

Pure PANIC And Grief in Europe Over US-Russia Negotiations | Ex-Diplomat Ian Proud

From Paris, Berlin, Brussels and London, all of Europe is in panic and shock over the US dropping its allies for a better relationship with the former "Enemy Nr.1". What happened and how is European media reporting this? Is there any kind of "foreign policy" that we could talk about? Short answer: no. Ian Proud was a British Diplomat from 1999 until 2023. He worked in Thailand, Afghanistan, and Russia. And recently published a book called "A Mistfit in Moscow: How British Diplomacy in Russia Failed" (<https://www.amazon.co.jp/-/en/Ian-T-Proud/dp/1739543106>) Today we want to discuss Europe's deep crisis over the peace talks that are underway between Washington and Moscow—Ian has been publishing several great articles about this over on his Substack and I can't wait to pick his brain. So Ian, welcome back. Ian's Substack: <https://thepeacemonger.substack.com>

#Ian

The countless op-eds and media reports about the imminent collapse of Russia, about Putin's imminent death, and all these things are all wrong. And, you know, now people have got to face up to that. And it hurts. It hurts like mad because those damn Americans have done it again. They've swept in and taken charge of the situation while we're flopping around on our bellies like babies, crying and wailing about how bad it all is. Grow up and actually have a foreign policy towards Russia that makes sense, that works for Europe, that works for Russia, that works for Ukraine. What's so difficult about that?

#Pascal

Hello everybody, this is Pascal from Neutrality Studies, and today I'm talking again to Ian Proud. Ian was a British diplomat from 1999 until 2023. He worked in Thailand, Afghanistan, and Russia and recently published a book called A Misfit in Moscow – How British Diplomacy in Russia Failed. Today, we want to discuss Europe's deep crisis over the peace talks that are underway between Washington and Moscow. Ian has been publishing several great articles about this over the last couple of days and weeks on his Substack, and I can't wait to pick his brain. So, Ian, welcome back.

#Ian

Nice to see you again, Pascal. It's nice to be back.

#Pascal

Well, nice to have you back on because you've been really writing a lot. And I would like to know, in one of your pieces, you wrote about the media meltdown in the UK and how the BBC is going nuts over this situation. Can you maybe expand on that a little bit and tell us what it's like to read British media at the moment when it comes to peace talks or the prospect of such?

#Ian

Well, it's in a state of complete flux, Pascal, because for the past three years, indeed, actually the past 10 years since the Ukraine crisis started—actually, it's 11 years now, oh my God, that long—the only thing that BBC media has been allowed to print is negative stories about how this is all Russia's fault. We should apply maximum pressure on Russia, not give them a blank check, hold them to account, and all these kinds of slogans. And all of a sudden, in one 90-minute phone call, President Trump has completely flipped the narrative and said, well, no, we should talk to Russia.

Engagement is the only way through the deadlock of this dreadful war, which has killed or injured over a million people over the past three years. Engagement is the only thing we have to do. And so now the British media are desperately trying to reposition themselves, not quite knowing where to land on this, having been saying the complete opposite for the past 11 years. So it's a total state of flux right now in the British press and political establishment.

#Pascal

You also wrote that the first reaction was equating this with a disaster, right? That now basically the bad side is winning or seems to be winning because there's no more intent of defeating it. Is that narrative also, as we speak on February 25th, still up and running?

#Ian

Yes, even the Liberal Democrat party is talking about the kind of, you know, the sellout of Zelensky that's happened. People are speaking about this as being a defeat, that our approach has lost, that somehow we've sold Ukraine down the river, we've thrown them under the bus. All of these, you know, terms that British media is even repeating things that Zelensky said, you know, that actually Trump is just spouting Russian propaganda. And how could this possibly be happening? It's a completely bizarre situation that we find ourselves in.

But ultimately, you know, that repositioning is going to have to kind of work its way through because times, they are changing. And little Britain, there's very little we can do to stem that tide, because as I predicted before, several times last year, in fact, the Europeans will move before we do. That will leave us yet again stranded at the back of the pack with the Americans leading, the Germans and

French coming in behind, you know, now that the elections are out of the way. And us, you know, the mad people at the back of the bus still crying and wanting things to be the same and never change.

