

Before the 1917 revolution Vladimir Lenin wrote in exile that *“There are decades where nothing happens and there are weeks where decades happen.”* We have been living through such weeks in the European Union, NATO and a revived West since Russia launched its war of choice against Ukraine 98 days ago. Changes that proved elusive over the decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall crystallised into policy reversals and reforms within days of Russia’s aggressive breach of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. We have entered a new age of uncertainty, triggered essentially by one man, Vladimir Putin, astutely described by America’s CIA Chief as stewing in a combustible combination of grievance, ambition and insecurity. Seeking to understand and not to underestimate Putin is essential to comprehending why Russia is now at war and whether he can be trusted when it comes to making peace.

Putin’s control over the levers of power in Russia is all embracing. Meaningful opposition has been crushed. His opponents have been poisoned, assassinated and imprisoned. His closest associates have been promoted, empowered and enriched. Over the past two decades Russia has been transformed into a security dominated kleptocratic plutocracy with a thin veneer of democracy, with no effective checks and balances. It is marked by elite impunity. Increasingly, Putin’s rule has transformed into a dictatorship in a society long used to autocratic leadership. The registration of NGO’s, domestic and foreign, has been revoked. Russia’s last independent media outlets have been closed. Up to a thousand independent internet sites, including Facebook and Instagram, have been restricted. Dissent has been criminalised through fines and the risk of imprisonment for up to 15 years for calling this aggression a war and not by its official designation as a special military operation. Reports suggest that up to 18,000 have been arrested for protesting against the war. Kremlin dominated print and broadcast media outlets totally control and disseminate the nation’s deceitful war narrative, presenting Russia as liberator not aggressor, as a peace-maker and not a warmonger, as a defender and not despoiler of human rights, as avoiding civilian war targets while laying waste to homes, hospitals, schools and turning entire cities and vital infrastructure to rubble, and as victim of fake news when presented with incontrovertible evidence of war crimes. Putin’s neo-imperial and neo-colonial instincts are ignored by Russian television while western elites and so-called Ukrainian neo-Nazis are blamed for triggering the special operation.

As his grip on Russia tightened Putin’s risk appetite has grown. He has gambled his standing in Russian history, his own future and that of his accommodating

elite on the outcome of this war. He dominates his narrow circle of advisors. One year ago he signed a law allowing him to run for two more six-year presidential terms, potentially keeping him in office until 2036. Putin could serve in the highest office of state longer than Joseph Stalin and longer than any other Moscow leader since the Romanovs.

During his multiple terms in office Putin has carefully cultivated an alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church which plays a key role in shaping and validating his vision of Russia today. Since the collapse of communism all church property seized by the Soviets was returned. The Russian Orthodox Church has the right to teach in all state schools. 25,000 new churches have been built or restored since the early 1990s, most in Vladimir Putin's time. State-owned enterprises and well-connected oligarchs have been in the vanguard of this massive patronage. This marriage of convenience between a strongman leader and the Church carries echoes of Russia's imperial past.

They both promote the *Russkiy Mir* - the Russian World - concept. This comprises a degree of nostalgic nationalism with a revanchist neo-Soviet aspiration to restore influence in the former Soviet Union's near abroad. Its civilisational space finds expression through Eastern Orthodoxy, Russian culture and language and links between historical memory and contemporary nativism. Putin has never accepted the verdict of history of 1991. Nostalgia for an idealised past and the need to right past wrongs should not be underestimated in the mobilisation of popular opinion by both church and state. Russian ideologues promote the dream of a Eurasian Union having Mother Russia at its heart and asserting a right to defend the interests of co-ethnics abroad, thus self-vindicating interventions such as Georgia, Crimea, Donbas, and the current war in Ukraine.

Among Putin's staunchest allies is the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, Kirill who has described Putin's strongman rule following the chaos of the Yeltsin years as a "*miracle of God.*" In a sermon delivered before the start of this year's Orthodox Lent, Kirill echoed Putin's unfounded claims that Ukraine was engaged in the "extermination" of Russian loyalists in Donbas. He chose to portray the war in spiritual terms, saying: "*We have entered into a struggle that has not a physical, but a metaphysical significance*", while referring disparagingly to gay parades. Having spoken to Kirill, Pope Francis told *Corriere Della Sera* "The Patriarch cannot transform himself into Putin's altar boy".

