

## How to respond to the confrontation that Russia is imposing on Europe?

“Comrades – we have been standing on the edge of a precipice. I am glad to say that we have made a great step forward”. This pun from a sketch performed by the Cracow-based cabaret in 1960s, was mocking the absurdity of inept propaganda of the Polish communist rulers at the time. But it seems to capture the grim absurdity of the confrontation offensive engineered by the Putin regime today. Kremlin seems

genuinely ready to go to war against Ukraine – for no remotely rational pretext, only driven by a fear of the long-term consequences of the very existence and potential success of a democratic, independent and prosperous neighbour of Russia. A damage that Russian invasion will inflict on Ukraine is bound to be catastrophic. It would shake the European security architecture (already being undermined by Russia) to its very foundations. And it would constitute a crime against humanity.

At the time of writing, the chances that this calamity may be averted are slim indeed, though they exist. Major and determined efforts<sup>1</sup> to prevent the aggression (the scope of which may turn out to be unlike anything seen in Europe for decades) seem somewhat desperate in the face of Putin’s going for broke tactic. Putin has created a moral dilemma for those who want peace (the rest of the world, except perhaps Lukashenka and his clique): peace, but at what price? Ukrainians themselves have provided probably the best piece of the deterrence equation, making certain that no capitulation is possible and if Russia wants to subjugate Ukraine it knows that can only do so at a great cost to itself. The determination and resilience of Ukrainians should not be doubted. Big questions about the ability of President Zelensky<sup>2</sup> to rally his nation have proven unfounded, regardless of some dubious communication mishaps (such as unwarranted criticism of the Western media). The US leadership throughout the crisis has only grown stronger, proving that US is “back”. The Biden administration deserves credit for showing that it is capable of uniting the collective West through inclusive diplomacy, showing a military example (sending American troops in significant

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numbers to bolster the NATO flanks and military equipment to help Ukraine defend itself) and surprisingly skilful information policy (finally putting the Moscow propaganda machine on unsure footing).

The threat of harsh sanctions, a genuine willingness to engage in a dialogue with Russia (in the NATO-Russia Council, in the OSCE, and in the framework of the US-Russia bilateral conversation), and beefing up of the NATO presence on the territory closest to Russia, are all in the package that had been agreed and implemented to avert Moscow's assault on Ukraine. While backed by a credible display of unity this package was developed within the confines of what the political market can bear. Listening to many lofty speeches of the Western politicians during the somewhat surreal Munich Security Conference this year, one got a strong impression that their verbal fortitude is guided by a noble desire to save Ukraine, but also by the clear motivation to cover the political base, i.e. to be able to say if things go really badly that "one has done as much as one could – or more". However, one can argue with a claim that we, collectively in the West, done as much as we could to help Ukraine.. First of all, too many and for too long, have suffered from the cognitive dissonance between self-evident and immanent hostility<sup>3</sup> of the Putin regime to democracy, international law, basic principles of security and stability that have kept peace in Europe for many decades; and a persistent inability to acknowledge it. This has led to unwarranted trust put in the effectiveness of dialogue with Russia and equally damaging refusal to take consequential steps in deterring Moscow.

Second, as the crisis generated by the blackmail involving the massing of almost 70% of the Russian Armed Forces on the borders of Ukraine has shown, various opinion formers in the West have found it difficult to hide a conviction that security of one of the largest countries in Europe could be traded for a peace of mind and/or selfish comfort. Hence a reluctance in many countries to offer meaningful military support to Ukraine in the form of defence equipment and a lingering temptation to force Kyiv into a suicidal "compromise" through unilateral concessions under the Minsk agreements (never implemented by Russia).

Third, and related to the way some view Ukraine, is the problem of lingering paternalism towards the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In spite of many years of membership in NATO and/or the EU, the preoccupations, policy analysis and recommendations of the countries that had the misfortune of spending decades on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain, have been downplayed or politely ignored. Even today, when the romantic assumptions of "partnership with Russia" are in tatters, many capitals refuse to admit that the CEE countries were right all along on the threat perception of Russia, and that listening to their advice earlier might have prevented a situation of mortal danger to the Ukrainian state. More broadly, it could have spared the whole Europe the confrontation it is currently facing. Of course this is not highlighted to "score points" for the CEE today (the region has a stronger interest in averting the crisis than any other parts of the continent).

