EPIS 10: Security, Society and Sustainability

26 OCTOBER 2025

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EPIS 10: Security, Society and Sustainability: A Conversation on Ukraine and beyond with Viola von Cramon-Taubadel Interview by Ferdinand Wegener and Leonie Nienhaus

Viola von Cramon-Taubadel

Introduction:

Viola von Cramon-Taubadel is a German politician of Alliance 90/The Greens. She was a member of the German Bundestag from 2009 to 2013 and of the European Parliament from 2019 to 2024.

During her time in the European Parliament, she served on several key bodies, including the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET). In addition, she was active in the EU-Russia Parliamentary Cooperation Delegation Committee (D-RU) and served as Vice-Chair of the EU-Ukraine Parliamentary Association Committee (D-UA). During her studies, she was already involved in international projects in Estonia, Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and China.

Alliance 90/The Greens (German: Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) is a green political party in Germany that emerged from the New Social Movements in 1980, which protested against environmental destruction, nuclear energy, and rearmament. Traditionally known for its pacifist stance, the party has since become one of the strongest advocates for military support to Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

Questions:

I think I have always been a political person. [Please insert again as a stand-out quote outside of the main text somewhere near where it was said, but also leave it in the text here, for examples of how to layout, ask Ferdinand Wegener] I always cared deeply about particular issues and believed that individuals have the power to make a difference.

As a student, I was active in the faculty council, and I also founded an NGO that worked with students from rural areas in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. We organised internships for them on German farms and supported their learning experiences. But once I had children, it became more difficult to travel to Eastern Europe, so I shifted my focus to local politics in my own community.

Viola von Cramon-Taubadel with Ferdinand Wegener and Leonie Nienhaus at the Black Sea Security Conference, May 2025, Odesa, Ukraine. **[Please keep these two pictures together]**

I realised that it is often much more effective to get involved through a political party than to act alone. There were practical issues I wanted to help address, such as nursery opening hours and local services.

I also discovered how fulfilling political work can be. There is real satisfaction in shaping decisions, working with people and helping to bring about meaningful change. That sense of purpose motivated me to get involved at the state level, where I served as a party spokesperson on agriculture, European affairs, and international policy. In 2009, I decided to run for the Bundestag.

Of course, working at the national level is very different from local politics, but the principles are the same: staying connected to people, listening

to their concerns, standing by your values and advocating for issues that serve the wider public interest rather than narrow groups.

My academic background also influenced my path. I studied agriculture in the 1990s, and when Renate Künast became Minister for Consumer Protection and Agriculture in 2001, that was a major inspiration. It probably marked the final turning point that led me to formally join the party and run for local office.

2. What kind of impact have you noticed from your interactions with young adults and civil society, particularly through initiatives like school visits and engagement with NGOs and Think Tanks?

I think you simply cannot be a well-informed MP or MEP without the input of experts, think tanks, universities and institutions like yours. [USE as standout quote:I think you simply cannot be a well-informed MP or MEP without the input of experts, think tanks, universities and institutions **like yours**.] People often talk about lobbyists in a narrow or negative way, but I believe we need a much broader understanding. Civil society, independent researchers and human rights groups also represent interests and values, and their contributions are vital.

The EPIS Thinktank delegation met Viola as part of the visit to the Black Sea Security Forum in Odesa, Ukraine, 2025

As for school visits, they were always a bit limited by my travel schedule to Strasbourg and Brussels. Usually, I could only visit on Fridays or early on Mondays, but I still managed quite a few, and not just during campaigns. I strongly believe in the importance of engaging the next generation. They are the ones who will shape the future, so it is crucial that they understand how politics works and why it matters.

The Black Sea Security Forum took place at the hištoric Odesa Opera House, chosen because the venue of laš̌t year's conference was hit by a Russian airš̌trike, Ukraine, 2025, photo by Ferdinand Wegener

For me, the goal is to bring young people into a lasting space of engagement. Whether that means joining a party, founding their own initiative, or connecting with others across Europe, I think we need to support and encourage that energy. From what I have seen, there is actually a fairly large number of students who are already on a path to become engaged in politics and civil society. That gives me hope.