Putin's obsession with Ukraine is not new. In 2002 he was behind Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma's appointment as prime minister of the Moscow friendly Donetsk politician Viktor Yanukovich. Putin publicly endorsed him to succeed Kuchma in the 2004 presidential elections. Yanukovich's pro-western opponent, Viktor Yushchenko, was poisoned in an attempted assassination. In a November run-off Yushchenko had a commanding lead in exit polls but Yanukovich was officially declared the winner. This led to the Orange Revolution. The Ukrainian Supreme Court ordered fresh elections. Putin's man lost. After biding his time Putin weaponised Russia's stranglehold on Ukraine's gas supplies as a tool of foreign policy in 2006 and again in the freezing winter of 2009, by ramping up the gas price charged to poorer Ukraine, higher than to richer Germany through Nord Stream 1.

Using popular resentment at these artificially high gas prices, set by Putin, Yanukovich won the 2010 presidential elections and promptly bowed to Russian power. In April 2010 he struck a deal to extend Russia's Black Sea fleet lease of the Crimean port of Sevastopol until 2042 in return for lower gas prices. Eighteen months later the Yanukovich regime imprisoned his main political rival, Yulia Tymoshenko, on procedural charges related to the gas deal she negotiated tête à tête with Putin in December 2009.

Draft association and trade agreements with the EU were set to be formally signed in November 2013 at an Eastern Partnership summit meeting in Vilnius. Putin was determined to stop this and piled on political and commercial pressure from the summer of 2013 through an economic war targeted especially at Yanukovich's Donbas political base. Putin later promised a massive macroeconomic bailout for Ukraine without the pesky conditionality of IMF funds. This induced Yanukovich to change his mind, press the pause button and refuse to sign the EU Association Agreement. As he flew home from Vilnius student protests had already begun on Maidan in Kyiv.

What happened on Maidan is a key to understanding what followed in Russia Ukraine relations. Ukrainians wanted change not vague promises. They wanted to rid their country of corruption. They saw the EU as a beacon of freedom, democracy, hope, and opportunity. Their neighbour Poland had prospered as Ukraine stagnated. They were choosing to step into a different future and not back to a jaded past. On 20 February 2014 more than a hundred protestors were gunned down on Independence Square in Kyiv. Public opinion was outraged. Days later, sensing that the game was up, Yanukovich and his closest advisors packed up and fled to Russia. The vast majority of Ukrainians

were exhilarated. Putin was outraged. Ukraine was slipping from his grip. He defamed the Revolution of Dignity - Ukraine's term for what happened at Maidan - dismissing it as an antisemitic, Russophobe, neo-Nazi coup.

Based on this self-serving big lie, with breath-taking opportunism, Putin seized control of and annexed Crimea in March 2014, superficially validated by a referendum. It was popular with Russians and boosted Putin's popularity. At the same time pro Russian protests began in Donbas. Declaring the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR and LPR, respectively), armed Russian-backed separatists seized government buildings throughout the Donbas. This led to armed conflict with Ukrainian government forces and has continued in the intervening years in spite of the Minsk Agreements.

The current invasion is a war of choice and so begs the question after so many years of overt and covert interference in Ukrainian affairs why Vladimir Putin chose to strike now?

The Covid pandemic seems to have drawn Putin into an extreme level of self-isolation. The sense of grievance, ambition and insecurity fermenting in Putin's mind yielded an extraordinary 7,000 word essay published in his name last July, entitled: "*On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.*"¹ The essay argues that Ukraine, as a state, was an unreal construction created by Russia and that the Ukrainian nation and Russians are parts "*of a single people*" belonging to the same "historical and spiritual space". If this is Putin's dream, his insecure nightmare is of a coloured revolution of the sort that set Ukraine on a such different course to Russia.

Putin dismisses Ukraine's Euro Atlantic orientation not as a sovereign choice but as "*the result of deliberate efforts by those forces that have always sought to undermine our unity.*" Prefiguring his self-described war of liberation, his essay concluded by arguing that: "*I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. Our spiritual, human and civilisational ties formed for centuries and have their origins in the same sources, they have been hardened by common trials, achievements and victories. Our kinship has been transmitted from generation to generation.*"

That kinship today is being transmitted through missiles, bombs and bullets in a reign of war and criminal terror visited upon the civilian population and

¹ You can find this essay on the Kremlin website in many European languages.

infrastructure of Ukraine through destruction, death, displacement, injury, rape and torture.

