

Klaus von Dohnanyi: “I warned against war”

SPD politician and book author calls on the EU to defend its own interests vis-à-vis the USA



Klaus von Dohnanyi in an interview with NDR on 22 April: “Europe’s interests are not the same as those of the USA”
© NDR

upg. Klaus von Dohnanyi is a political legend. In January 2022 he published his latest book “*Nationale Interessen. Orientierung für deutsche und europäische Politik in Zeiten von globalen Umbrüchen*” (“*National Interests. Orientation for German and European policies in times of global upheaval*”). In it, he warned against a war in Ukraine. On 22 April, two months after the outbreak of war, the Norddeutscher Rundfunk NDR interviewed him. In the following, we present his most important statements for discussion. They are quoted verbatim and therefore partly colloquial (subheadings “*Infosperber*”, Switzerland).

It is depressing that war was not prevented

In the book, I explicitly warned against a Russian attack on Ukraine. I wrote: if Ukraine continues to be driven into NATO – and that is American policy – if that happens, then there may be a war on the eastern borders of Europe, where it is now taking place, namely on the eastern border above all Ukraine. That’s what American experts – especially Biden’s current chief of intelligence have written explicitly in 2019. And I find it de-

* Klaus Karl Anton von Dohnanyi, born 23 June 1928 in Hamburg, is a German lawyer and politician (SPD). He was Federal Minister of Education and Science from 1972 to 1974, a member of the German Bundestag from 1969 to 1981 and First Mayor of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg from 1981 to 1988.

pressing that they saw it coming and did not prevent it.

The war could have been prevented even in the short term

All the American president had to do was say, “President Putin, we will talk to you about the future of Ukraine now that we see that you are obviously serious.” Biden had explicitly refused to do that. Putin had written to the Americans in December 2021: “This time I need it in writing. I want to know from you in writing how we want to deal with Ukraine in the future.” President Biden then said, “We will not negotiate with you on this issue at all.” And when that happened, in my view, there really should have been an uproar on the German side. We should have said: “This can’t be true. Because if it really comes to a war now, as you yourselves have said, you Americans, then of course that also leads Germany right into the middle of this problem.”

I think the labelling as “Putin-Versteher” is nonsense

I am of the opinion that if you don’t understand your opponent, you can’t deal with him. I think this thesis of being a so-called “Putin-Versteher” is nonsense. If a football coach doesn’t know how the coach of the other side trains his team, which tactical finesses he will use then he himself can’t leave the pitch as a winner afterwards.

In other words, you always have to understand your opponent. And this thesis that you are a “Putin-Versteher” or “Versteher” of Biden or Xi or Macron, I regard as nonsense. Of course I have to understand *Macron*. Macron wants nuclear energy. Macron wants to preserve his nuclear weapons. It’s not our policy, but we do have to understand him in order to deal with him.

That’s what I tried to make clear in my book, namely that the US has very different interests from ours, but that we still have to deal with them.

**Part of the military response
is the willingness to talk to each other**

The military response and talking to each other are not alternatives. You have to do both. Of course, at the moment, the way things are going, you also have to make sure that you would be militarily capable and able to defend yourself in an emergency, although that will be very difficult.

I once led a NATO exercise on behalf of Chancellor *Helmut Schmidt*, at that time in a bunker in Bonn. And I experienced how things run: as soon as the Russians advance a little, the Americans drop tactical nuclear weapons on German soil so that the Russians can't march on. So I know the meaning of things like that.

But of course you have to do both today. You have to think about defence and improve it, and you have to talk under all circumstances. And the fact that there is no real talk at the moment, in particular that the US side is not talking to Putin about what can be done to limit this disaster, I really think that it is a big mistake. Unfortunately, not talking is compatible with American interests. However, it is not compatible with German interests.

**The UN Secretary-General
would have to sound out Moscow
on how to guarantee Ukraine's security**

Mr *Zelensky* – the President of Ukraine – has said himself that he is prepared to accept the neutralisation of Ukraine in return for a ceasefire. It will be a difficult operation because Putin has conquered a lot in the meantime, but it is a possibility. *Zelensky* added: "but then, of course, there must be security for us."

I am convinced that this security must be given not only by the USA and Europe and Russia, but also by the *United Nations*. In this respect, Mr *Guterres* has the big task to make clear, yes, President Putin, if there is neutralisation, then we will help to ensure that this country firstly remains neutral and secondly is secured jointly by all of us.

**Negotiations must be held first
and foremost with Putin**

President *Steinmeier* wanted to go to Ukraine, but would he have gone to Moscow? Negotiations are not only necessary with Mr *Zelensky*, they are currently necessary with Putin. He started the war. This criminal war that Putin has started can only be stopped if an agreement on

Ukraine is reached, especially between the USA and Russia. Mr *Guterres* could help with this. But then, of course, the US must also be willing to talk about it. And I fear that this is not in the interests of the US.

It needs a concession on both sides

A negotiated solution could look like giving in on both sides. Putin would have to concede that the independent republics he recognises in the Donbass area would remain independent and not be annexed by Russia. Putin would have to accept that Ukraine aligns itself economically and politically with the EU. And the West would have to accept that Ukraine does not join NATO and that Putin gets a guarantee that American soldiers will not one day patrol the Russian border.

Exactly that would be the consequence if Ukraine as a whole were to join NATO. A Russian president is aware – also with his domestic political considerations, which he also has – that it would be unacceptable for Russia to have American soldiers patrolling the border between eastern Ukraine and Russia. I think the West has to understand that. And that is part of understanding the interests of the other side, namely the interests of the Russian Federation, and not just Putin.

The current head of CIA, Biden's chief of intelligence stated that he hasn't met anyone in Russia who does not share Putin's opinion on this issue.

