

# EASTERN EUROPE: HOW TO LIVE ON WAR'S DOORSTEP?

Friday 27 september, 2:00 p.m. - 3:30 p.m., Plenary Room



Arnoldas Pranckevicius, Mihaela Antoche, Émilie Aubry and Anna Kowalska

If there is one television show that has been striving for 34 years to dissect geopolitical news with ingenuity, it is *Le Dessous des Cartes*. Broadcast on Arte, it is presented every week by Émilie Aubry who, on the stage of the plenary hall, introduced this debate by praising the secondary school students present, who chose the History-Geography, Geopolitics and Political Science (HGGSP) option for their baccalaureate: 'I congratulate you on having this curiosity for the wider world. It also means that, in a way, you are rejecting a retreat to the national level. When you work with geographers, they say that you are never as relevant as when you change scale.'

## MODERATION

**Émilie Aubry**, Editor-in-Chief and presenter of the show *Le Dessous des Cartes* (Arte)

## SPEAKERS

**Mihaela Antoche**, Journalist for Televiziunea Romana

**Anna Kowalska**, Journalist for Telewizja Polska

**Arnoldas Pranckevicius**, Ambassador of the Republic of Lithuania in France

It is precisely on this principle that an episode of the show entitled 'Europe with a Leaning Towards the East' is being screened. This involves an immersion at one of the border crossings between Poland and Ukraine in November 2023, when a blockade was organised by Polish lorry drivers to prevent their Ukrainian counterparts from entering European Union territory without special permits, as authorised by Brussels. They saw this competition as unfair, demonstrating the difficulty in which Eastern Europe currently finds itself, between the desire to belong to Europe and the historical membership of the former Soviet bloc claimed by the Kremlin.

Anna Kowalska, a journalist for Polish public television, is familiar with this problem. Her country, which lives in fear of the 'Putin project', as Émilie Aubry described it, has long tried to alert the European Union of the Kremlin's intentions. 'We saw heads of state, notably from France, who were trying, probably rightly, to Europeanise Russia, but we didn't think that this was the direction in which we had to go, because we had precisely

this experience of history, she explained. As proof, Poland's military spending, which was estimated at 2.4% of GDP in 2022, is expected to increase to 4.7% in 2025, a record among the countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), making it the largest army in Europe. She considers a Russian threat realistic: 'There have definitely been Russian rockets falling in Poland. There have been deaths.' Poland has also welcomed more than a million Ukrainian refugees, with an economic impact that has pushed inflation to almost 20%, due to the increase in the cost of energy.

## ***If the Kremlin wins, what will remain of international law?***

**Arnoldas Pranckevicius**

Faced with these threats, is it still possible to live without the possibility of war, especially in Romania? According to Romanian journalist, Mihaela Antoch, it is a matter of habit, as her country has regularly faced war on its borders in recent history. Romania, the only French-speaking country in Eastern Europe, has also been forced to strengthen its defence capabilities, while affirming its unwavering support for Ukraine. But the economic crisis that is hitting her country, like all European countries, has perhaps fostered a weariness with the situation. 'Just like in France and Poland, we also have this war fatigue. There is only one solution, peace. But how can we get it if there are no negotiations?' she asked.



Émilie Aubry and Anna Kowalska

Arnoldas Pranckevicius, Lithuanian ambassador to France, former diplomatic advisor to German politician and President of the European Parliament from 2012 to 2017, Martin Schulz, is quite pessimistic regarding the issue. According to him, 'Vladimir Putin cannot be trusted', as he is already the cause of many conflicts in Eastern Europe. 'At the beginning of the war, three years ago, many told us: you were right.' Lithuania regularly receives threats from the Kremlin. The most recent, of a nuclear nature, is generating tangible fears, as are the cyber-attacks which are increasing, while the country has welcomed many Russian dissidents including those close to Alexei Navalny. One of the first obvious responses was, again, an increase in the budget allocated to defence, now at 3% of Lithuanian GDP.

He who wants peace prepares for war, as the saying goes. This is somewhat the opinion of Arnoldas Pranckevicius, who is in favour of Western allies authorizing Ukraine to use long-range missiles to strike Russian soil. Is the West too concerned with what is going on in Vladimir Putin's head, rather than helping the



their protection from Russia. On these issues, European leaders are deeply divided. While some would be in favour of sending soldiers to Ukrainian soil, others are more reluctant. Because who can predict what consequences such decisions might have? Not to mention that winter is already hitting, and Ukraine has lost 80% of its energy infrastructure.

Added to this concern is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where the State of Israel has just obtained aid of 8.7 billion dollars to continue its war, relegating the Ukrainian cause to the background. But these conflicts are not to be seen as mutually exclusive. 'Everything is linked,' said Arnoldas Pranckevicius, who recalls Iran's role in helping Russia and Hamas, even though the State of Israel believed itself to be very close to Russia. This should clarify things and make everyone's interests more understandable. The outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict will have enormous consequences for global geopolitics. Because if the Kremlin wins, what will remain of international law, which has been flouted so many times? 'All the dictators of this world are watching what is happening because this is really the test. If Ukraine loses, the Western world will lose its place in the world.'

Ukrainians win the war in more concrete ways? 'This decision should have been taken a long time ago,' he believes. Volodymyr Zelensky really needs this to destroy all ammunition stocks in Russia.

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Every day, without this authorisation, we contribute to the possibility of Russia striking Ukraine and all civilian targets. Another way to help Ukrainians maintain their sovereignty would be for them to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), as the three Baltic countries did in 2004 (Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia), which greatly aided



Watch the full debate on YouTube

In the East, despite these threats, people continue to live their lives. Lithuania, Romania and Poland are proving to be resilient and dynamic under all circumstances. The latter, with 38 million inhabitants, has risen to 6th place in the European economy and could, according to Anna Kowalska, become 'richer than the Italians and the British' within 5 years. Romania, which continues to attract many students, also benefits from its strategic position on the Black Sea for trade. Is this quest for progress against all odds not, in fact, the answer to the question 'how can we live in peace on the brink of war?' as a kind of forced march towards building an optimistic future?