3. What are your thoughts on the current state and future prospects of EU enlargement?

When I joined the European Parliament in 2019, there was a strong sense of frustration around the topic of enlargement. It was something people talked about, but mostly in theory. On paper, yes, the EU supported enlargement, but in practice, not much was moving.

The House of Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2025, Photo by Ferdinand Wegener

When I travelled to the Western Balkans, and also to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, and spoke with people about the EU's approach, they were clearly sceptical. They had heard these promises for years. In the Western Balkans, they've been told since the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 that membership was on the horizon. But progress has been painfully slow. North Macedonia, for example, went through the entire Prespa Process to resolve its name issue, and yet, once they completed that, another hurdle appeared. The frustration is understandable. It feels like every time one obstacle is resolved, another takes its place.

I have always said that we must take a broader view. Yes, there are geopolitical reasons to support enlargement, but more fundamentally, there will be no lasting peace or stability in the EU without peace and stability in the Western Balkans. These countries are surrounded by EU member states. It's in our own interest to support them.

There are also environmental reasons. For instance, the 19 remaining coal power plants in the Western Balkans emit more sulphur dioxide than the 250+ coal plants across the entire EU. [Use this part as quote, make it "The 19 remaining coal power plants in the Western Balkans emit more sulphur dioxide than the 250+ coal plants across the entire EU. If we are serious about our climate goals, we need to integrate these regions into the European Green Deal [USE as standout quote: If we are serious about our climate goals, we need to integrate these regions into the European Green Deal] as soon as possible.

We are talking about around 17 million people altogether, about the same as the population of North Rhine-Westphalia. Two of these countries, Albania and Montenegro, are already NATO members. Montenegro has fewer people than cities like Leipzig or Stuttgart. No one can reasonably argue that the EU is incapable of integrating countries of that size.

I believe it's essential that we go beyond technical preparation and start the political process in earnest. That includes strategic communication within EU member states, especially in countries like France, where public support is key and a referendum might be required. We cannot afford to let countries that have fulfilled all the necessary conditions sit waiting indefinitely.

In that sense, as tragic as the war in Ukraine is, it has also been a wake-up call. Even the most hesitant political leaders and commissioners in Brussels now understand the gravity of the situation. Russia's aggression has shown why a more united and resilient EU is urgently needed, and that includes bringing in new members who share our values.[use as quote: Russia's aggression has shown why a more united and resilient EU is urgently needed, and that includes bringing in new members who share our values]

4. Throughout your career, you have actively engaged with the South Caucasus, particularly Georgia and Armenia. Given Georgia's Democratic backsliding under the Georgian Dream party and Armenia's recent pivot toward the EU, what do you see as the future of relations between the EU and these two countries?

Georgia was long considered a frontrunner in democratic reforms and Western alignment. It even enshrined its aspirations for EU and NATO membership in the constitution so in theory, the current government is committed to that path. But in practice, we are seeing serious democratic backsliding. [USE QUOTE AS "In Georgia, we are seeing serious democratic backsliding."]

On the other hand, civil society in Georgia is remarkably active and resilient. Since the disputed elections last year, we have seen mass protests across the country, not just students, but people from all sectors of society. And yet, both the European Union and the United States have remained largely silent. That lack of response has been disheartening for many on the ground.

Day 311 of peaceful protests in Georgia, 4th of October, 2025, Tbilisi, Georgia, Photo by Leonie Nienhaus

The introduction of the so-called "foreign agent" law is a major concern. It threatens to cut off funding for civil society organisations and brand them as agents of foreign influence. People are being arrested, and the fear of repression is growing. It's starting to resemble the situation in Belarus more than a country on a path toward EU membership. [UsE as "Georgia is starting to resemble Belarus more than a country on a path toward EU membership…]

While in the European Parliament, I strongly advocated for Georgia to receive candidate status. I believed it would give opposition parties a stronger platform, and they could campaign on a clear message: if you want to join the EU, do not vote for Georgian Dream. Unfortunately, the elections were so deeply manipulated that this strategy failed to gain traction. The ruling party's narrative, portraying pro-European voices as warmongers intent on dragging Georgia into conflict, played on existing fears and proved effective.