#Pascal

Where do you think this entire disaster is coming from? Is it a failure of policy that we're seeing now in Britain and continental Europe as well? Or is it really the logical endpoint of this insane media propaganda that we've been going through, which, to this extent, we haven't seen—at least not in my lifetime. I've never seen such an extensive form of propaganda that is so divorced from any form of verifiable reality the way that this war was reported about for the last three years. A lot of it was factual. Pure fantasy land, including the North Korean troops, including the Russians running out of people, including the Russians running out of war materials, and the Russians about to collapse, and the Ukrainians going to win and sprint to the Black Sea, right? All of this was pure fantasy. And it was never accepted or never worked up that it was fantasy. Are we seeing the failure of policy or the failure of propaganda?

#Ian

Well, we're seeing both on the basis that propaganda has been our policy. That's an important point to make. Right back in 2014, as I actually pointed out in my book, we decided at that point in the second half of 2014 that we would no longer talk directly to Russia, that we would have our conversations via the media. We would push the things that we wanted to talk about regarding Russia and start a conversation with the collective West, with the Global South—that didn't really work out—but with anybody that would listen to say that Russia was wrong and we were right, no more talking directly to Russia.

That was pointless. So the whole drive of propaganda came from the state itself. Even before the Ukraine crisis started, the British media probably had an anti-Russian bias. Actually, what we've seen now, this blizzard of propaganda over the past 11 years, has been an article of state policy, and it's important to understand that. So as that policy is being found to have no clothes on, the propaganda is figuring out what it's going to do in the future because it has nowhere left to run.

#Pascal

Yeah, reality just hits back again. I just wonder, on the one hand, how we got ourselves into this utter mess in Europe and Britain. And on the other hand, what it means that it is, again, the Americans who are lifting us out of it. I mean, on the one hand, they got us into it and they're taking us out of it. We've been pushed into it by America, and now we're being left behind again by the same ones. I keep repeating 2008, when the Germans and the French didn't want to go along with promising NATO membership. In 2014 and so on, the Minsk process was supposed to be underwritten by continental Europe, right? And then again, sold out again, and Nord Stream as well,

and so on. And now it is America again that's running ahead of the pack and is leaving Europe behind. What do you make of that?

#Ian

Well, I mean, that's the political cycle, right? And that actually shows that Europe doesn't have its own clear policy towards Russia that's durable in a strategic sense in terms of what they want to do with Russia, and that's durable in terms of how they manage constantly shifting US positions. Ultimately, Europe needs to have a policy with Russia that is uniquely European, that is immune from the regular kind of shifts, you know, when the Democrats are in power, who basically hate the Russians, to the Republicans, who have a more nuanced kind of position on Russia. You know, we need to kind of isolate ourselves from that and get back to having a European foreign policy with Russia that focuses on both sides' respective strategic interests. Only then can we move on from this vicious cycle of the Americans coming in, us doing exactly what they want us to do, and then falling foul of it later, only to be rescued by them again. I mean, it's a bizarre form of Stockholm syndrome in a way.

#Pascal

Very bizarre. The thing, though, is we are now seeing the nuances, right, in what used to be this grand alliance. And just before, also today, I talked to Andrei Kortunov, and he was making the argument in one of his essays that the collective West, also the way that Russia perceived it or thought about it, is not as collective as it might be, not as monolithic as it might be. We are seeing all of these cracks now, obviously. And one of the important differences is a lot of Russians seem to be saying that the Americans are much less Russophobic than the Europeans. Is that something that you would also see this way? Or do you have another perception on that?

#Ian

I think there's a risk of massive generalization. I think the vast majority of people in Europe, who have probably never met a Russian person, are probably ambivalent either way. If given the chance to actually engage with Russia, they would probably be quite open-minded. When I speak to normal people about Russia, they're fascinated that I have a different take on it from what they'll read in The Sun or the Daily Mail in the UK. I think actually the political establishment, the media establishment, is very clearly Russophobic. And you could say the same across large parts, but not all, of Europe. I think the position is more nuanced in Central Europe.

I don't think it's correct. I just don't think it's objectively correct to say that the US is less Russophobic than Europe. The Democratic Party, under Biden with Blinken, Nuland, and Sullivan, and all of these dreadful human beings, were rabidly Russophobic, arguably more so than Europeans. We just find it strange now that there's a new brand of realist Republicans. People have finally been listening to people like John Mearsheimer and Jeffrey Sachs, who actually say, well,

whether we like Russia or we don't like Russia, we have to engage with Russia. And it's pragmatism and realism more than necessarily affinity that we're seeing right now.

