

Ukraine Falling Apart: Military Could Side With Ultra-Right Wing | Dr. Nicolai Petro

[Part 2 of 2] There is a serious risk that even if the political establishment of Ukraine (Parliament and Government) came to the conclusion that only a surrender could save the country from complete annihilation, the ultra-right wing with its willingness to kill their own people, might be able to seize power if the army sides with them. That is a real fear that Professor Nicolai Petro expresses in this interview. Beyond this, we discuss the future of both Russia and Ukraine as the war is drawing to a close. I'm talking again to Dr. Nicolai Petro, a Professor of Political Science at the University of Rhode Island and the author of the magnificent book „The Tragedy of Ukraine: What Classical Greek Tragedy can teach us about conflict resolution“.

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Will the Ukrainian military stand with the elected government and validate its authority, or will it stand with the far right if groups on the far right make an effort to overturn the government in the interests of this kind of nationalistic vision of the country? I think this threat is not to be discarded.

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And this is a wonderful segue into the second part of this interview. And everybody, I'm still talking to Nicolai Petro, our analyst on everything Russia and Ukraine. You were just talking about how Russia is charting its own course in this multipolar world and how some of the analysis suggests that the current US approach might be trying to do basically a reverse of the China strategy of 1973, when Nixon was normalizing relations with China in order to drive a wedge between the Soviet Union and China. This might currently be the opposite of that, trying to normalize relations with Russia in order to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing. And you're saying this is unlikely to happen. Could you expand on that a little bit? Why do you think that the current trajectory of the multipolar setup that we are in is unlikely to incentivize Russia to go that route?

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Well, because Russian, Chinese, and other analysts from the Global South have been saying for more than a decade already that the momentum is with these other countries, the BRICS Plus countries. There are all sorts of economic and geopolitical examples and evidence of that. The Russia-Ukraine war has reinforced this assessment. It didn't change that calculation on Russia's part, but what it did was reinforce the correctness of that assessment, and it has confirmed Russia's ability to rely on China, India, Vietnam, and other countries as partners in any confrontation that Russia might have, large or small, with Europe and the United States.

So, in essence, why would you turn your back on reliable partners and return to your former partners who have betrayed you time and again? There's no incentive. Plus, these newer partners are only becoming more and more influential; they're becoming stronger in their own right. And Russia, again, I think of Russia and China in particular as having a beautiful economic and political synergy. China has a growing population and economy; it needs resources. Russia has those resources to provide and, in return, has allowed China to become a major player in its domestic markets.

Again, this is sort of the way that international commerce, based largely on mutual profit, is supposed to work. And so I think there's an inescapable synergy to this relationship that nothing the United States could offer would encourage them to break. Now, if the United States wants to offer something in its own right that is attractive economically or politically, I'm sure Russia would consider it, but not at the expense of China. I think Russia and China are indeed a partnership and an alliance that is destined to last for quite a long time, at least in this century.

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Some people within the Western commentariat, who don't let any opportunity go to basically speak badly about both Russia and China, have made the case that with this development, Russia has become a junior partner to China. Being like one-tenth the population of China, with Russia at about 140 million and China at 1.3 or 1.4 billion, they argue that Russia is now inevitably going to be a satellite of China. This, to me, seems absolutely ridiculous, but what do you make of such arguments?

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Well, I would say two things. It's a play on some sort of collective psychosis, I think. There's an assumption that for deep historical reasons going back nearly a thousand years, the Russians fear the Mongols, and so we can derive current policies from that sort of deep psychological trauma. I think that's weak and implausible. As a matter of fact, if you look at surveys of countries that are viewed favorably by Russians today, China is at the top of the list. So, it's not at all clear what these analysts are talking about in those terms. In terms of being a junior partner, of course, that's exactly what the project of the EU was supposed to be in the 1990s with respect to Russia.

Russia was a small country, a small economy that was going to be dominated by the much larger and wealthier EU economies, and they indeed explicitly were going to try to manipulate Russian political outcomes through this kind of economic investment and control. And the clincher on that was indeed the constant threat of application of sanctions, which has been going on. Again, I'll remind you, our listeners, there's never been a generation since the Korean War that has not imposed some sort of sanctions on Russia, either the United States or its junior partners in Europe. So that's the relationship. And again, the Chinese have stepped up and proven themselves to be

good friends, whereas the Europeans have historically not stepped up and never proven themselves to be reliable partners. And at some point, I think, or at least this generation of Russian leaders, therefore, doesn't look to Europe and its advice as reliable advice.