Add to this the government's increasing closeness to Russia and China, and the outlook becomes even more concerning. However, I have great confidence in Georgia's civil society, especially the younger generation. They will not accept this shift quietly. [USE AS 'I have great confidence in Georgia's civil society, especially the younger generation. They will not accept this shift quietly.] Some may leave the country; others will continue to fight for a European future. Either way, we must not abandon them.

Looking ahead, Georgia's situation may remain frozen for some time, perhaps until the next round of elections. Much will depend on how

international partners, particularly the US, deal with figures like Bidzina Ivanishvili and the political elite surrounding him. So far, sanctions have had little practical impact on civil society or the media environment. My biggest fear is that many capable and committed people will simply leave Georgia due to fear of persecution or economic instability.

Armenia is in a very different position. Armenian leaders have often stressed how important Georgia's progress is to their own aspirations, recognising that regional momentum helps everyone. But after the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia finds itself under intense pressure politically, economically, and socially.

Still, I am impressed by how Prime Minister Pashinyan has managed to hold his ground. He came to power as a political outsider and reformer, and against the odds, he has remained in office. His government has taken bold steps to distance Armenia from Russia's influence, such as removing Russian security personnel and customs officials. Despite the challenges, he has charted a clear course towards closer ties with the EU.

With a large number of internally displaced persons and continued disinformation from both Russia and Azerbaijan, the pressure on his government is enormous. But so far, the public appears to be standing behind him, and polling remains relatively stable. Armenia's future with the EU, in my view, looks significantly more promising than Georgia's at the moment.[USE as quote, Armenia's future with the EU looks significantly more promising than Georgia's at the moment] I would urge my colleagues in Brussels to begin treating Armenia as an independent partner no longer tying its prospects entirely to Georgia's progress.

5. As a former member of the EU-Russia Parliamentary Cooperation Committee between 2022-2024, do you believe that any attempt to bring Russia closer through cooperation, particularly after the Russian war against Georgia in 2008 and the invasion of Crimea in 2014, was in vain?

As we often say in Germany, you are always wiser after something has happened. However, looking back, it is clear that these efforts were in vain. [USE QUOTE AS "Looking back, it is clear that efforts for cooperation with Russia were in vain"]

Especially after the annexation of Crimea, it became evident that Russia had chosen an imperialist path. The signs had already been there following the war in Georgia, but Crimea made it impossible to ignore. From that point on, it was clear that the Kremlin had no interest in a real partnership with the European Union. [Use quote as "From the annexation of Crimea on, it was clear that the Kremlin had no interest in real partnership with the European Union"]

The Gerasimov Doctrine, which emerged around 2012, made Russia's strategic direction unmistakable. It outlined an updated form of hybrid

warfare that included cyberattacks, disinformation, and the systematic weakening of democratic institutions, both in its neighbourhood and in the European Union. The EU was increasingly seen by Moscow not just as a geopolitical rival but as a threat to its authoritarian model because of the values we represent: democracy, freedom, and prosperity. [USE QUOTE: The EU was increasingly seen by Moscow not just as a geopolitical rival but as a threat to its authoritarian model because of the values we represent: democracy, freedom, and prosperity]

Many warned against continuing with a cooperation-based approach and called for stronger deterrence instead. But those warnings were often ignored. In Germany, in particular, there was significant strategic corruption, especially around energy policy and projects like Nord Stream. These links between political elites and Russian interests undermined a clear-eyed assessment of the Kremlin's actions.

Memorial for the fallen soldiers, May 2025, Odesa, Ukraine, Photo by EPIS member Jon Lott

That is why I believe the German Bundestag should launch a parliamentary inquiry into this period. We need transparency about the extent to which financial interests and political ties influenced key decisions. But unfortunately, since the SPD is still quite highly influenced by those actors and also in the conservative party, you have a lot of people who still work very closely with Putin and his oligarchs.