#Pascal

Right. And there, I mean, there needs to be a way forward. I mean, that's the one thing that is clear now. Or do you think that in the UK, there's still a debate on whether the UK and Europeans, the rest of NATO, are able to continue the war? I mean, there is a threat when it comes to these negotiations about the normalization of US-Russia ties, and especially, you know, bringing an end to the warfare in Ukraine. There is a threat that spoilers emerge, and spoilers can be minor players, right? Is it possible that the Europeans will be active spoilers if the process develops in a certain way?

#Ian

Well, we saw this kind of bomb attack in Marseille against the Russian consulate overnight. So the scope for spoilers, you know, is huge. But taking you back to your question, I don't really think there is any debate in the UK about Russia policy. Maybe that will change on the back of Keir Starmer's visit to Washington, D.C. on Thursday of this week. I think, you know, reluctantly, painfully, and making a lot of noise along the way, the Europeans are inevitably kind of shifting slowly their position to line up behind the U.S. I don't think they have any choice. They can't afford to keep bankrolling the war into 2026. There's enough money to keep fighting for the rest of this year if they really have to.

But Europe just doesn't have the economic or political capital to support that fight anymore. If the Americans change their position, you've seen the results of the elections in Germany where the AfD has come in a very strong second place, very much concerned about this self-harm Europe has imposed upon itself in the battle to punish Russia, even if they punish themselves. So I think the European leaders are seeing that there's a huge political risk to continuing down this line in terms of their power base if they completely ignore what the Americans are doing.

#Pascal

Right, right. But the question remains, like, what will... how will Europe now, or let me put it this way, what are the lessons going to be that they're going to believe they have learned? Because in my view, Europe also has a track record of learning the wrong lessons from its history. How do you think the UK, Germany, and France are now going to deal with this new situation where a new accord with Russia might be ordered coming from the other side of the Atlantic?

#Ian

Well, Friedrich Merz said after getting the largest share in the German election that actually Europe needs to have its own policy. And I think that's the change that needs to happen. Lessons learned

are, as we've just discussed earlier, Europe has become far too over-reliant on the U.S., both in terms of the security umbrella and in terms of setting the agenda of our relations with Russia in a way that has had catastrophic consequences for us Europeans. So, you know, the lesson to be learned, and Merz has already pointed out on day one, good start, green tick, is that actually Europe needs to kind of chart its own course with Russia.

And that means, heaven forbid, opening up economic relations again, because, you know, I'm a firm believer that economic relations can help to moderate political difficulties. This ridiculous self-harming cutting off of Russian gas pipelines hurts Europe far more than it hurts Russia. The avalanche of sanctions needs to be reconsidered, and we should look at a plan to ease them if a peace plan is reached for Ukraine. But these need to be European-focused decisions that consider the long-term strategic benefit of a normalized relationship with Russia.

#Pascal

But isn't there a danger that the opposite might happen, that the Europeans might decide, yes, we need our own policy, and if the Americans normalize relations with Russia, then our independent policy is going to be that we don't do that, and we will put a 17th and an 18th and a 19th and a 20th sanction package? Because at the end of the day, we, the great continent, are going to... We can do this. We can break Russia. Isn't there a danger that they might go this way, especially because I don't see the big change in the elites? OK, we're going to have now a new German chancellor. But to me, Mr. Merz is even more belligerent and even less likely to find an accommodation with Russia than Mr. Scholz. I might be wrong, but that's how I perceive him so far.

#Ian

I think you're probably right. But I mean, there's something about having strength, but also accommodation as well. It's not necessarily a bad thing to have a strong policy as long as you're willing to engage. It's the lack of engagement that has been the difficulty over the past 11 years. And now the Americans have stolen the thunder. Let's see whether the Europeans actually recognize the need for them to engage with Russia as well. Yes, it's absolutely possible for the Europeans to continue with a self-defeating policy towards Russia, where we completely cut economic ties at a time when the U.S. is both re-establishing its economic ties with Russia and also plundering Ukraine's mineral wealth in the process. There's a huge risk of us being undercut there as the Americans come in and steal all the bounty.

You know, there is a risk that we say, well, actually... Even though the U.S. has put \$175 billion into the war effort in Ukraine, we will continue to fund Ukraine fighting into 2026. There is a risk that that would happen too. But how would we afford to do that? Because everything we've given Ukraine over the past year has pretty much been loans. Macron and Trump disagreed on this in their press conference yesterday, but the shift has been to lending. We've got no more free money to give. How could we possibly fill the gaping hole for Ukraine to keep fighting? So I think, yes, people

can talk about this, and I'm sure people will talk about these things. But I think the political and economic risks of the Europeans going along are probably going to be weighed as too high.

