

Estoril Political Forum 2024
Ukraine, Russia, and the West
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Good evening, everyone!

- Your Excellency Mrs. Mikhailenko, Ukrainian Ambassador to Portugal;
- Distinguished experts and guests;
- Dear Professors and students;
- Ladies and gentlemen

I'll let myself start by giving a few words of gratitude and, first of all, I'd like to thank the Institute for Political Studies, my own school and a place I can call home, as well as its Director, Professor Mónica Dias, for this invitation. But also, thanks to Professor Rita Seabra Brito for making this possible, one more time, and to Professor João Carlos Espada, my PhD supervisor, for everything he's done for the Institute and its students.

It's the last day of this forum and it's been giving us so much food for thought on the matter of threats, and to be more concrete, threats to the Western, liberal way of life.

We're now here to discuss one of these threats, and personally speaking, the one I find the most dangerous, as it also the most real and immediate, both in time and geography. I'm obviously refereeing to the Russian threat.

I know it is almost unwitting to think of the war in Ukraine as the main physical result of this imperial, revisionist leadership, so well described by Professor Mach. But I'd like to invite you all to kind of "zoom out" your mental map and start searching for all the other places in that map and all the other targets in the Western Community where Russia has been keeping an eye, or sometimes more than that.

It won't take long - maybe 5 seconds - until you're all capable of naming a couple examples. And my aim with this presentation is to give you a general view on some of those examples, which I'm sure you've heard about in the news, for at least the last 2 years.

1. So let's start with History. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has been trying to have something to say in the so called "frozen conflicts" in the former-soviet republics of Azerbaijan, Moldova and Georgia. These conflicts are named "frozen" because they have been waiting for a solution since forever. They're basically linked with the nationalist sentiment brought by the collapse of the Soviet Union in these new sovereign, independent countries, in which there's always been minorities, some of them Russian, with separatist claims. And because these are minorities, they need the support of something or someone stronger. That sponsor is Russia, who finds in these territories the perfect excuse to breakaway this region and to promote instability in or near NATO state-members. So, one of targets I told you about, on which Russia keeps fighting a silent war with the West, are these countries and this sponsorship that keeps feeding rebellion.

2. The second target I want to mention is the Baltic Sea. We have been knowing about it very lately in the news, as Russia seems to be trying the West and testing it with “border redrawing ideas” in these waters. Sweden, but also the three Baltic countries, are the most concerned - obviously a matter of geography – and we should not ignore their warnings on the Russian willing to get to a very relevant, strategic island in the Baltic, that is the Swedish island of Gotland. In some way, it’s safe to say that Gotland stands for the Baltic Sea as the Portuguese Açores do in the Atlantic, meaning that, since 2024, when Sweden became a NATO state-member, the Alliance got to be a lot closer to a bunch of very relevant countries for the Russian dream – and some of these are the ones considered by the Kremlin as the “near-abroad”, which expresses the idea that Russia has to have a sort of “special relationship” with the post-soviet space.

3. The next target in my list the African world. You’re probably thinking that this an old thing, that Russian or soviet influence in Africa is already very well known. But have you noticed the way Russia has been expanding this influence, deepening and growing its footprint in Africa lately? This is a sign that the Kremlin is working on rebuilding some Cold-War ties and specially in places where there’s a lot of people and their political regimes in need of the support of an external actor. Becoming a partner to these peoples and regimes serves Russia’s interests in two ways: first, it helps expanding Russian trade map, military presence and diplomatic support abroad; and second, it helps fighting Western trade map, military presence and diplomatic support abroad.

4. Another threat I want to mention is a very common one nowadays: it's the cyberwar. I believe Russia's ability to remotely create political chaos in the West became especially famous after the American elections of 2016, when Donald Trump was elected. But let me tell you that the cyber threat is much older than that, although it's becoming a lot more useful as technology advances. Estonia 2007; Georgia 2008; Ukraine 2014; Germany 2015; United Kingdom and United States 2016; France 2017; South Korea 2018; Poland 2019; Romania 2022; and now Ukraine. So there's a lot of experience in knowing that modern Russia can use, and uses, technology, and cyber technology, as a weapon too. But there's not the same experience in knowing the rules of this Russian-cyber-club. And the reason is simple: Russia works with both official and unofficial, sometimes illegal, groups and experts, the so-called hackers, to fight its cyberwar – making it a lot more difficult to prevent some attacks and to learn more about these groups' strategies.

5. And last but not least, there's all of us, all European people and all Western World being threatened by Russia's nuclear blackmail. I'm sure you have already noticed the way Russia has been using this blackmail every time things go wrong or not as planned. The most recent example of that behavior is the idea of sending Western troops to Ukraine, which obviously scares the Russian leadership and makes it feel in need of saying things like Russia has already taken all the decisions on the matter of using nuclear weapons if NATO dears to send men to Ukraine. And although Ukraine's position's been that of calling all this a "bluff strategy" by the Kremlin, the truth is that Russia is indeed a nuclear superpower and has got something we don't: that is someone, a leader, available to start a nuclear war.

Now to conclude, and because my time is running out too, I just hope none of these threats I mentioned – and I know there are many more we could talk about – I hope they're not enough to break us away and I also hope that, because of these threats and targets, we all understand that Ukrainian interests are my interests, your interests and all Western freedom lovers' interests. I hope there's nothing in the future blinding us enough that we stop seeing Ukrainian people as all European people's front line. Mrs Ambassador, thank you very much for that.

Thank you all!