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I think that makes a lot of sense. I mean, especially if you think about the fact that the people in power at the moment are the ones who have been there for the last 20, 25 years. I mean, we've not had a lot of change in that.

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We cannot overlook the treasure house that Russia has in its senior political and diplomatic personnel. They have seen it all. They have dealt with every European leader over the last generation and every American leader, as well as with China. So, in a very real sense, they have the true measure of what the word of a European leader, an American leader, and a Chinese leader actually means with respect to Russia. They don't have to guess. They have personal experience with this, and I'm sure they will be guided by that first and foremost.

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Why do you think it is that analysts like you and I, and others on the Internet, are able to put this history together and actually pinpoint the moments when promises were clearly broken on all sides, when agreements were thrown out time and again, but this ability seems to lack or is intentionally kept away from a large part of the European and North American population? Why is it that these things, which are public knowledge and that Russia keeps pointing at and repeating, are not just ignored but talked down? Like when people like Jack Matlock remind others that, yes, there was a NATO promise, a promise that this situation wouldn't be weaponized against Russia, and that this was immediately and repeatedly broken. How is it that this realization hasn't set in among the general public, at least in Europe and North America?

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There's a discipline in the social sciences called media studies, or media and communications at some colleges. One of the interesting aspects of the study of the media is who generates our information space, who manipulates it, and what the outcomes are. I've looked at this research. It's not very controversial. It's very consistent, especially with respect to the Western democracies, which are the ones that are mostly studied by media analysts. They all agree, at least in the United States, from the time of the Vietnam War, when the first attempt was made to understand how the American public's attitudes were changed, given the information they were provided over the course of the Vietnam War.

And the leading scholars, W. Lance Bennett at the University of Washington comes to mind, several scholars at the University of Missouri, they all agree that our information, the public's information, is curated. It's curated by the media elite. And this media elite doesn't invent its own narratives; it has its narratives handed to it by the government. So what happens, inevitably, is that a reporter and an editorial staff have to get their information as much as possible from the key sources of information, and that has to be the government. The government tells them what that information is. A minuscule number of media outlets today actually have foreign correspondents, people who live and work in a country for a long period of time and have a good association with a variety of people on the other side.

All of that is partial and has a minimal influence compared to the overwhelming bullhorn that is the press spokesman of, in the case of the United States, the Pentagon, the State Department, and the White House. I mean, those are on the news every day, simply feeding the press the information that they want the press to cover. Historically, and Professor Bennett has pointed this out in the case of the Vietnam War, there is no criticism of the government's assertions. Because, again historically, the press has not seen itself as having the proper role to interpret what the government is conveying, because the government news is, in fact, the national policy, and the national policy has to be conveyed fully to the populace. This is why we have this distinction in the American press between reporting and commenting.

And those are supposed to be very separate and completely distinct endeavors conducted by even different individuals in the same organization, with a firewall between them. But we live in a different media culture, a different media age now. For one thing, there is no more commentary versus reporting distinction. Secondly, editorial boards are no longer, by and large, striving to be detached from events. And one of the examples of this is that Jeff Bezos, the owner of the Washington Post, criticized. He said, my newspaper, the Washington Post, has always reliably endorsed the Democratic candidate, no matter what.

And it is no longer, therefore, credibly impartial. Therefore, we will simply no longer conduct this kind of endorsement because it discredits us as a news organization. He has since come out with further pronouncements that many people in the Washington Post feel is an abdication of their journalistic rights. Their rights as journalists, I would say, are to tell people what to think, to educate, to illuminate the ignorant masses, and to reveal to them what is the proper role that they should be playing in the policies of the United States, which the media, the elite media, should be determining.

All of this is crumbling now because of the impact of social media and the fact that Sergei Lavrov, certainly one of the preeminent diplomats of modern times for a major power, has gone out of his way to give an interview recently to three prominent bloggers rather than to a news outlet. This tells us about the shifting importance of the role of the media, which, in its own mind, is still trying to shape the narrative and to inform the way the public thinks about things, but is less and less successful in doing so.

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Thank you very much for this assessment. The three bloggers are highly interesting because these bloggers are, of course, one of them is Judge Napolitano, who is a huge figure actually on YouTube. The other one is Larry Johnson. And the third one, I actually don't know, a young fellow. But the others are very important commentators here on YouTube. The fact that this is now one of the ways in which Russia sees how it can convey parts of its viewpoints to parts of the Western public is, in this sense, a public diplomacy approach, right? You try to influence the viewpoints of the other population.

