

The EU's Participation in the New Cold War against Russia

A Conversation with MEP Clare Daly

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The European Union faces multiple challenges as it progress into 2021. The 27 member states are struggling with simultaneous economic and health crises resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the EU which is the world's largest trading bloc is trying to expand its geo-political and economic power with a trade deal with China that was signed in December 2020.

It faces numerous problems as it struggles to emerge from economic recession and the attendant rising wealth inequality that has seen a huge wealth transfer to European elites. The EU has chosen to compound its many problems by becoming an enthusiastic participant in the new Cold War against Russia initiated by American imperialism.

Clare Daly MEP representing Independents For Change (Ireland) is part of the Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left, (GUE/NGL) in the European Parliament. She took time out to talk about the geo-political and economic challenges faces the European Union.

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Leon Tressell: During the Obama administration the United States initiated a new Cold War with Russia. This can be dated back to the events of 2014 when the American sponsored Maidan coup overthrew the elected government of Yanukovich. Following this, an ultra-nationalist regime took power in Kiev which led Russian speaking regions in Eastern Ukraine to secede in the Donbass region. The US sponsored regime in Kiev respond to this by launching a so-called anti-terrorist offensive against the people of the Donbass region. This war has killed over 10,000 civilians and continues to this very day. Plus we saw the secession of the Crimean region which voted to rejoin Russia. Following these events the United States and its EU allies imposed a series of sanctions upon Russia which continue to the present.

The new Cold War against Russia has also been pursued in the military sphere with the build up of NATO (i.e. US and EU) forces along Russia's western borders and the installation of missile defence systems aimed at Russia in several East European countries.

More recently, there has been growing support within the EU for American demands that the

Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline be suspended. Last September the EU Parliament overwhelmingly passed a resolution demanding a suspension of the construction of the Nord stream 2 gas pipeline. The same resolution also demanded further EU sanctions on Russia due to the imprisonment of the opposition politician Navalny by Russian authorities. Yet the EU is deafeningly silent on the continued imprisonment of journalist Julian Assange who is kept in solitary confinement in a maximum security prison in the UK. How would you explain the increasing hostility of the EU towards Russia and what dangers does this pose for peace on the continent of Europe?



Clare Daly: I'm not sure the Ukraine crisis marks the restart of Cold War politics to be honest – the proclamation of the end of the Cold War was a bit of stagecraft, but throughout the 1990s, during Clinton's presidency and into the George W Bush years you had significant voices on both sides of US politics continuing to push for Cold War stances on Russia. Anti-Russian policy took a back seat to the so-called War on Terrorism, but NATO expansion continued. We shouldn't forget the encroachment of American missile defence systems in Eastern Europe, which was going on throughout this period. Bush withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which was interpreted as aggression by Russia. We're certainly back to fever pitch now. What is different, I think, is the dangers that are present in this new chapter of relations with Russia. The late Professor Stephen Cohen put it well when he said that this is probably more dangerous than it was before, because there do not seem to be rules of behaviour or red lines on either side. It's an unstable situation and the rhetoric in Brussels and Washington is increasingly reckless and bellicose. It's being undertaken as a project of national security for the NATO states, and that is driving massive hikes in weapons spending in Europe, but it is actually destroying security because it treats Russia – a nuclear armed state – as an adversary.

LT: The mainstream media across the EU, UK and the United States is engaged in a ferocious propaganda campaign attacking Russia for the 3 year prison sentence given to Alexei Navalny for parole violations. Governments in all these countries have agreed that if Navalny is not released by Russia then it will face further economic sanctions. Yet, the EU Parliament is not demanding sanctions be placed upon the UK for its imprisonment of journalist Julian Assange who faces a 175 year prison sentence if he is extradited to the United States and convicted on charges relating to the 1917 Espionage Act.

It should be noted that the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Torture Professor Nils Meltzer has repeatedly stated that Julian Assange is a victim of psychological torture at the hands of the US and UK governments. How would you explain the huge discrepancy between the EU's defence of Navalny and its shameful silence over the psychological torture

and imprisonment of Julian Assange?



CD: There are two main reasons Assange is ignored in the European Parliament. The first is that he exposed the wrong countries. There is zero interest from the larger groups in the European Parliament in the fact that Western governments routinely commit human rights abuses, war crimes, etc. Zero. Any talk of it is inconvenient and embarrassing for them. So the fact that WikiLeaks' publications in 2010 provided massive amounts of documentary evidence of US and allied war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq is the main reason his human rights don't matter to those groups. He embarrassed these power groups and they are happy to see him punished for it. However, his human rights would very quickly matter if they could be used to attack perceived adversaries, like Russia. Unfortunately, they can't, so they are ignored. The same goes for Navalny. Most of these groups don't care at all about Alexei Navalny's human rights. If he couldn't be used to attack Russia they would leave him for dead. For example in the last few days the Biden administration found that the Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman personally approved the murder and shocking dismemberment of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018. But the US has not sanctioned Saudi Arabia and that story will very likely sink like a stone. It just has no currency in the present geopolitical environment. For those of us who care about upholding human rights, consistency is important. But the European establishment doesn't actually care about human rights except as a cudgel to bash official enemies. No analysis of how human rights are actually used and abused in the European Parliament could arrive at any other conclusion.

