

# "No peace in Kiev while the rights of Russophones are ignored"

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## INTERVIEW WITH NICOLAI PETRO



Professor of Political Science at the *University of Rhode Island* in the USA, Nicolai Petro was an advisor to **George Bush** (senior) on policies with the USSR. With a German mother and a Russian father who emigrated to the USA after the war, Petro has been interested in Ukrainian politics for over ten years, visiting the country almost every year for at least a month, and twice for an entire year. As a boy he lived and studied in Italy for 5 years, and knows our language perfectly. Founder of the "*Center for Studies of Contemporary Russia*", in 2023 the professor published a book with the curious title "*The Tragedy of Ukraine - What classical Greek tragedy can teach us about conflict resolution*".

**Professor, like all of us, you also consider the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 to be illegitimate, and understand that the causes are to be found, after the 2014 coup, in the rise of Ukrainian nationalism pervaded by strong anti-Russian sentiment. In your book you insist a lot on the role that "Tragedy" has in the history of Man. Can you tell us why?**

«The term 'tragedy' today has a negative connotation. In classical Athens, however, it was thought to have a therapeutic and curative function. It allowed Athenians to face and overcome their deepest fears and hatreds through a process of catharsis—a change of heart. According to sociologist **Raymond Williams**, "tragedy does not lie in individual destiny, but in the general condition of a people who are reduced or destroyed because they are not aware of their true condition". It is a condition that reflects the inability to recognize what political scientist **Hans J. Morgenthau** defined as "the fragility of human reason, carried by the waves of passion", a fragility common to all men: Greeks and Persians, Americans and Russians. One of these fragilities is the obsession with justice – often confused with vengeance – which makes us incapable of seeing the compassion necessary to hold society together and heal its wounds. In the 5th century BC, the performance of tragedy became an essential component of Athenian civic discourse: it taught citizens how to deal with the political and social crises of the moment. The recovery of this vision could have important implications for Ukraine.»

### **In short, tragic representation as therapy. But today we are not in ancient Greece...**

«The Athenian *polis* was small enough to involve citizens in these civic rituals. Today it is different. A similar process, however, has existed for more than forty years, and has been implemented in over 50 countries: the " *Truth and Reconciliation Commissions* " which, like the Dionysian celebrations of old, seek to heal a profound social trauma and lead to social reconciliation. For example, the Commissions have worked to transform South Africa, Guatemala and Spain. In South Africa, the Anglican Church (and Archbishop **Desmond Tutu** in particular), played a key role in transforming a situation that was fraught with potential violent punishment after the end of Apartheid into a healthy situation of forgiveness. In Guatemala, the commission (known locally as the " *Historical Clarification Commission* ") helped foster a national discussion about the country's controversial history of genocide, despite the military government's reluctance. In Spain, the pact between the country's political parties to literally forget the past ( *Pacto de Olvido* ) has given new democratic institutions time to emerge."

### **So a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Ukraine too?**

"Yes. In Ukraine, decades of nationalistic policies have divided Eastern and Western Ukrainians over questions of language, religion and cultural affiliation. A tragic cycle fueled by the destructive narratives that each side tells about the other, then used to promote conflict in the name of justice. Trapped by a determination to correct the injustices of the past, rather than engaging in dialogue, both sides have helped perpetuate their mutual tragedy."

### **Isn't there also the tragedy of Western politics?**

«The current Western strategy in Ukraine does not favor peace because it does not address the essential aspects of the ongoing conflict. It does not address the rights of Russian speakers in Ukraine. And it does not address the thirty-year failure to create a pan-European security system that includes Russia. It thought the West had accepted this concept in the final declarations of the 1999 *Istanbul Summit* and the 2010 *Astana Summit* , and felt betrayed when it was informed that those declarations were not legally binding. In this context, Russia considers NATO's decision to expand eastwards and exclude Russia to be threatening and intolerable."

### **Which of the White House aspirants do you think offers the most hope, and why, for a quick solution to the crisis?**

"Neither. Both seem to me to be seriously misinformed about the nature of the crisis. Biden says he is convinced that Putin wants to reconstitute the USSR and then attack Europe. This differs markedly from the stated objectives of Putin, who demands guarantees: 1) that Ukraine will remain neutral and not join NATO, 2) that NATO will not turn Ukraine into an armed anti-Russian bridgehead on its border and 3) that the civil rights of Russophile Ukrainians are protected. Trump is equally uninformed when he suggests that if he were president, Russia would not have dared to invade

because the United States would have impoverished it through economic sanctions. As a matter of fact, though, despite all the sanctions, the Russian economy outperformed all major Western economies last year.

Neither candidate seems to understand how the global economy works, how much it depends on free trade, and how current policies undermine America's influence in the world. They simply do not understand the constraints placed on the power of the United States, and that fact alone should disqualify them for public office."

**Can you comment on the policy of the EU leaders who, almost in unison, have made such compromises against Russia?**

«I share the point of view of critics who see it as political suicide: 1) it has structurally damaged European economies, which depended on cheap Russian energy; 2) threatened the security of Europe, designating Russia as an enemy to be defeated; 3) rearmed and militarily strengthened Russia, while at the same time exhausting and weakening Ukraine; 4) consolidated and strengthened Putin's authoritarian regime. The fact that this policy seems destined to continue under the next leadership of the EU and NATO would be a comedy of errors, were it not for the possible apocalyptic consequences."

**On the Ukrainian crisis, what kind of support does Russia have, if any, from other Asian countries (in particular China and India), and what weight does this support have on the conclusion, one way or another, of the crisis ?**

«The Peace Summit in Switzerland showed how the Western perception of this crisis is different from that of the global South, led by the Brics countries . The West wants to end the war only *after* Russia is defeated, while everyone else simply wants to end the war. The West's total commitment had, at first, encouraged many nations to support it. Now, it seems the opposite is happening. The West will exhaust its resources once BRICS and the Global South, Russia's tacit supporters, fully commit to building a new world order. The West's insistence on turning this regional conflict into a global struggle over the fate of humanity makes such an alliance inevitable."