. As a result of his own life experiences, Brauner divides the world into categories that others would not. On that occasion he told me, "Eastern Ukraine is okay; western Ukraine, however, is populated by criminals." I do not like such generalizations or oversimplifications because people are different everywhere. At dinner after the performance I asked him, "What do you mean?" He answered, "Very simple. In western Ukraine all the Jews were denounced and shot, so much so that even the SS said, 'We decide when to shoot, not you guys.' Meanwhile, people in eastern Ukraine tried to protect their Jews." And he continued, "That's the difference for me." Behavior toward the Jews during World War II is his main criterion for judging nations. Of course things are never that simple or easy, but it is interesting to recall Brauner's reaction.

To be sure, even without engaging in generalizations, the fact is that Hitler and the Nazis were received very differently in both parts of Ukraine. In some ways, the divide between east and west in that country is still reflected today. Most European governments have no idea about this, because they employ foreign ministers who know far too little history. They often encounter things that they cannot evaluate and assess. But one has to know these things.

Nationalism did play a critical role in the transitional government. Of course it was stupid to declare straight away that Russian would no longer be an official language in Ukraine, because that had people in the east boiling.

Second, there is no denying that a neo-Nazi party, Svoboda, is in the government. I am not speaking of a right-wing nationalist party—we all have them—or simply a far-right party. I am speaking of an unabashedly Fascist party. The leader of Svoboda called his "people of the guns" into action against "the Russian pigs, the Germans, the Jewish pigs, and other degenerates"—the four groups he lumped together.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was even photographed with him. In my opinion, this is not something the German government can allow itself. What the Belgian or Dutch governments do cannot be our benchmark. I have always said that as long as there are Fascists in the government, I cannot

cooperate with it. They could have been tossed out and the Ukrainian government would still have had a majority.

Of course, the Svoboda candidate did poorly in the presidential election. But we do not know how many votes the party will get in the forthcoming parliamentary elections. Meanwhile, they still sit in the government and they have control over the security service and the army. I've never seen Fascists who have voluntarily relinquished power once they have gained it.

All this benefits Putin. Of course he exaggerates, because he pretends that the entire Ukrainian government is Fascist, when in fact the majority is not. But there is a part that is Fascist, which is cause for concern. And something must be done about it. Then there is the strong vocabulary being used by the Ukrainians. There is a "pro-Russian party," there are "pro-Russian separatists," and there are "terrorists."

Now the new president is saying, "They must be disarmed." I agree. But why did he not add that the Pravy Sektor Party also needs to be disarmed? I do not like this one-sidedness; I would say both have to be disarmed, and the army must stop shooting.

Who are the winners and losers here? The winners are the Americans, who did not want to win. The losers are, of course, Ukraine and the EU. Europe was going to be independent of the US. This is now no longer the case. Russia has reoriented gradually to Asia and away from the European Union. This is partially because all EU member states, with the exception of Finland and Sweden, belong to NATO, and that organization is led by Washington. This means that Europe is once again closely associated with Washington, and Brussels' relatively independent foreign policy is no longer maintained.

It is interesting to note that while Israel is more dependent on the US than the EU in many respects, Israel also often responds much more independently. It has always been an illusion that the American president and the government can dictate to Israel what to do.

With Europe, the Americans have had more success, although countries such as France and the UK are trying to pursue a more independent foreign policy. But this is only partially possible for France, which is now in a deep crisis. Britain is another matter. The British have such a close relationship with the US that there are more and more voices calling for them to leave the European Union. This is because when EU decisions have to be taken unanimously, Washington

always gets what it wants through the UK. An increasing number of European governments find this annoying.

Moscow, in fact, has several economic and political options. It is no coincidence that Putin just visited China and signed a deal there. It is also no coincidence that he is still looking for other options. Of course, Putin needs trade with the EU, and he has not yet imposed any economic sanctions on it.

But Obama is also a skilled player. He always asks the EU to impose economic sanctions on Russia because he knows that the response from Moscow would not affect Americans but rather Europeans. To be more precise, sanctions would affect our economy and our society, especially once the supply of oil and gas is halted. This means that EU foreign policy is becoming less and less independent, and that the EU is becoming economically more dependent. Ukraine also loses in such a scenario, but that does not mean that Russia wins. Russia, however, has at least several options for new markets.

The US is winning because it is gaining more influence in Europe again, something that Obama did not even want at the beginning of his presidency. He wanted to focus more on Asia and not Europe. These are the sorts of victories that one achieves unintentionally, but which still must be dealt with.

To sum up, it must be made clear that where Ukraine is concerned, the German government is no rabble-rouser. Berlin has tried to slow everything down, but evidently not effectively enough. In the end, Germany has managed to hold things up a bit but not to prevent them. The German government knows that sanctions are wrong, but it seeks to impose them anyway. Still, I'm glad that Chancellor Angela Merkel speaks with Putin every week because when they talk to each other, there is at least hope for another interim solution, for the prevention of further escalation, and the avoidance of further misunderstanding. To that end. I have proposed a new *Ostpolitik*, similar to what Willy Brandt once advocated.

The great advantage of the EU is that the countries are politically, economically, and culturally linked so that a war between them—so long as there is a balance of rationality—is not possible. This makes today's Europe so different from the Europe of the nineteenth or the first half of the twentieth centuries. By new *Ostpolitik*, I mean pursuing a policy that is the opposite of what is now occurring, and instead building close political, economic, and cultural relations with Russia so that a war between us becomes impossible, again, provided rationality prevails. If we succeed, we would wield even more influence on issues such as democracy and freedom in Russia. If we isolate Russia, we will have no influence. The West must finally grasp that Russia is part of Europe and not an outsider. We need to

understand that there is no security in Europe without Russia, and certainly not if Europe acts against Russia.