**The USA has always exerted
pressure for NATO expansion**

What do we have to do now in order not to make the break with Russia to be final? Russia is a European nation – to a large extent. Moscow and St. Petersburg and so on have always looked towards the West. And we have now pushed them to the side of China. That was not very wise. The Western policy in the last decades was not really wise. I make my exception for Germany as we have always tried differently. But the US has always exerted this NATO expansion pressure.

Europe and the Europeans and the Germans must understand that presently in questions of security and foreign policy, it is not us but the USA that determines this, through NATO and through its influence in Europe, for example on the Eastern European states and on the Baltic states. We have to realise that the USA has com-

pletely different interests. The USA is a long way off.

A ceasefire benefits Ukraine the most

I think Ukraine is best served by helping to ensure that there is a ceasefire and to stop the destruction of the country. We have to make sure that we arrive at a situation for a ceasefire in Ukraine. But if we keep feeding more and more weapons, which can then also reach across to the Russian side, then we are doing neither Europe nor Ukraine any good. [...] At the same time we must create a climate in which peace is possible, through negotiations, talks and meetings.

Also in the question of NATO the USA has other interests than the Germans

Ukraine is in the middle of a war. One probably has to give in on the decisive point – namely the NATO question – and neutralise Ukraine, as Zelensky himself admits today. In other words, it is high time that Europe and Germany understand that US interests are not our interests in Europe. [...] The EU has a direct EU border with Russia up above Kaliningrad. It simply can't be that our interests are the same as those of the US, which has an Atlantic Ocean in between and is some 6000 to 8000 kilometres away from Kiev.

The USA is defending its own interests – also in Europe. That is what they have openly expressed. It was no coincidence that a few years ago the French Finance Minister said that Europe or we in Europe were just vassals – tributary dependents – of the USA. We must get the message that we have to change this by openly speaking with the USA. We in Europe need a little more self-confidence, a little more character, a little more personality.

Of course, we also have common interests. No doubt about that.

Today, Germany is more dependent on the USA than on Russia

Today, we are much more dependent on the USA than we are on Russia. And it is interesting that this alleged dependency on gas supplies – if you look at it soberly – leads to the realisation that it was always Ukraine that wanted to import more gas from Russia. Have you ever heard Ukraine say: "Please, don't put so much gas through our pipelines"? On the contrary, they said, "don't

build *Nord Stream 2*, because it could be to our disadvantage." That was the main reason. Ms *Merkel* then reached an agreement with Ukraine that the volume to be routed via Ukraine would not change. But has Ukraine ever said: "you are making yourselves too dependent"? Never.

Biden is under pressure from "midterm elections"

It is my deep conviction that President Biden has refused to negotiate with Russia on the future of Ukraine only because he is in the middle of an election campaign. Every two years, the US elects its entire House of Representatives and a third of the Senate. And Biden is facing these *midterm elections*, which will take place in November this year and which, in effect, drive every president, no sooner elected, into another election. Biden was actually in a very difficult position. Because he really risks losing these midterm elections, and then he would have no say anymore.

So we are currently in the hands of a president who is no longer free at all, but who, in order to win the elections, which is also his right, actually has to pursue a policy that does not correspond to the Democrats in the USA at all, but rather to the Republicans. And all this has to be said openly. I am not claiming that I am always right in my book. I specifically said: "maybe I'm wrong. If that is the case I want a debate." But I find it saddening and frightening that we no longer have debates in Berlin.

With sanctions we will change neither Russia nor China

A realistic policy is trying to preserve its own values, to urge values on others, if it makes sense, but in the knowledge that not every country is governed in the same way. Germany cannot be governed like Switzerland, and the USA cannot be governed like Switzerland. They are different concerning size, different countries altogether with different problems. And you simply have to understand that.

We will not change China or Russia through sanctions. That is nonsense. With the sanctions, we are now driving the Russians further and further on China's side. But we will not change Russia overnight, a country that has been governed maybe similarly, maybe differently for centuries, but it is governed in a way we are criticising today. That's complete nonsense.

We need a debate culture à la USA

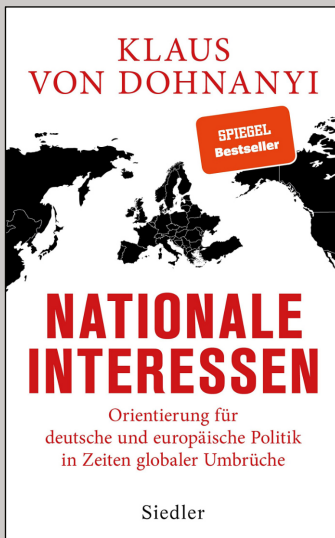
I think we have a relatively narrow culture of debate in Germany, if you compare us with the USA. [...] In our country, people are not brought up to debate. Not even at school. That is, of course, quite different in the USA and the UK – especially in England. But even there, the culture of debate has declined because many people

move in their echo chamber, where they get the news they like via social media.

David Huber transcribed Klaus von Dohnanyi's statements.

*Source: <https://www.infosperber.ch/politik/klaus-von-dohnanyi-ich-habe-vor-dem-krieg-gewarnt/>, 26 April 2022.
Reprinted with kind permission of the editors.*

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")



From the blurb:

In the competition between the USA and China, Europe is already getting caught between the fronts. And this will also have to change our relationship with Russia. A sober, illusionless view of the new realities is necessary now, as Klaus von Dohnanyi shows: we cannot rely on “communities of values” or “friendships”. Instead, Germany and Europe must openly formulate their own well-understood interests and pursue them with realism. Thus, in his book, von Dohnanyi calls for fundamental course corrections – in the area of external security as well as in industrial policy, away from one-sided dependencies and towards a policy of individual responsibility.

Siedler Publishing House, January 2022.