If dominance at home and an obsession with Ukraine are one part of the explanation for going to war, Putin's perception of the apparent weakness of his enemies abroad was another.

In early February this year fortified by his anticipated "*no limits*" friendship with China's Xi Jing Ping and convinced of the limits of the Biden Administration and NATO's capacity to act after the debacle of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, Putin proceeded with his invasion plans. The war in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea resulted in sanctions that for Putin amounted to no more than a slap on the wrist. Talk of rapprochement and strategic engagement returned. President Macron received Putin personally in France on the eve of a French-hosted G7 meeting in 2019, five years after the annexation of Crimea. Berlin proceeded with intensified energy interconnection plans for Nord Stream 2. For Putin the EU was weak, distracted by Brexit, by internal divisions, by feeble and aspirational security and defence policies and by anxieties about the Transatlantic Alliance. He sees democracy as post peak and autocracy as on the rise. He sees the West as decadent and in decline.

Moreover, nativist politics had been boosted in the USA, in the EU and the UK following the financial and migration crises. Many, such as Trump, Farage, Le Pen, Salvini and Orban, who deprecated so called globalist political elites at home were attracted to Putin's strongman nationalism abroad. This prevailed despite the annexation of Crimea, election and referendum interference by Russia, direct and proxy cyber-attacks, and Putin's support for the discredited Assad regime in Syria.

Putin's lesson was clear. He was winning at home and not losing abroad. As for Ukraine, Putin's assessment of its leadership was one of pure contempt, and so the die was cast. Viewed through this lens he felt he had much to gain and little to lose. He was wrong.

Putin's invasion of Ukraine marks a point of inflection in global history and is the most momentous geopolitical event so far of the 21st century. This new reality has been an eye-opening wake up call for democracies across the world. For all their contested politics, these democracies got the message loud and clear and responded to the challenge with a speed, substance and coherence that Putin and perhaps even they could not have anticipated.

In the EU for example, and especially in Germany, more strategic decisions were taken within several days of Putin's invasion than had been taken in decades before. Nord Stream 2 was suspended. Years of policy continuity, of change through trade with Russia under Angela Merkel, Gerhard Schroeder and others evaporated in the heat of the moment. Chancellor Scholz committed Germany henceforth to spending 2% of its GDP on defence, explaining the stakes to the Bundestag as *"Whether we permit Putin to turn back the clock to the nineteenth century and the age of the great powers. Or whether we have it in us to keep warmongers like Putin in check. That requires strength of our own."* The EU also broke with long standing taboos in creating the European Peace Facility from its own resources with an initial €500 to provide weapons for Ukraine's defence. Vacillation was displaced by decisiveness, complacency by urgency, division by unity.

Denmark today is holding a referendum on its opt out from EU security policy, Finland and Sweden have applied for NATO membership.² Russia's invasion of Ukraine has changed NATO's posture, with the Secretary General reporting agreement at a recent summit *"to reset our deterrence and defence long term to face a new security reality with substantially more forces in the East, more jets in the skies, and more ships on the seas."*³ The EU's own and growing security and defence dimension will add a new strategic layer to its role as a geopolitical actor beyond its more traditional roles in trade and economics. Its recently published Strategic Compass commits the EU to complement NATO and is likely to see the emergence of closer ties between both institutions.

Russia has been hit by a rolling and escalating range of sanctions without precedent against a large state so deeply integrated into the global financial and energy system. These cover finance, technology, energy, software, computer chips, consumer goods, sport, culture and media. They extend from named politicians and officials and their relatives to asset freezes against oligarchs. Russia's planes cannot land, its ships cannot dock, its trucks cannot drive in the EU and elsewhere. Over 800 international companies have suspended activities or entirely withdrawn from Russia. A growing number of its banks are excluded from the SWIFT international clearing system. The EU

² Denmark voted by two to one to abandon its thirty year opt out

³ NATO has had an active engagement with Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union starting with the North Atlantic Cooperation Council established in 1991. In 1994 Russia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace. In 1997 in Paris a Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security was signed with Russia aiming to foster closer ties among former adversaries. The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined NATO in 1999. A Russia NATO Council was established in 2002 with a focus on fighting terrorism which included cooperation on Afghanistan. Joint projects were suspended after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 but not the Council itself. After expelling eight Russian officials from NATO in Brussels in October 2021 the respective missions in Brussels and Moscow ceased.

has just agreed a sixth round of sanctions planning to cut 65% of all oil imports from Russia and banning Sberbank, Russia's largest bank accounting for 37% of its banking sector, from SWIFT. EU unity has been preserved but its achievement has taken weeks and has been strained.