It is about ensuring that there is a genuine unity of interests in the coming days and years – as this unity is essential for an effective policy.

### Available options for the West

As we are in a pivotal moment for Europe's stability, what should be the priorities for now and in the longer perspective? Now that everybody is aware that the only certainty one can expect from Moscow is threats, denials of wrongdoings, false claims and a full revisionist agenda (expressed in black and white in the response to Washington published by the Russian MFA<sup>4</sup>) – what is to be done about it?

The list of immediate priorities needs to start with a clear and unambiguous recognition of the threat and the culprit behind it. Indifference, or neutrality, is no longer a morally acceptable option. And this applies to every member of the Western community, irrespective of institutional membership.

Tangible assistance to Ukraine must be continued as a matter of urgency. Military supplies of defensive weapon systems matter enormously, as they act as a direct deterrent against a possible invasion and means to resist it if it happens. Financial help is crucial too. Kyiv is being strangled economically by the Russian threat, losing revenue due to a fall in tourism, increased insurance rates, cancelling of air flights, more onerous credit conditions, as well as a result of a de facto naval blockade by Russia.

Some sanctions against the Kremlin could be introduced already now, to drive a point about the illegal nature of military blackmail and as part of international pressure on verifiable de-escalation (right now it has not led to any costs imposed by the international community). If areas occupied by Russia are recognized as separate states by Moscow (which could happen soon), or if Russian military start crossing current disengagement lines in Donbas, the case for the first sanctions would be irrefutable.

Intensive strategic communications effort, spearheaded by Washington, needs to continue and be replicated by other countries. Going public with information available to Western governments, as well as advertising investigation results produced by independent outlets (case in point – Bellingcat<sup>5</sup> exposed that the evacuation video prepared by the separatists was actually recorded few days before the "emergency situation"), undermines the element of surprise sought by Moscow and takes away the initiative advantage. One should also consider direct Western appeals to the Russian population, over the head of the Kremlin. While it is impossible to calculate their effects (in view of the tight control of information space by authorities) such messages, explaining the irrationality and consequences of the war against Ukraine, could still reach millions of people in Russia.

### New Western policies towards Russia

These are some of the actions that should be taken today. Other moves may require more deliberation. But they would be the key to unlocking the most meaningful transformation of our policies and approaches, a paradigm shift no less. This shift has to be performed in response to Russia's confrontation strategy that will continue to challenge us for a foreseeable future. These intermediate-perspective actions can be grouped into five clusters.

First, it is high time to draw *Hohe Politik* conclusions from Russia's destructive policy. Its antagonism – under the leadership of Putin – to the West requires direct recognition. As the author of this paper has written before, Russia must be defined as a hostile revisionist power – by international organisations such as NATO or EU, and by individual countries. The political elites, even in Western Europe (where one could register the greatest reluctance in the past towards labelling Russia as an antagonist), would actually be in sync with the public opinion in their countries, that has undergone a change of views on Russia as a result of its threats and rejection of diplomacy.

Such labelling would have positive consequences for a range of e.g. legal initiatives that could impose costs for all entities and individuals associated with the regime. Various institutions that count Russia among its members should consider expulsion, especially if Moscow does invade Ukraine (Even the toothless League of Nations did decide to kick the Soviet Union out after its attack on Finland in 1939).

Two, aided by the political definition process described above, NATO and, partially the EU in areas where it has the mandate and expertise, should proceed with what the US Secretary of Defence has been referring to as "integrated deterrence". Such a posture and strategy should bring together all the military and non-military tools of a response, available to the Western community. For NATO, this should mean amplifying and accelerating implementation of the existing ideas on more focused military deployments, encouraging efforts to configure national forces for high-intensity warfare and sharpening a defensive posture across the board.

