

Russia, Ukraine, and the West

Throughout the past few years, we have discussed at the Estoril Political Forum the threats of authoritarianism to the rules-based international order and the transatlantic alliance. These dangers were always diffuse. There were ample reasons to consider the internal failures of Western democracies rather than focus on the ongoing hybrid warfare Russia had already been waging against the West. After February 24, the war is out in the open. We should have no illusions: the unjustifiable attack on the freedom and sovereignty of Ukraine is an attack on the West and everything it represents. As Nicholas Tenzer put it¹: “What Putin wants to destroy is the very idea of humanity, and what goes with it: freedom, beauty, nobility of feeling, generosity, altruism, joy, everything that represents something like a form of greatness. ... he intends to show ... that the supposed forces of reason, morality and justice will never be strong enough to resist the steamroller of devastating liberation from any rule.” This nihilist project must be soundly defeated, Ukraine must win, and the West must help in the military, political, economic, and humanitarian spheres.

While the war brought moral clarity, Putin still counts on Western failures to live up to its own ideals. His cynical belief about the decline of the West is not simply a delusion, but it is also informed by personal experience with Western actors. His widespread success in corrupting Western officials and businessmen could give him the impression that everyone is for sale and references to values are just empty slogans without real commitment. He had agents working for him in politics and the business world in the US, the UK, and the European Union. One can get an accurate picture of the ecosystem in the Western business and legal profession by reading the recently published book *Freezing Order* by Bill Browder², Putin’s archenemy and promoter of the Magnitsky legislation worldwide. Russia also has influence over Western governments, and Putin signals confidence in his ability to sow division in the transatlantic alliance³. While he cannot succeed in convincing Western actors about the justifiable nature of his war,

¹ <https://tenzerstrategics.substack.com/p/russian-mass-crimes-in-ukraine-a?s=r>

² Browder, Bill (2022): *Freezing Order: A true story of money laundering, murder and surviving Putin’s wrath*. London and New York: Simon and Schuster.

³ Belton, Catherine (2022): Putin thinks West will blink first in war of attrition, Russian elites say. Washington Post, June 3. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/06/03/russia-putin-economy-attrition-war/>

supporting various appeasement narratives is a clear Russian propaganda objective with a much greater chance of success.

It is only natural that people want peace, especially Ukrainians, but appeasers hide behind emphasizing their desire for peace over the crimes of Russian aggression. In Hungary, the simple message of “we want peace” led to another constitutional majority for Viktor Orbán in the April elections, while the united opposition, which aimed to provide support for Ukraine, was painted as a warmonger and a threat to the security of Hungary. Obscuring and relativizing the responsibility for the war, desensitizing the public to the ongoing genocide in Ukraine, advocating for compromise and concessions is a distinct Russian strategic narrative⁴, which shifts responsibility for its criminal enterprise to those who resist its power. However, one of Churchill’s famous quotes applies to appeasement: “Each one hopes that if he feeds the crocodile enough, the crocodile will eat him last. All of them hope that the storm will pass before their turn comes to be devoured. But I fear greatly that the storm will not pass. It will rage and it will roar ever more loudly, ever more widely.”⁵ We do not have to go back to 1938 and München to find truth in the analogy – in 2014 a neutral Ukraine made concessions about the Crimea and the Donbas regions only to find that a few years later Russia wants to eradicate Ukraine and Ukrainians from the map.

Beyond the desire for peace, rising energy prices, inflation and an approaching recession are also likely to lead to sanctions fatigue in the West or at least Putin strongly expects so. He aims to exacerbate this situation by blocking the Black Sea ports to prevent Ukrainian grain exports. This could cause famine in the Middle East and North Africa, thus threatening Europe with another migration wave. Putin’s condition for unblocking the ports is sanction relief – through this blackmailing, he is again shifting responsibility for his own crimes to those who resist his aggression. The explicit condition of sanction relief however indicates that another widespread Russian strategic narrative about the ineffectiveness of sanctions is false – sanctions are painful for the Russian economy and cause much more severe disruption than the Russians like to admit. In the West it should be recognized that there is no way back to the pre-war era and economic relations with Russia – if the West does not include certain elements in the sanctions packages because the costs would too great, it will be Russia, which uses the measure as a punishment for other sanctions. The instability of gas supplies to Europe since last Fall is a case to this point. While sanctions will not stop Putin in the short-term – the war itself shows that

⁴ <https://tenzerstrategics.substack.com/p/how-the-kremlins-narratives-are-still?s=w>

⁵ Text of Churchill’s Speech on War Prospects, New York Times, 1940 January 21.

his motives cannot be interpreted in a strictly rational framework – they are indispensable in wearing down the Russian war machine.

While the longing for peace and economic stability are valid sentiments in the face of war, there are more sinister factors behind the calls for appeasement. For over a decade Putin has successfully employed various methods of hybrid warfare against the West – strategic corruption, various channels of propaganda and the financing of extremist parties in Europe, Left and Right. While sanctions are making it increasingly difficult to continue these activities, we should have no doubts that a decade of mischief cannot be undone in a couple of months. Russian dark money in the West is hidden behind layers of anonymous shell companies thus measures such as confiscated yachts of wealthy oligarch are only scratching the surface. Political actors, who have been corrupted by Russia in the past decade can still worry about compromats in case they do not assist Russian objectives. While the official propaganda channels of RT and Sputnik have been blocked, there are plenty of other possibilities for Russia-friendly actors to spread the messages of appeasement and confusion. In Hungary, around 80% of the media are basically controlled by the government, and they keep presenting Russian narratives and prospects of certain Russia victory. The most popular Facebook pages are also openly rooting for Russia. Grayzone media networks spreading similar messages have been uncovered in other Central European countries as well⁶.

The pressures towards appeasement are exacerbated by institutional weaknesses. This is particularly severe in the European Union given the unanimity rule in foreign policy, which gives veto power to every member state. A single leader can act as a Trojan horse for Putin⁷ and soften or delay painful sanctions. As the Hungarian government has shown in the past months, the veto power can be greatly abused and used for blackmailing the community. Getting rid of the veto is indispensable for the EU to become a powerful global actor in foreign policy. Behind this problem however lies a conflict over basic values – and the ability of the European Union to reinforce its founding principles as elaborated in Article 2 of the EU Treaty – the respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights. Compromising on these values within the European Union, appeasing authoritarianism eventually dismantles the European project and makes it impossible for the EU to become a

⁶ Political Capital Institute (2022): *Shadow Forces: Hidden malign domestic and foreign “grey zone” media influence in the Czech, Hungarian and Serbian election campaigns*. Available: https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PoliticalCapital_Grey_Zone_CEE_20220529.pdf

⁷ Orenstein, Mitchell and Daniel Kelemen (2017): Trojan Horses in EU Foreign Policy. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55: 87– 102. doi: 10.1111/jcms.12441.

serious geopolitical actor. Appeasement does not work with autocrats outside or inside the EU – a sense of weakness only emboldens them. This is the case with Putin and Orbán as well.

Still, with all these vulnerabilities the West has greatly surprised Russia with its unity and support for Ukraine. Putin does not believe that this support can last, and we should be prepared to all the methods he will use to break it. The West must prove him wrong again. An optimal end of this war is a much weaker Russia, a more careful China vis-à-vis Taiwan, a reinvigorated transatlantic alliance, a unified West, and a strengthening of liberal values across the world. I am hopeful this can be achieved, but it is a long road, and we should be mindful of all the difficulties that lie ahead. As Ukrainians are willing to die for the ideals of the West, the West should demonstrate that it is still worth fighting for.

Thank you for your attention!