It is also important to acknowledge how dismissive many Western European leaders were of concerns raised by our Eastern and Central European partners. Too often, they were dismissed as overly Russophobic. [USE QUOTE: "Too often, concerns by Eastern European partners were dismissed as overly Russophobic"] To the contrary, at the very moment Russia was waging war in eastern Ukraine, Germany deepened its energy dependence on the Kremlin. Not listening to our Eastern and Central European partners was a strategic error that made Europe more vulnerable. In the end, the policy of engagement not only failed to bring Russia closer, but it also allowed the regime to become more aggressive and better equipped to interfere in our democracies.

6. Disinformation, particularly from Russia, remains a big problem for democracies across Europe. The recent elections in Romania are a prime example. Through your work as an MEP, you have also dealt with foreign interference. How do you assess the current impact of (Russian) disinformation, and is enough being done to push back?

The short answer is no; not enough is being done at the European level to push back against disinformation, especially the kind orchestrated by Russia.

To be honest, I do not even think that conventional military forces are Putin's primary tools anymore. The far greater threat comes from Russia's hybrid arsenal: disinformation, propaganda, infiltration, the financing of anti-EU and anti-democratic parties, and psychological operations designed to exploit social divisions. These tactics are smart, sophisticated, and dangerously effective.

The Romanian Palace of Parliament, 2025, Photo by Ferdinand Wegener

We have already seen this with political parties across Europe. In Germany, there's the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht and the AfD; in France, Le Pen's party received a significant loan from a Russian bank. In virtually every EU member state, there is at least one political force that is either openly or covertly supported by Moscow.

What is especially alarming is how professionally Russia has built up its disinformation infrastructure. It is rooted in deep psychological analysis of our societies, our vulnerabilities, our fears, and our sentiments.

Just recently, I shared a case where the Russian FSB was using minors in Ukraine to carry out attacks. That is the level of cynicism we are dealing with, and it's only the beginning.

We are already seeing signs of similar tactics spreading elsewhere. If you look at young voters in Germany, particularly those aged 17 to 20, where up to 70 percent lean toward the AfD, it becomes clear how vulnerable this demographic is to influence. It would be relatively easy to manipulate them and activate them for sabotage or disinformation purposes, just as has happened in Ukraine. [use quote as "It would be relatively easy to manipulate the European youth and activate them for sabotage or disinformation purposes."] And we must not forget: disinformation is only one part of the picture. What we are facing is a full-spectrum hybrid threat: a mix of disinformation, cyberattacks, political subversion, economic coercion, and even the orchestration of violence. It poses a fundamental threat to German society and to all democratic societies.

We have already seen Russian fingerprints on elections and referendums across the continent: from France and Catalonia to the Dutch referendum on the EU-Ukraine agreement, and even in the 2016 US presidential election. These were not isolated incidents. They were warning signs that we largely ignored.

And that is exactly the problem: we have not pushed back. Putin does not feel the pressure. We remain too polite, too complacent. [USE AS QUOTE: Putin does not feel the pressure. We remain too polite, too complacent.] We tell ourselves that defensive measures are enough. But they are not. Real security also requires deterrence. It requires resilience, not just in our institutions, but in our societies.[USE quote: Real security also requires deterrence. It requires resilience; not just in our institutions, but in our societies] Every citizen should be aware of the techniques and goals behind Russian interference, and we must urgently invest in public education, independent media, and civil society.

There are good examples to follow, especially in the Baltic states. They are far ahead of us in both awareness and preparedness. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. We just need the political will to act. [MUST USE QUOTE: We do not need to reinvent the wheel. We just need the political will to act.]

7. Why are you, as a former member of the European and German Parliament, so involved in Ukraine's security? Is it difficult to be staunchly pro-Ukrainian, including weapons deliveries, as a member of the Green Party, which has traditionally been seen as pacifistic?