Third, linked to the potential "integrated deterrence" concept, much political capital and attention should be spent on those elements of resilience of Western society that are seen today as the weakest links in our "all-society" defence. Introducing a whole variety of anti-corruption, financial and political transparency measures is long overdue and would benefit the health of our democracies. While the Russian threat is the most pressing one for Europe, these actions would also come handy in plugging vulnerability holes ripe for probing by other malign actors. Similarly to moves stemming corruption and malign influence, more aggressive steps are needed to improve our capacity not just to defend, but to inflict costs on Russia for its attacks in the cyber and information domains.

Fourth, current situation and experience gained already during this crisis, prove beyond any reasonable doubt that US remains the indispensable security and political player in Europe. This should be the driving argument for the abandonment of some of the half-baked ideas plaguing European debate on hard defence. So, instead of wasting valuable time on concepts such as “European strategic autonomy” or proposals to introduce QMV (qualified majority voting) in the realm of defence, the EU members of NATO should fulfil the pledge on 2% defence spending, work on acquiring real meaningful capabilities and devote their political capital to use the full potential of the EU on comprehensive security tasks for which it is ideally placed (energy security, resilience, legal cooperation stemming malign influences, use of economic tools, including sanctions, to shape the security environment etc.). For example, showing solidarity with Lithuania facing the wrath of China will make a bigger contribution to European security than another organogram.

Fifth, while this does not signify full unanimity with US on many issues (vide data protection), political and defence cooperation with Washington is a win-win proposition for the continent that has to deal with predators such as Russia, whose goals are adversarial. Brussels and Washington working together to offer better prospects of cooperation and integration for such regions as the Balkans, North Africa, Central Asia and the Caucuses, will improve the leverage of both Europe and US in dealing with a bigger confrontation. And yes, Europe should show greater understanding to the strategic challenges occupying American minds in relation to China.

### Conclusions

1. The time for complacency is over. Europeans – decision-makers and the general public alike, have to understand that the sunny days of security on the cheap have finished. The spectre of war is not just hunting Georgia or Ukraine, but the whole continent. There is no place for ego trips, for grandiose but unrealistic ideas that have not gained the acceptance of others.
2. Incredulity<sup>6</sup> among Western leaders that the threat of a major war has to be debated does not deserve sympathy – it is a self-inflicted predicament. But that incredulity has to give way now to a determined, responsible and based on solidarity, policy. If Putin does decide to make a step forward towards the precipice he will not fall into the abyss alone. He will take with him thousands of Ukrainians, Russians and potentially many Europeans. Our collective job is to ensure that the damage will be mitigated and any further adventures are not possible. But we need to act without hesitation, without illusions and we have to act now. And most importantly we, Europeans, have to act together with our North Atlantic allies.

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<sup>1</sup> See: "The President of the Republic spoke with the President of the United States, Mr. Joe BIDEN and the President of the Russian Federation, Mr. Vladimir PUTIN," Elysee, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2022/02/20/spoke-with-the-president-biden-and-the-president-poutine>

<sup>2</sup> "Speech by the President of Ukraine at the 58th Munich Security Conference," President of Ukraine, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vistup-prezidenta-ukrayini-na-58-j-myunhenskij-konferenciyi-72997>

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Fried, Kurt Volker, "The Speech In Which Putin Told Us Who He Was," Politico, February 18, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/02/18/putin-speech-wake-up-call-post-cold-war-order-liberal-2007-00009918>

<sup>4</sup> "Press release on submitting a written reaction to the US response concerning security guarantees, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation," [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1799157/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1799157/)

<sup>5</sup> Zachary Basu, "Metadata shows pro-Russian separatists filmed evacuation video days earlier," Axios, <https://www.axios.com/telegram-ukraine-russia-separatists-evacuation-23c418ef-cd60-4ab7-afdf-6f3260102a4a.html>

<sup>6</sup> Gideon Rachman, "How Putin took Europe to the brink of war," Financial Times, 20 February, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/73df6814-49fa-4645-97cf-a6732933bc38?shareType=nongift>

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