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And I thought this is an interesting moment. If you don't mind, I'd like to interject about a distinction between the United States and Europe in this regard. The United States, I think, has such a strong attachment to its First Amendment, its free press principles, that it is very difficult, nearly inconceivable, to imagine that voices of this kind would be suppressed in the United States. So there is a real rivalry between the impact of social media and the impact of traditional media, even though traditional media still has a greater influence on the political elites. That's because of history, context, and personal contacts. They went to the same schools.

This is a class issue compared to the lower-class social media. But nevertheless, social media's voice will be heard, and it will have an impact, as you say, on the public discourse. In Europe, by contrast, you look at Romania, you look at a number of other countries, and you look at the ostracism imposed on media outlets by Western European larger bodies in other countries like Hungary, Slovakia, and Serbia, as a result of which their voices are not even heard and not allowed to influence the public discourse. You will see, I suspect, the ban on RT lifted in the United States, whereas in Europe, this will not happen for a much longer time, even though the ban is essentially easy to circumvent if you really want to.

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These are, in my view, good ways of trying to distinguish or to take apart a little bit this notion of the collective West, because not all countries acted alike. It's interesting to me that neither Japan banned RT or Sputnik, nor did Switzerland. They both said... No, I mean, that's a bridge too far. Whereas the EU went all in, and the UK as well, on trying to control the information space because they're so afraid, actually, of these counter-arguments. But maybe let me just, for the last 10 minutes or so that we have, also ask you about what you see inside Russia and Ukraine in the political process that they're going through. Do you see larger shifts inside Ukraine or inside Russia toward the way that these political entities, like with the different parties that they've got, would like to approach what's coming in the next one or two years?

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Well, unless I'm very much mistaken, the situation in Ukraine is volatile. It could, depending on when elections are held, become highly volatile and even violent. The role of the far-right nationalists, now heavily armed, cannot be overestimated.

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We really need to be concerned about a revanchist nationalism influencing politics, perhaps not overtly, but certainly from behind the scenes, as they did time and time again to scuttle the Minsk Two Accords. They essentially intimidated the Poroshenko regime when it was willing to engage in negotiation. As soon as the Minsk Two Accords were signed by Poroshenko, they successfully did the same thing with Volodymyr Zelensky, who, it is common knowledge, ran on a peace platform and then ran away from that peace platform under the influence of the violence that hit the people on Bankova Street, which is where the office of the president and presidential administration is. So that's all. It's clearly a very volatile situation. Russia, by contrast, I think is unlikely to undergo serious political changes. That's my suspicion.

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May I just ask at this point, because the fact that Poroshenko signed the Minsk One and Two Accords and then immediately reneged on them, and that Zelensky ran on a peace platform but then immediately reneged on it and today says pretty much the opposite of what he used to say five, six years ago, is taken by a lot of people as a sign that these people are not to be trusted. They are liars. They said things intentionally that they didn't mean, and now they are showing their real face. Whereas when I listen to you, it seems that you hint at the fact that the ultra-right-wing nationalist faction of Ukraine, as you also pointed out in your book, just has such an outsized influence by the sheer willingness to use extreme violence. It's not their numbers.

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It's their willingness to use force.

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It's a willingness to use force. Is this still the case? And is this how you interpret the shifts of Poroshenko and the shifts of Zelensky? It's not necessarily that they lied; it is that they were, at gunpoint, basically forced to change.

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What you're saying, and I agree with, is simply common sense. Politicians respond to their immediate incentives. A politician might want something different, but under the pressure of current circumstances, it could be the threat of cutting off aid, a threat to your family, or a threat to your political career. There are all sorts of threats and incentives that are simply part of the everyday life of political negotiations, whether you're negotiating the passage of a bill or a peace treaty. There's really no fundamental difference in that. Whether you are advocating for \$10 billion more for medical aid, cancer research funding, or an end to the fighting in a particular area of the country, you are always going to wrap yourself in noble ideals and promises of how this is going to transform everyone's life.

But the bottom line that every politician who has been in office and had to spend more than a few weeks dealing with other politicians realizes is that it is all negotiating. You had better not lead with your emotions because they will not convince your interlocutor and will actually weaken your case and your ability to reach a successful deal if you talk the same way to another negotiating partner as you do to the press. Those are simply different functions. You deal directly, one-on-one, about matters that you are actually willing to compromise on. Then you turn around and tell the press how you made an excellent deal for everyone, even if you don't think so deep in your heart.

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Yeah, but there is an additional question if the people are not the press, but the right-wing nationalists waiting with clubs and guns for your pronouncements, right?