#Pascal

Yeah, and let's not forget the Europeans don't have the industrial base. They don't have the military-industrial capacity to actually supply stuff. I mean, even if the Europeans said, OK, we're going to jump in and pay the next 50 billion US dollars' worth of weapons, if the US says we're not going to sell you any weapons, then there are no weapons. Because the Europeans can't produce them themselves. Let's be clear here, the Americans.

#Ian

Let's be clear, the Americans aren't going to do that. Well, I see very little prospect of the Americans not selling weapons. But anyway, let's see what happens. I mean, I think, you know, whether the Europeans wanted to pay that money or whether they wanted to pass it on to the Ukrainians as debt, it's going to be a bad call because the politics of giving away another 50 billion euros to Ukraine is going to weigh further on the kind of nationalist elements in Europe that are growing right now, particularly in Central Europe—Hungary, Slovakia, Romania. Gosh, they're going to have elections again. Who knew what happened in Austria recently? Croatia as well was re-elected to a kind of more nationalist presence. So, yeah, I think, you know, the internal friction that will be caused within Europe from a continuation of this policy situation would pose significant risks to the union itself, but also, of course, to the policy's continuance.

#Pascal

So let's say the union comes out of this alive and well, and let's suppose that the overall political setup remains what it is. For you, as a diplomat who worked in embassies, if or when states decide to do an about-face and reverse previous policy without trying to lose face, how do you go about that? What would be the most efficient way forward for Europe to change its policy without looking like it has its pants down?

#Ian

Well, I think that's going to be very, very difficult because Trump has had the benefit of an election. Actually, the Germans have had the benefit of an election too. So let's see how Merz positions himself there. The others haven't had that benefit. Starmer's election was last year, and he just imposed a more extreme version of what the Conservative Party had been doing before him. Elections create great opportunities for very bad news. Most political leaders don't have that benefit. So I think they have to do it subtly, as Macron was doing yesterday in the White House, showing

some slight areas of nuance and disagreement around the edges, but essentially coming around to Trump's position on Ukraine, recognizing that there probably would need to be a ceasefire in the coming weeks and that sort of thing.

So it'll be a gradual shift of nuance in terms of positioning Ukraine in any meetings that happen with Trump. The fascinating thing for me, because, you know, the French are much more susceptible to kind of shifting positions than the Brits, will be how Starmer positions himself on Thursday this week when whole swathes of the British media have been accusing him of... pressuring him not to sell out the Ukrainians. So how he positions himself on Thursday is going to be absolutely fascinating.

#Pascal

I mean, this strange treaty between the UK and Ukraine on the 100-year, what is it, alliance that was done in the summer, right? I mean, what kind of stupid idea is that?

#Ian

It's completely meaningless. I mean, if you get another one of my articles on that topic, it's totally ridiculous because no agreement lasts for 100 years. A different government might just change that sort of agreement at a moment's notice. We're not going to give Ukraine £4 billion a year for 100 years. No government would agree to do that. So it was pure virtue signaling and, you know, showing that we'll support Zelensky, come what may, even though he's very obviously on his way out. So it's a bizarre situation.

#Pascal

Do you have hope that positive change might also come from within Ukraine? I know that you observe Britain and Europe more, but do you have any indications that Ukraine might be able to help itself as well in this process? Because there are so many factions within the political process, which is one of the reasons why the ultra-nationalist Nazi types were able to threaten their own leaders and chase them in one direction. But do you think that this process might now play out in reverse and that the peace-oriented factions might actually gain a stronger hand inside Ukraine?

#Ian

I don't know how many peace-oriented factions there are in Ukraine right now, to be perfectly honest. I'm not even sure that Petro Poroshenko is a peace-oriented sort of force within Ukraine. And he's just been sanctioned internally, you know, by Zelensky. So, you know, I think it's going to be a tough road. And I think they need real new voices. And let's be honest, we thought that was Zelensky in 2019. You need to step forward. You know, the same old corrupt and tired figures like Yulia Tymoshenko and, oh, my God, you know, no thanks, you know, coming forward. I mean, where are the leaders?