About half of Russia's vast currency reserve and gold assets built up since the annexation of Crimea as a bulwark against sanctions, amounting to €552 billion, are inaccessible having been frozen by the US Fed and by central banks of the EU, the UK, Switzerland, and Japan. As regards the financial economy high interest rates, foreign currency restrictions and buoyant receipts from energy exports boosted by huge price increases has seen the value of the rouble stabilise, but Russia's real economy is slowing down and will ultimately pay the price of sanctions. Despite the booming energy prices the Russian economy is expected to decline this year by at least 10% of GDP. In the case of Ukraine the decline is likely to be of the order of 40% of GDP.

Vladimir Putin projected an image of being a geopolitical grand master. That impression has been punctured by his political miscalculations in Ukraine. He has strengthened NATO, united the EU, and has become the most potent unifying force of Ukraine's burgeoning national consciousness. His failed blitzkrieg to decapitate the Ukrainian government in Kyiv was an embarrassing fiasco. On every front, politically, economically, diplomatically and strategically Russia is paying a high price, but so too are others, innocent victims of Putin's aggression.

In addition to heavy losses and injuries are being inflicted on the military on both sides, thousands of Ukrainian civilians have been killed and tens of thousands injured. Evidence abounds of war crimes – executions, torture rape, deportation, and the use of cluster munitions against civilians. Eight million Ukrainians are internally displaced. Over one million have been deported to Russia, many reportedly to the far East. Up to six million fled as refugees. Putin may have hoped that triggering a mass wave of refugees from Ukraine would be another weapon to destabilise the European Union. Here too he underestimated Europe's response. For the first time ever the temporary protection directive was invoked guaranteeing refugees' rights. The EU's frontline states and Moldova have responded with compassion and generosity on a grand scale.

A humanitarian crisis looms with the blockage of Black Sea ports. Supplies of sunflower oil, maize and wheat have been cut off. Food prices are soaring hitting the poorest the hardest in terms of nutrition. The UN Food Prices Index

reveals that prices are at their highest since records began 60 years ago. The UN World Food Programme suggests that 49 million people are threatened by famine. The World Bank speaks of a “crisis within a crisis” suggesting that as many as 60% of the poorest countries are either in debt distress or at risk of being in debt distress. Putin has weaponised grain exports by linking them to unrealisable demands for the immediate lifting of Western sanctions against Russia. Proposed EU solidarity lanes for grain export corridors at best may result in modest relief. These crises will be exacerbated the longer the war goes on. The impact will be especially severe in North Africa and the Middle East. In addition to the humanitarian dimension the EU has a self-interest in seeking to address this problem. If the food crisis prompts instability or a sense of hopelessness many younger and mobile people will seek refuge in migration. If they do, it is not to Vladimir Putin’s Russia that they will choose to go.

Today there is a sense of the war tilting in Russia’s direction. Ukraine’s will and determination to fight is not in doubt. Their ability to do so depends on the military, economic and humanitarian support of western allies and the speed of its deployment. This is critically important not only for Ukraine’s capacity to fight the war but also to secure a sustainable peace. When negotiations come, as surely they will at some point, the empirical outcome of the fighting - of who holds what territory - will be the point of departure. Nothing about Ukraine should be decided without Ukraine. The war of attrition in Donbas could endure extending eventually to Odesa and Transnistria or even doubling back later to Kharkiv. Putin can declare victory when he chooses but to date has not spelled out an exit strategy. Russia has open military supply lines into the Donbas and from Crimea. So far Putin has hesitated to decree a full Russian mobilisation. This would puncture the pretence underlying the special military operation and necessitate bringing the war from the shadows of false propaganda and lies into full open view of the Russian public, releasing associated internal tensions across the spectrum from ultra-nationalist patriotic forces to anti-war protagonists. It would require a new more urgent narrative of immediate and existential threat from a US-led NATO aggression extending the current war aims beyond the “demilitarisation and denazification” of Ukraine.⁴

⁴ I would commend your attention to an article published earlier this month by Ria Novosti, the Kremlin created and approved news agency, entitled: “What Russia Should do with Ukraine.” It makes for chilling reading. It equates denazification with de-Ukrainisation, suggests the “liquidation” of the armed forces of Ukraine, “mass investigations,” a generation long mass re-education campaign, and “forced labour to restore the destroyed infrastructure as punishment for Nazi activities from among those who will not be subject to the death penalty or imprisonment.”