LT: Following the 2008 financial crisis EU countries pursued austerity policies for many years making ordinary people pay for the crisis of capitalism that was created by the unfettered greed of banks and other financial entities. Meanwhile, the European Central Bank pursued a policy of ultra low interest rates that made it difficult for ordinary people to save money. The ECB also printed trillions of euros through its QE programmes which continue to this day. During 2020 the European Central Bank spent over 1 trillion euros on buying government/corporate bonds. This QE programme has bought up huge quantities of government and corporate bonds yet it appears to have done little to improve the living standards of most EU citizens. This massive money printing has greatly inflated the prices of assets such as stocks and bonds and further enriched the billionaire class.

Meanwhile, social and economic inequalities have widened across Europe. We now have a situation where one arm of the capitalist state – national governments – issue huge amounts of debt. This debt is then monetised through the ECB purchasing those bonds. In effect we are seeing the 'socialisation' of the commanding financial heights of the economy due to the grave crisis of capitalism. Free-market capitalism which is touted as the only way to run society has effectively broken down. What economic measures are needed to effectively deal with this organic crisis of capitalism?

CD: I would take a step further back. The situation you describe cannot be addressed through purely economic measures – it arises because of a profound lack of democracy in the European Union. The only directly elected EU body is the Parliament, which does not determine the make-up of the Commission in anything but a token manner, has no ability to initiate legislation, and is not arranged on the government/opposition lines of most national parliaments. The electorate understands how little influence it has, and this is shown by the consistently low turnout in its elections. The institutions where power really lies are able to operate completely opaquely, with the public shut out. Meanwhile institutions like the Court of Justice and the ECB operate effectively without constraint. There is no counterbalance to them. Neo-liberal dogma is baked into the EU's foundational treaties, and is basically beyond the reach of popular reform. We are well over a decade into a crisis of legitimacy for the free market dogmas on which the EU is based. The post-COVID EU will merely be the latest demonstration of the bankruptcy of that ideology. And there is widespread public appetite for a more socially just and equal EU, where the social component of EU policy becomes more than a mere alibi. The roadblock is that there is no path through the institutions for that to come into being. No such political programme has a hope of being implemented without profound reform of the institutional setup of the EU.

LT: Once the mass vaccination programs have been fully rolled out and economies begin to open up again there will no doubt be demands from some quarters for governments to take action to deal with their huge debts. Do you think the EU will return to austerity policies? If it proceeds down such a path how should ordinary people respond to a return to austerity economics?

CD: There are already indications that this is what will happen. As to what the response of ordinary people should be, that's a more difficult question. The lack of real democracy in the EU's structures set against the use of those structures to impose austerity has been the main problem for the left since the 2008 financial crisis. In the long run, the heedlessness of the EU institutions to the needs of ordinary people will continue to exacerbate that crisis. Crises bring about changes, and the outcome of a crisis can be either good or bad for ordinary people. To shape that outcome, it is necessary for people to organise, to have a clear vision of an alternative and to make sure they are in a position to apply decisive popular pressure. Elected politicians are reactive, not proactive, and cannot be depended on to take the initiative themselves. It is only the pressure of ordinary people that will keep them on their toes.

LT: In December last year The EU and China concluded in principle the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment. Negotiations are ongoing until the final draft can be presented to the EU Council. In a press release explaining this agreement the EU makes great fanfare regarding its demands upon China to end forced labour and implement the toothless Paris agreement on climate change. China has now replaced the United States as the EU's largest trading partner so undoubtedly multinational corporations across Europe see the potential for making massive profits in China's huge domestic market. Conversely, Chinese capitalists see great investment opportunities in Europe.

The documents provided by the EU on this agreement talk about protecting the property rights of Western corporations in China while paying lip service to the issue of workers rights. There is nothing in this investment treaty that specifies how workers and farmers will be protected from exploitation by foreign corporations. Nor is any explanation given as to how this Comprehensive Agreement on Investment will improve living standards for ordinary people in both China and the EU. It would appear that we are meant to believe in the widely

discredited trickle-down theory of economics. In other words, the massive wealth and profits generated by multinationals under this agreement will eventually trickle down to the workers and farmers who produce the goods and services that are sold. As a member of the European Parliament what is your take on this pivotal economic treaty?

CD: It should be noted that the CAI is taking place in the context of the widening East-West divide driven by the United States over the last few years, during which we've seen the willingness of the EU to insist on a measure of independence from Washington, and to continue engagement with China. This is of course driven by the interests of European corporations, but in the context of increasingly bellicose rhetoric against China, the mere fact of continued engagement is not something we can overlook. It remains to be seen how this situation will develop now that there is a new president in the White House. As a general rule I am opposed to neo-liberal trade deals, because – despite lofty political declarations – they tend to create a race to the bottom, erode environmental and labour standards, entrench private sector control over public services and reinforce unequal North-South relationships. It's premature to take a hard position on the agreement before having sight of a mature text, but there are obviously a lot of important issues embedded in this deal, especially for us on the left, and we'll be looking at it in depth in the trade committee.

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