I mean, you know, maybe it's this illusory guy who's in London at the moment, you know, the guy who apparently orchestrated the Nord Stream bombing. So there's not a lot of choice. But when I visited Ukraine, you know, when I was based in Russia, I constantly saw among young people a desire for change. I've always thought the aspiration to be a part of the European family is a good aspiration. That's what some young Ukrainians want. There just needs to be some young, vigorous, genuinely independent figure, not tied to oligarchic money, coming through the ranks to really take Ukrainian politics in a new direction.

I mean, Ukrainian politics hasn't really evolved since 1991. Let's be perfectly honest about it. I mean, there's always been an element of struggle between US domination and Russian influence over Ukrainian politics at the high level. But fundamentally, the corruption and the vertical of power have been the core features that have never really changed since 1991. But that's the thing that young Ukrainians, from what I saw when I reached out to Ukraine, want to see happen. I mean, let's see who steps up right now. There doesn't appear to be a huge amount of choice, and Zelensky wants to hold on for as long as he can.

#Pascal

Yeah, I still feel extremely, extremely horrible for Ukraine because they are the greatest victims. I mean, the Ukrainian soldiers and the Russian soldiers and the civilians on both sides who died, they are the victims of this entire scheme who paid the dearest price. But I think it's utterly clear that Ukraine bled a lot and many people lost their lives. Do you see a scenario in which there would be an outcome, a settlement that might lead to prosperity for Ukraine, at least over the medium or long run?

#Ian

I do. I genuinely do. I mean, but that has to be rooted in a ceasefire, you know, in a peace process, even if that ceasefire locks in the status quo, you know, when the fighting stops, as happened in West Germany, obviously, after the end of the Second World War, with genuine peace, where the Americans and the Europeans aren't whipping the Ukrainians into a frenzy to ramp up their hostility towards Russia. A genuine peace where all sides are trying to coexist with each other and people are invested in Ukraine's genuine economic rebirth and integration with Europe, there would be huge potential for Ukraine to prosper and develop on the back of that, just as, you know, West Germany did after the Second World War.

Clearly, the circumstances are very different today. But that depends on there being genuine stability where outside forces aren't trying to interfere in Ukraine's politics and perpetuate this eternally hostile relationship towards Russia, which serves absolutely no one's interests. We need Ukraine and Russia to coexist peacefully. Only then, and this isn't Russia holding Ukraine hostage, it just makes very obvious economic sense. Only then can Ukraine have a clear path ahead to really grow and prosper as a European nation.

#Pascal

Do you think the Europeans will be able to jump over their own shadow on this one? Because let's remember that in 2014, the trigger for the Maidan coup was that Mr. Yanukovich wanted to sign an agreement with both Russia and the Europeans, and the Russians said, fine, and the Europeans said, no, it's either-or. And then Mr. Yanukovich said, fine, I'm going to go with Russia. And then things unfolded. And so that was a moment when the EU made a decision. Do you think this might be one of the lessons the Europeans now learn, that no, we need to allow a bridge to be a bridge and not change it into a wall? Or is that still too much wishful thinking on my part?

#Ian

I mean, there are two issues there, really. There's one about Europe's relationship with Russia itself, which is key in all of this. And then there's Europe's relationship with Ukraine and Ukraine's relationship with Russia as a separate kind of subset. If Europe is actually looking to reestablish a much more normal relationship with Russia, an economic relationship with Russia, then the issue of Ukraine being an either-or, a zero-sum, Ukraine either with Europe or with Russia, starts to fade away because actually, if Europe is pursuing the same sort of relationship with Russia on equal terms, economic terms, as it is with Ukraine, then that question is no longer a salient issue.

Europe, Russia, Ukraine, and other countries are starting to think in more Eurasian terms about how collectively the set of countries and groups of countries can economically coexist in a way that benefits everybody in terms of their mutual prosperity. So I think that's the critical point here. It's as much about Europe's relationship with Russia as it is actually about Europe's relationship with Ukraine.

#Pascal

Yeah, which is why the Russians are saying what they're looking for is not just a peace settlement for Ukraine. They're looking for a security settlement with Europe and actually a global security architecture that should keep things stable. That's their overall goal. Do you think Europe, as of February 2025, is ready for that? Are they open to contemplating this?

#Ian

Well, no, because at the moment, they're going through the penultimate stage of the Greece cycle, as I like to put it. They're in this phase of depression, where they've realized that their policy is actually dead, and they need to develop a new policy. It's only over the coming months, as the earth tremors from Trump's shift start to fade away somewhat, that they can start to pick themselves up and say, well, actually, what is our strategic aim here with Russia and with Ukraine? We're nowhere near that point yet, it seems to me. People are still scrabbling around, repositioning themselves on

the back of what Trump's done to think about what they're going to do. And I think we're in a massive transition phase right now.