For me, this is ultimately a battle between autocracy and democracy. [USE QUOTE AS: "The war in Ukraine is ultimately a battle between autocracy and democracy."]It is not only about being a friend of Ukraine, although I certainly feel a strong obligation to support them. Russia's goal is not just to destroy Ukraine. It is to demonstrate that it can re-establish parts of the old Soviet or Tsarist empire, and it will not stop there.

Ukrainian-made BTR-3 IFV in Kyiv, 2018, Photo by Ferdinand Wegener

What the Kremlin really wants is to dismantle the European Union [use quote]; this voluntary union of democratic states, built on shared values. No one forced the Baltic states, Sweden, Finland, or Austria to join. They chose to, freely and democratically. Russia, by contrast, uses violence and coercion. It kills civilians and then calls it 'liberation'. [USE quote "Russia kills civilians and then calls it 'liberation'."] We offer partnership and rule of law. That contrast is precisely why so many still want to join the EU; and that is what threatens Putin most.

Some still argue that we should cooperate with Russia, but that is a fantasy.[USE as quote: Some still argue that we should cooperate with Russia, but that is a fantasy.] The Russian regime has no intention of cooperating. It wants to subjugate. [Use as separate quote: The Russian regime has no intention of cooperating. It wants to subjugate.] And that is why I support Ukraine; not just out of solidarity, but because Ukraine is now fighting for all of us.[also use as quote:And that is why I support Ukraine; not just out of solidarity, but because Ukraine is now fighting for all of us]

If Ukraine falls, the consequences will reach us too. Russian troops could one day be at the borders of Poland or Lithuania. Would Hungary or Slovakia hold firm? This is not just Ukraine's fight. It is a geopolitical imperative for all who believe in liberty, democracy, and the rule of law.[use as quote: This is not just Ukraine's fight. It is a geopolitical imperative for all who believe in liberty, democracy, and the rule of law]

As for the second part of your question, no, it's not difficult to support Ukraine as a member of the Green Party. In fact, the Green Party has long moved beyond simple pacifism. [UsE quote "The Green Party has long moved beyond simple pacifism."] Remember Joschka Fischer in 1999.

It was the Greens, under his leadership, who took the difficult decision to support NATO intervention in the former Yugoslavia, to prevent a potential genocide in Kosovo. [QUOTE: "It was the Greens, who took the difficult decision to support NATO intervention in the former Yugoslavia"] We had already witnessed Srebrenica. Many of us in the party were deeply aware of the danger at that time.

The Greens have always stood clearly for human rights and for defending democratic values. Observing from the sidelines, doing nothing, may feel like pacifism, but as Joschka Fischer said then, that also makes you complicit.

It is easy to talk about peace, but failing to act when people are being murdered is a form of responsibility, too. [Use as quote: It is easy to talk about peace, but failing to act when people are being murdered is a form of responsibility too.] The same applies today in Ukraine. Of course, there are internal debates. It's not always simple. But I would say that 85 to 90 percent of people now joining the Greens do so because of our firm and consistent support for Ukraine.

8. War and military vehicles produce enormous pollution of nature, cause vast destruction of the environment, and spew out copious amounts of CO2 and other harmful pollutants and toxic materials. How can you unify your beliefs to protect the world's climate with your wish to send more weapons to Ukraine?

It is actually very simple. Every weapon we send now is not just about Ukraine's defence. It is also about defending our ability to protect the climate, uphold our values, and preserve our democratic systems. [Use quote: . If Putin wins, climate action loses, because Russia has no interest in decarbonisation.

Look at the reality. There are no climate movements in Russia. There is no large-scale rollout of heat pumps, no national strategy for renewable energy, and no commitment to climate neutrality. Russia's economy remains entirely dependent on the sale of fossil fuels. While sanctions have somewhat reduced that revenue, especially through the price cap on Russian oil, Putin continues to rely on fossil exports as his main source of income.

Destroyed Russian BTR-80 APC in Kyiv, 2018, Photo by Ferdinand Wegener

This war is not just about territory. It is also a fossil-fuel-powered assault on democracy and decarbonisation. Take the example of the Kakhovka dam. The Russian bombing of that hydropower facility did not just destroy infrastructure; it caused an environmental catastrophe, killing ecosystems and wildlife and displacing thousands of people. Some might claim the area is now "more natural," but in truth, the destruction released huge amounts of CO2 and devastated the landscape.