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Well, but then they're easier to deal with because you know that they are out to get you. And I have always argued that peace internally in Ukraine can never be secure unless the violent right wing is disarmed and essentially neutralized. There is no country in the world where this kind of violent, disruptive, non-elected constituency can intervene in the political process. I mean, that's what the January 6th riots in the United States were all about. And they were labeled, correctly, probably, as treasonous, as an attempt at a coup in this country.

So, after World War II, there were right-wing parties in many former Axis countries. Eventually, those were certainly deprived of the ability to arm themselves and were marginalized on the political spectrum in order to push political parties toward the middle and establish a broader social consensus at the center. The weakness of Ukrainian society is that over the course of the last 30 years, no government has felt strong enough to contain its own violent extremists. That issue cannot be put off indefinitely anymore. The government has to deal with that directly at some point.

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The difference, I think, between the ultra right-wing nationalists of Ukraine and the January 6th insurrectionists in the US is that in the US case, they came without guns to the Capitol, right? Whereas in Ukraine, we know that they're armed. Are they today more or less armed than, let's say, three or four years ago? Because according to your analysis, the difference is huge.

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Certainly more because we know of organized groups that have joined or affiliated with the Ukrainian Armed Forces and been given guns. There was also a time early on during the conflict when the government distributed small firearms and weapons to individual citizens, and I'm sure a certain percentage of those were groups on the far right. They have, since the early 1990s, hoarded weapons stores and caches for themselves because one of their objectives, in the case of the government, is the threat that if the government pursues policies that the right wing considers not to be in the Ukrainian national interest, they reserve unto themselves the right to overturn the government in the national interest of Ukraine. That has been a consistent policy statement since before 1991, when these groups were originally set up in the 1930s.

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Jesus Christ, that reminds me so much of how the end of the Second World War went down in Japan, where at the very end, lower-level officers wanted to overthrow the higher-level officers and generals because they said if you want to surrender to the US, you're treasonous, and we need to protect the emperor from himself, who just said that he wants to surrender. But that leaves a very, very important question open. I mean, even if Washington, Donald Trump, Moscow, Vladimir Putin, and Kyiv, Mr. Zelensky, all of them agree, fine, let's stop this. Let's surrender or let's just finish it. Who would have the power to disarm these ultra right-wing nationalist groups that, if it came to this, would actually start a second civil war inside and try to just kill anything in the way? Who could disarm these people?

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It would have to be the Ukrainian military with the support of the Ukrainian government. And here we have an imponderable—a question to which we do not have the answer. Will the Ukrainian military stand with the elected government and validate its authority, or will it stand with the far right if groups on the far right make an effort to overturn the government in the interests of this kind of nationalistic vision of the country? I think this threat is not to be discarded, but is a very real one, potentially, if it is assessed that the peace negotiations are not providing Ukraine with a way to eventually recapture its territories.

Perhaps not immediately, but certainly down the road. So it has to be... And this is, of course, one of Russia's main demands. It wants a peace, not a ceasefire—a peace for the long term. And that is something that the nationalists have every interest in avoiding, especially for their own political

future. If there is not a permanent conflict with Russia, why would any average citizen, thinking about the well-being of their family and their children's children, ever vote for perpetual confrontation and perpetual, essentially, impoverishment in a Ukraine that is on permanent war footing?

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Sorry for keeping you so long, but this is just so important. Do you think that Moscow and Washington appreciate this political deadlock or the very real threat that Ukraine lacks the institutional coherence to surrender or to wind down from a war footing? That it's just incapable of doing so, right? It will break out into another form of civil war and then continue. Is this appreciation there in Washington and Moscow or not?

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I don't know. And I wouldn't say that it's a done deal. I mean, I think there is a risk there. It might. Yeah, it might. And I suspect that there are ways in which Ukraine could be offered support, and the institutional government of Ukraine could be supported in its efforts, should it choose to fight against extremist elements. But what I'm telling you and predicting with confidence is that this fight will take place. And I hope that the institutional government in Ukraine will succeed in this, taming and eventually not eradicating fully, but certainly minimizing the role of the militant far right to the levels that are considered tolerable in Western democracies. Right now, that is not the case in Ukraine.

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Well, these are very difficult questions. It's a very difficult situation, but thank you very much, Nicolai, for shedding some light on this, because I think these intricacies of the internal political process are something that constantly fall by the wayside when looking only at the big picture, and you're one of the people who can shed light on this. People who want to read more from you, should they go to your personal homepage, or where do you publish?

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Yeah, my website is www.npetro.net.

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Okay. Everybody go to npetro.net, and we will have Nicolai on again soon. Nicolai Petro, thank you very much for your time today.

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Thank you.