#Pascal

Is anyone in Europe and the UK looking at the reactions from the rest of the world, like from China, Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America, regarding how this momentous event is being witnessed by the non-European part of the planet?

#Ian

Well, yeah, and of course, that's a risk for Europe itself, right, from Trump's move, because that makes Europe appear even more isolated than it was before. Before, it was like the collective West versus the global South in terms of what's happening in Ukraine in particular. Now it's Europe versus everybody else. And I think that is a very hard position for the Europeans to sustain long term. One of the other political risks, really, is that it makes it harder for Europe to continue fighting come what may, even if the Americans totally pull the plug, which they look likely to do.

So interestingly, the UN General Assembly's resolution yesterday said, actually, most of our countries voted in favor of condemning the violence that's taken place in Ukraine. So the position is quite nuanced. But very clearly, Russia and China, in particular, have really forged ahead with their BRICS grouping in terms of gathering this big global South conversation around them about the future of global politics. So, yeah, there's a massive risk right now that Europe is going to be completely left behind and end up with, as I said, Europe versus the world, which would be totally unhelpful for Europeans economically, politically, and in every other way.

#Pascal

They would have nobody else to blame but themselves if that was what happened. But then again, the Europeans are masters at blaming everybody else for their own mistakes. Are you seeing any indications of that? Like, you know, when things happen that you didn't expect, then you need to start making ad hoc hypotheses about why that is. So from within the framework, the propagandistic framework that we've been engulfed with, what are the explanatory variables that people are coming up with right now? Oh, it's the Chinese support, or oh, it is the shadow fleet of the Russians that managed to sell the oil. What explanations are these people coming up with in order to justify their previous misinterpretations of what was going on?

#Ian

Well, I mean, I think the answer is that they're not. What they're doing is they're just trying to reposition their narratives right now in a way that doesn't illuminate their failures of the past. And that's why that kind of transition is going to be gradual. And it's happening everywhere. Even the

British are slowly kind of repositioning themselves right now. A British minister over the weekend said for the first time how important it is to recognize the need to engage with Russia, it having been an explicit UK policy since 2014 that we wouldn't engage with Russia. So everywhere people are kind of repositioning themselves gradually to avoid too much emphasis on the massive failure of the past 11 years.

I think it's going to be tough for everybody because actually there will be blowback on them politically. What's different in the UK, I suppose, than in some other European countries—in France, in Germany, in Central Europe, even in Italy, for example—is that there are factions within those countries that have always been against the war. That doesn't really exist in the UK, where there's been almost a blanket consensus and censorship even of alternative voices on the war. So in some respects, that repositioning may be easier because nobody wants to talk about the past. Everybody's jockeying to position themselves for the future.

#Pascal

It's not just the way that Washington and Moscow are creating a rapprochement or a thawing of the war. It's also the fact that the new US administration is criticizing Europe for not being democratic enough and not supporting free speech enough. That is causing quite a stir. How is the British establishment media and so on reacting to this judgment, especially by the vice president who said so about 10 days ago?

#Ian

with absolute indignation and red-faced anger about it, because let's face it, the truth hurts, right? It really does. I mean, you know, there is censorship in the UK of alternative voices. I mean, I'm quite a reasonable guy, right? I'm not an extremist. I'm a centrist. I'm absolutely a pro-European centrist. But trying to get my voice heard in the mainstream media in the UK is practically impossible because I'm saying things that they don't want to hear. So, yeah, no, it's really painful. That guy, the head of the Munich Security Conference, crying at the press conference. What the hell was that all about?

I mean, come on, guys, get real. You know, the world's changing, actually. Let's all live in peace with each other. Let's get along with other countries. Let's even get along with Russia rather than just promoting war. What is so bad about what's happening right now? It's a quite bizarre situation that people can somehow claim that actually talking to Vladimir Putin tips the world into a bigger crisis than the millions of people who've died since the end of the Second World War through various conflicts and wars, many of which we've actually started. How can talking to people be a crisis? It's totally, totally ridiculous.