And that is just one example. Russia has shelled wind farms, bombed solar installations, and destroyed civilian energy grids. Every piece of infrastructure we have to rebuild—from power plants to water systems—comes with a massive environmental cost. Cement, steel, construction, and transport all emit CO2. If we can prevent this destruction by acting now, we can reduce both human suffering and environmental damage.

So yes, defending Ukraine militarily is entirely compatible with protecting the environment. In fact, it is a precondition for it. Without freedom, sovereignty, and democratic space there can be no real climate action—not in Ukraine and not in Europe either.[USE QUOTE:Without freedom, sovereignty, and democratic space there can be no real climate action—not in Ukraine and not in Europe either]

9. Is Chancellor Merz's pivot in defense policy, Bundeswehr rearmament, and more aid for Ukraine believable? Will we ever see German Taurus missiles hitting Russian military targets?

He has placed this issue so high on his agenda that, no matter whom you speak to, many people afford him a great deal of credibility. However, in the end, what really matters is seeing concrete action.

We must increase production capacities. I am deeply concerned that Russia operates around the clock. It is not a standard 35-hour workweek for them; everyone available is mobilised for weapon production. Meanwhile, we still have limited manufacturing capacity rather than mass production. There must be a shift towards a "war economy"— a phrase I dislike — focusing on what is urgently required right now, such as drones, electronic warfare systems, and many other critical components for Ukraine.

Taurus Missile at the German Army Collection in Koblenz, 2025, Photo by Ferdinand Wegener

Only then can we fairly judge whether Merz is serious or merely engaging in rhetoric. His visit at the start of his tenure, alongside Stoltenberg, Tusk, and Macron, was an important and impressive signal to Ukraine. But now he must deliver on those promises.

That said, from what I heard during my recent visit to Berlin, Merz and some in his inner circle sometimes come across a little like cowboys. They enter a room pretending to know everything, but this is often not backed by sufficient expertise. It feels more like showmanship.

I sincerely hope that, for Ukraine's sake, they will learn to listen and make the right decisions. What matters most is achieving victory for Ukraine. That is our shared goal; nothing else matters at the moment.[USE QUOTE: What matters most is achieving victory for Ukraine. That is our shared goal; nothing else matters at the moment]

10. In your view, what is the most pressing issue facing European societies today and how should it be addressed?

From my perspective, what I see is this: for a generation —and I am not very old, but probably old enough —the European Union and its integration were always seen as a positive, upward trend. It was clear we would take in more countries and deepen our cooperation.

It was very much an elite project handled by those in Brussels, but it was never questioned negatively. We trusted that they were making the right decisions, and we believed these decisions were in our interest.

Now, however, with the rise of Euroscepticism, the growth of right-wing parties, and increasing doubt about where the EU's money goes, the attitude has shifted. People ask, "How does the European Union benefit Germans? How does it benefit Lower Saxony? What is in it for me?" Everything has become transactional, focusing on immediate self-interest. [UsE as quote]

We must defend the EU, but not by attacking others or through negativity. Instead, we need to create spaces where society as a whole values the EU as a positive force.[use as stand out quote, only use frst sentence about negativity if too long: We must defend the EU, but not by attacking others or through negativity. Instead, we need to create spaces where society as a whole values the EU as a positive force. They need to say, "No, I will not vote for those who want to close borders forever, or who want to expel my foreign friends." Diversity and pluralism are fundamental to the European Union. We must explain clearly why the European Union is so special, why it is worth fighting for, and why we can be proud to be members.

I am not a fan of national pride in the usual sense. I have never sung the German national anthem. But I do believe in European pride. We need to cultivate a European public sphere with European television, European news [USE this part as stand out quote:We need to cultivate a European public sphere with European television, European news], and so on. This will, in turn, strengthen our national societies too. We need to be proud to be European citizens.

DOI 10.69790/epis08.98172