The second element is the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). It has been receiving less funding and has hardly been playing a role, but suddenly everybody recognizes how important it is. Aside from the UN and the Council of Europe, this is the only organization in which both Russia and the Ukraine are members. It is not organized like the United Nations, and thus there is a chance for conversation. The importance of this should not be underestimated.

In Germany, the media are in almost complete agreement, as are the political parties in the Bundestag. For them, Putin is the “bad guy” and all others are the “good guys.” That’s the simplistic way some people view the world. Of course, Putin is far from perfect, but he is not the only bad guy in this story; there are others who have committed their fair share of follies as well.

Yet, the German population thinks differently than the media. Many surveys demonstrate, to the annoyance of other parties and the media, an entirely different picture. This is all the more interesting because normally, the influence of the media is so strong that large parts of the population adopt the ideas of the media and the main political parties. However, this is not the case when it comes to Ukraine. Many people have become wiser and have come to realize that this kind of confrontation with Russia does not work. Of course, there are those who have less noble motives, who object to such a confrontation mainly due the high financial costs it would entail. Overall, however, the instinct of the people is to resist the prevailing policy of NATO and the EU in relation to Ukraine.

It is good that my party and I have adopted a balanced position. We are not Putin’s mouthpieces and we do not say that whatever Russia does is right and anything else is wrong. Had we done that we wouldn’t have been taken seriously. But the truth is that I’ve never done that.

The deputy chairman of the Russian Federal Assembly told me:

You know, Mr. Gysi, I respect you because when Turkey occupied northern Cyprus, you said, “This is illegal under international law.” When Kosovo declared independence, you said, “This is illegal under international law,” and when we took Crimea, you also said, “This is illegal under international law.” I am of a different opinion, but I respect your stance. However, I do not appreciate people who tell me that what happened in Kosovo was okay but what happened in Crimea was unacceptable. One must always have a consistent position. When Turkey occupied Northern Cyprus, we were

all, including the US, of the opinion that it was illegal under international law. There was also a Security Council resolution. But what sanctions were adopted against Turkey? Not a single one, so then why only against us?

Even if they regard it a violation of international law, Germans think differently about this conflict than what the governing parties, the Greens, and the media tell them. Ultimately, what I told them about Kosovo is that in my understanding of international law, it is clearly illegal. I will not relate to the conflict over Israel/Palestine, because in every respect it is indeed a special case.

I have always said that a group that feels harassed may leave its country, but not take the territory with it. That can only be done with the consent of the country itself. In the case of Kosovo, I said, "If we say that Kosovo can simply decide to secede, then explain to me why the Basques or the Catalans may not decide to separate from Spain, or why the Russians in Crimea cannot decide to leave Ukraine." But the West was still going from victory to victory, and thought, "We can decide what is allowed and what is not allowed."

Something positive may yet emerge from this conflict, and that is that the general rules of international law might regain validity, because the interests of China, Russia, and the US do not coincide after all.

When there are opposing forces, a functioning legal framework is necessary. Such a framework will always empower the weaker states insofar as they will secure the right to defend themselves against the stronger ones, which will also have to abide by the rules. If you do away with the law of nations, as was partly the case, these rules are no longer valid. Now, we are again coming to recognize that rules are needed. That, of course, is a positive development.

Finally—and I think this is also important for Israel—the US, and its status as a world power, is currently on the wane. This is taking place with each passing day despite the fact that the Americans are again playing a stronger role in Europe. Illustrative of this is the fact that an African ambassador recently told me that the US ambassador to his country had met his president and had told him that the latter's behavior would not please Washington. The African president told the American ambassador, "You can tell your president that I will do what I want anyway, and if he does not like it, he should invade us." In other words, he ridiculed the American leader. In former times, this would have been almost unthinkable.

America's role is on the decline, while other states, such as China, Russia, India, Brazil, and South Africa, are increasingly gaining in importance. Now the question

arises: Are any of these countries particularly supportive of Israel? I am afraid the answer is no, and that the US stands alone in its support for Israel. If, therefore, a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict exists, then, taking into account the interests of Israel, it is much wiser to seek to achieve it now than to wait twenty or twenty-five years, because we do not know what the world will look like then. The Ukraine conflict in Europe is also a struggle between the great powers. But this conflict will not trigger a new war between them. It demonstrates that we are in need of a new international framework, which we have not yet found.

Of course, we do have a functioning global economy, but no global political system. The G7 or G8 is worthless: the very fact that Russia was kicked out is indicative of this. Personally, I would have preferred that they talked to Putin instead of excluding him.

As I mentioned at the outset, had I told someone in 1985 that I would be talking about Ukraine in Jerusalem, I would have been sent to a psychiatric ward. However, the very fact that I can be here in Israel today represents an entirely new situation, about which I am very glad.

Translated from the German by Michael Thaidisgmann

<p>Founded in June 1950</p> <p>RIA</p> <p>ISSN 127 ISSN 0036-6036</p> <p>THE REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS</p> <p>BELGRADE, VOL. LXIV, No. 1149, JANUARY-MARCH 2011</p>	<p>International Affairs Journal from Serbia</p> <p>Published by Institute of International Politics and Economics Belgrade, Makedonska 25, Serbia</p>
<p>The journal is distributed to institutions and individuals in about 150 countries who are policy-makers at the national and international levels.</p>	
<p>For all additional information, please call +381 11 33 40 019 or e-mail us at: RIA@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs</p>	
<p>Please visit our site: www.diplomacy.bg.ac.rs/ria.htm</p>	