#Pascal

This is what happens when, for the last three to eleven years, you depict people like Vladimir Putin as the second coming of Hitler. And Hitler, of course, is synonymous with the devil. So you just created a moment in which now, you know, talking to the devil is what is necessary. I think this cognitive dissonance now actually really physically hurts these people, at least the dumber ones, the ones who didn't understand that it was stupid or that it was not true from the beginning.

#Ian

There are a lot of dumb ones out there, to be honest. It's hard to identify the sensible ones a lot of the time. But absolutely right, it's painful. We failed. We were wrong. And that's a huge reckoning for all these people who have puffed up on their own kind of power and importance to swallow. You know, the countless op-eds and media reports about the imminent collapse of Russia, about Putin's imminent death and all these things, all wrong. And, you know, now people have got to face up to that. And it hurts. It hurts like mad because those damn Americans have done it again. They've swept in and taken charge of the situation while we're flopping around on our bellies like babies, crying and wailing about how bad it all is. Grow up and actually have a foreign policy towards Russia that makes sense, that works for you, that works for Russia, that works for Ukraine. What's so difficult about that?

#Pascal

A couple of days ago, I had a former Spanish ambassador on my channel, and he was making the point, and I put that at the very beginning because I thought it was so important to know, that the diplomats of Europe, they knew. He said, he told me, like, "Pascal, we knew. We are professionals. We knew what was going on. We knew about the color revolution. We knew about the policy behind that. We were aware of it. We were just not able to speak about it because we served our politicians, right? The way it has to be." Is that also an assessment that you would make? I mean, does the diplomatic corps of Europe actually understand what's really going on under the hood?

#Ian

Well, I think a lot of them believe they're in propaganda, of course, because if you look at the European diplomatic corps, the European External Action Service, they don't really have any political leadership. I mean, you know, that is a democratically unaccountable body. I'm pro-European, but that's how it is. So, you know, their voice is actually kind of European policy. In the UK context, there are no kind of clarion calls or alarms behind closed doors in King Charles Street about the policy. There's almost nothing to separate the political position from the position of the diplomats.

So I think in other parts of Europe, perhaps, but there is very, very little evidence that I saw of diplomats standing up and saying, "Well, hold on a minute. Maybe we're making a colossal mistake here." I saw practically no evidence of that during my time. And I was in right from the beginning in

2014, right? I mean, I saw Putin in the UK in slightly better times in 2013. I witnessed a whole lot, and everybody was in denial, believing that what we were doing was absolutely right and justified.

#Pascal

Okay, so for the diplomats, it depends very much on whether you swallowed the ideological pill whole or not, in that case, huh?

#Ian

Exactly. It always stuck in my throat, but I never saw anybody else kind of red-faced and coughing. I mean, I went to a European meeting—I used to go to them every month—in Moscow at the European delegation office, these kind of coordination meetings. And I remember then, when the sanctions were coming in, there actually was a Spanish diplomat who was shouting at us, saying, "Guys, are you completely crazy? Do you not realize how stupid this is?" So, you know, you could see elements of it going to European coordination meetings. But the French, the Germans, the Brits very much had a stranglehold on that, and most other diplomats kind of fell in line. Now, what's changing now, of course, is, you know, in Central Europe in particular, there's a real shift there where people are saying, "Well, actually, no, this is wrong." And I think that's a big risk for Europe going forward. Over the past 11 years, no, very little kind of dissent.

#Pascal

Okay. Interesting. Interesting. Because I'm still trying to figure out how, collectively, we got into such a huge mess. And a war is the ultimate mess, right? I think it will take us a long time to figure that one out.

#Ian

We've lost the ability to actually develop foreign policy in a critical way. We have such an amateurish way of developing foreign policy. You know, people just come in, look at it through a purely normative lens, and say what's happening is wrong. We have to act. And nobody's really thinking through foreign policy options from a position of, actually, what are our strategic interests here? You know, why is it important for us to act? And where do we want to get to with this? There's very little of that going on. And indeed, British ministers have even talked about this, not just about diplomatic policy, but also other kinds of domestic policy too. The quality of advice that goes up to ministers in the UK is really generally quite poor. And I think that definitely impacts us choosing bad policies and then following them to the nth degree.

#Pascal

Why? Why does that happen? I mean, Europe, in geopolitics, used to be synonymous with geopolitics, right? Not in a good sense, I mean, in a very kind of war-making sense. But there was overall geopolitical strategic thinking once upon a time. And that seems to have left. Or is that just my impression of it?

