

SPEECH BY LORD OWEN IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS DEBATE ON EU AND RUSSIA (EUC REPORT), 24 MARCH 2015

My Lords, I have an important interest to declare, which is that I have been involved in business in Russia since 1995. I started that in the belief, which I still hold, that it is through commercial interchange that eventually we will restore some of the optimism about Russia's future that many in this House have had for a number of years, although we have certainly found ourselves and our judgment somewhat questioned by the experiences in Ukraine.

We have heard two outstanding speeches. The maiden speech of the noble Earl, Lord Oxford and Asquith, was quite remarkable and I find myself agreeing with almost all of his analysis. I have watched his career with great interest for some decades. He certainly does great service to the memory of his great-grandfather, whom I have been writing about with interest in *The Military Conversations of 1906-1914*. We look forward to hearing much more from the noble Earl. The other speech that I found myself agreeing with—we do not always agree on these matters—was that of the noble Lord, Lord Kerr. His words on sanctions are well worth careful scrutiny. We often embark on sanctions with the best of wishes and intentions, but unfortunately they can yield poor results and they often produce the very effects that we do not want, particularly in the country that is most affected by them. In this case, a great many countries are affected.

All the members of the committee deserve to be congratulated on the report and on the tone that they have brought to this discussion. It is very different from the tone of discussion, I dare say, in another place and particularly in the newspapers of this country. We have to change that. We have to develop a much greater understanding of the complexity of the issues and we must do so fairly urgently.

What is Britain's role? Paragraph 82 of the recommendations and conclusions says:

“As one of the four signatories of the Budapest Memorandum (1994), which pledged to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity, the UK had a particular responsibility when the crisis erupted. The Government has not been as active or as visible on this issue as it could have been”.

That is a matter of great regret. During the crisis inside Ukraine and in Kiev, the French, German and Polish Foreign Ministers went into negotiations. In the light of the fact that, no sooner was the ink dry on that agreement, it was effectively torn up in front of everybody's eyes, it may have been quite a good thing that we were not involved in that rather deplorable example of EU negotiations, but staying out of that particular involvement carried with it our then acquiescing in what I think was the brave and necessary involvement of the President of France and the Chancellor of Germany in direct negotiations with Ukraine and Russia.

This country has a responsibility to try to find a way of dealing, in international law, with the annexation of Crimea. This will not be changed, probably for a number of years, but we need to lead the discussion, because eventually it will have to be changed. Of course, if Ukraine and Russia can reach an agreement, it will be settled in international law. That is probably the most desirable outcome and it eventually will

have to be part of such an agreement. But to help that process we should point to the necessity of a wider discussion—widening it means that it is always easier to reach agreement—and indicate that one area that could be brought into that discussion is the question of Moldova and Transnistria. Putting that into the international discussions over the annexation of Crimea would be sensible. There is a lot to be said for widening this to all the disputed areas and boundaries in and around Europe and central Asia, which will come back to haunt us if we do not settle them.

Among the other aspects that have been raised in this debate, a great deal has been said about this whole issue of why Russia feels encircled. History shows us exactly the same: if you look to the origins of the 1914 war, there is no question but that encirclement was a big factor. It was felt not just by Russia at various stages but by Germany and by other countries. We need to respect that in international affairs.

One person who does not carry much weight these days in Russia is Mikhail Gorbachev. There is no doubt, in my judgment, that he can fairly claim that, with the full might of the Soviet Union behind him, he could have clamped down and there would have been no unification of East and West Germany. There has been some correspondence recently in the Guardian, on 6 and 9 March, with a NATO spokesman claiming, unwisely I think, to interpret Mikhail Gorbachev's actual position. Gorbachev was under no illusion during the negotiations that went on following the fall of the Berlin Wall and throughout that period that his sensitivities on behalf of Russia—historic sensitivities—were going to be respected. Reference has been made to Ambassador Braithwaite's assessment, which I value and trust greatly. More importantly, one should go to the text of the main spokesman for the West, President George Bush Senior, who made important statements and conducted one of wisest pieces of diplomacy in relation to the United States and Russia that we have seen for 50 years. His Secretary of State, James Baker, also made commitments. You cannot tear these up or ignore them, although they are not an excuse. Gorbachev said about the present crisis:

“One of its causes, though not the only one”—

an important reservation—

“is the unwillingness of our western partners to take account of Russia's point of view, legitimate interests and security. Verbally, they applauded Russia, especially during the Yeltsin years, but in deeds they took no account of it. I am thinking mainly of Nato's enlargement, the plans to deploy a missile shield, and the west's actions in areas important to Russia (Yugoslavia, Iraq, Georgia, Ukraine). They literally told us: it's not your business. As a result an abscess built up, and burst”.

We must return to this area to try to find our way through these difficult questions.

The contribution of those who have said that Russia has to be part of the solution is also important. The economic strength of Ukraine has to be built up, but it will not be built up just by relying on EU disbursements, the IMF or anybody else. Russia has an interest in Ukraine: it will invest there and will need to become a partner in investment. It is not going to be easy; it will be very difficult to break down the

hatreds, almost, that have emerged in the last few years between people in Ukraine and Russia who previously worked evenly and well together. It will take time.

I suggest that Britain's role is strategic. At the time, I was not keen on the decision at the NATO summit in Chicago to continue with dual-capable aircraft. In retrospect, I believe that it was a wise decision. I agree with those who have said that there is no case for these aircraft to be deployed now to new NATO members, but I believe that Britain should take a very active part in the whole of that issue and discussion. We may have a role to play. That whole aspect of NATO's strategy has to be looked at again, but we should not consider deploying such aircraft in sensitive areas. These are issues to which we will return.