#Ian

Well, I mean, Europe itself is, in many respects, a huge geopolitical success, right? I mean, emerging out of the ruins of the Second World War through economics, principally, and social and cultural engagement. They've achieved a level of peace until recently that had been unheard of in the centuries of our history before that. So that came from an initial vision, and I think that vision of what Europe stands for, you know, has been lost. And I think one of the reasons for that is actually that Europe has become, you know, less kind of philosophical, less kind of political, and more bureaucratic.

Actually, the institutions of Europe have now got so much power that they continue to centralize that power, a trend we've seen under Ursula von der Leyen during her term—a massive kind of centralization trend. The bureaucracy is just serving its own needs and isn't really working to any specific vision. Its need to exist and to grow more powerful is actually now outstripping any sense of purpose for the union as a whole. And you see exactly the same things with NATO. People spend too much time thinking of NATO as a purely military alliance. And of course, on the surface, it is. But fundamentally, NATO is a bureaucracy.

And it's because of that sort of bureaucratic drive to gain power and to grow just to serve its own interests, which is the thing that's causing us harm. Actually, once we start thinking about Europe and NATO as bureaucracies, then we can start thinking about how to reform them so they become much more visionary, much more light-touch in terms of the role they play, allowing member states to have political freedom as they see fit, but within an overarching framework, and not just pursuing power as an end in itself. And I think that's a shift that I frankly don't see happening anytime soon without some sort of catastrophic political change. So yeah, that is the condition that we're in right now.

#Pascal

Yeah, yeah. Maybe the last question. Do you think that... Or what's your assessment of NATO? I mean, this is probably the largest strategic defeat in NATO's history, right? And it's not a defeat in which an alliance member was invaded, but it's definitely a defeat of the out-of-area or out-of-business kind of mentality. Where do you see the future of NATO going?

#Ian

Well, I think people are too quick, firstly, to talk about the U.S. leaving NATO because the U.S. gets massive economic benefits from NATO just as an internal market. I mean, NATO, you know, as I said, people think about NATO in the wrong ways. They think about it as a military alliance. It's first and foremost a bureaucracy, and it's an internal market for weapons and supplies. That said, NATO has suffered, as you say, a huge kind of strategic defeat in a David and Goliath struggle. Vladimir Putin has said, well, no, he won't expand and has won. There's no other way to say it than that. And that is going to cause huge amounts of reflection in NATO itself, but also within Europe specifically about the nature of European security.

Cause will grow for a much more robust architecture for European common security in the future that must embrace regional powers, including Russia, which then throws the future of NATO in doubt. But I don't see it in a downfall. It's not the Roman Empire. I think, actually, if anything, it will just fall into some sort of stasis and slowly wither on the vine. But actually, the US is far too invested in NATO in terms of the economic benefits they gain to let it fail. Let's see the future direction of travel on some common European army and that sort of stuff. I personally don't think that's going to go that far because individual nations want to have their own control over those things. But yeah, it's in a state of flux, but I don't really see it collapsing anytime soon.

#Pascal

Yeah, yeah. And especially, I think what is also said about the internal market for weapons and so on, you know, all of these calls for 5% GDP spending on defense is a call for buying more such weapons from the United States, and doing that would be the natural thing to do, right? It would be the natural way to go.

#Ian

They get over, I think it's about 53, 54 percent of total global weapons supplies, and therefore you can extrapolate from that. They get about that much from some NATO contracts as well. I mean, about one third, about 32 percent of all NATO spending is on equipment. And if you bear in mind that NATO spends each year around \$1.5 trillion on defense, let that number sink in for a minute. A third of that, that's \$500 billion, let's say, for argument's sake, is all equipment. And that's basically close to 300 billion of business for the U.S. every year. I mean, they're not going to give that up anytime soon.

#Pascal

Good observation. Good observation. Um, Ian, it was a pleasure. Thank you very much. People who want to follow you should best go to your Substack, I suppose.

#Ian

The Peacemonger. Yes, that's my new Substack. Please find me there. Yeah, thanks. As always, Pascal, it's always terrific. What you do has been incredible—a much-needed voice of reason during these ridiculously, mind-blowingly stupid times of policy incoherence over the past 11 years. So thank you for what you've done.

#Pascal

Thank you, Ian, because fighting back against stupidity, we can only do that by talking reason and by peacemongering. So everybody, go to The Peacemonger and help us peacemonger until they stop the stupidity. Ian Proud, thank you very much for your time today. Cheers, Pascal. All the best.