For Ukraine the loss of its industrial heartland and of access to the Black Sea would greatly diminish its future potential. President Zelensky says it has lost twenty percent of its territory. For Russia this could end up being annexed. For Ukraine territorially, politically and psychologically this more accurately could be described as amputation, something they are not prepared to accept. Ukraine already is mounting counter offensives, in the Kherson oblast, and is exhibiting an appetite and a high level of motivation to fight on. Western weapons supply to Ukraine has been cautiously calibrated from the outset seeking to avoid any direct confrontation with Russia that could risk provoking further escalation. There is now a more coordinated flow of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine with the United States in pole position and the UK, a strategic first mover, not far behind. German rhetoric in particular appears to be considerably more developed than German weapons delivery to date. All this suggests that the war is set to last for some indefinite period of time. A fresh US commitment to deliver High Mobility Artillery Rockets to Ukraine has been explicitly accompanied by assurances by the US Secretary of State that they will not be fired into Russian territory. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that strategic security, as witnessed by the scale of military support for Ukraine, suggests, in terms of life cycle, that EU aspirations to develop strategic autonomy are closer to conception than birth.

Unity achieved at the outset in the EU, with the US and inside NATO is not necessarily unity sustained. Global and EU growth forecasts are being cut. Inflation is at a four decade high. Energy prices are exploding suggesting the need for a more concerted and pan EU energy policy perspective than in the past. Countries already are carrying debt overhang from the Covid crisis. This all coincides with an overdue adjustment to loose monetary policy witnessed by the upward creep of interest rates. All this is accompanied by a necessary but costly adjustment from a fossil fuel to a green economy. Compared to what is happening in Ukraine these costs are modest. Compared to what people have grown used to this could sow the seeds for a more contested political environment. This leaves politicians struggling to strike a balance between those concerned about the end of the world and those concerned about the end of the week, never easy.

It raises the nagging question about attention span deficit and potential Ukraine focus displacement as other issues rise up the political agenda. France appears to be an outlier in its diplomatic posture towards Putin, supplying arms to Ukraine, yes, participating in sanctions, yes, accommodating refugees,

yes, but differentiating itself from Washington DC, London and other EU capitals in the constancy and level of engagement. President Macron warns against humiliating Russia. Meanwhile key US administration voices talk of weakening Russia.

This hints at a creeping degree of strategic geopolitical divergence which risks to sharply divide opinion between EU member states, within the Transatlantic Alliance and to fuel doubts as to the unity and staying power of Western allies in the minds of Ukrainians. When I was President of the European Parliament, the house was extremely divided in its posture on the war in Iraq, mirroring almost perfectly the wider state of public opinion. The US talked then of old Europe and new Europe and their differentiated responses to that war. The response of the Baltic States and Poland, of Moldova and the EU's other border line states with Ukraine has been immense. The associated costs proportionately are greater as a share of their GDP than all other EU states. The historic memory of what the Soviets did to them remains vivid in their national psyches. They wish for strategic security more that they wish for a more elusive strategic autonomy. Meanwhile, legitimate anxieties remain about what is next for the polarised politics of the United States and its potential negative spill over effects on Europe. The staying power of the unity forged under the brutal weight of Russia's war risks, his health and continuity in office permitting, to be less robust than Putin's long game against a free and sovereign Ukraine.

To conclude, most if not all attending this dinner have lived our adult lives on a continent at peace. Putin's invasion of Ukraine is a shocking wakeup call not to take that peace for granted. When it comes to making peace Europe will have a vital role to play in reconstruction, in security architecture and guarantees and in processing Ukraine's demand for accelerated EU accession. Meanwhile, there is one side and one side only in this war that currently needs and deserves our undivided support and that is Ukraine, the victim of aggression and not Russia, the aggressor.

Ukrainians are fighting to preserve the values that we believe in and promote. They are the front line of defence of our Union's eastern frontiers. We must reassure Ukrainians that their suffering and sacrifices have not been in vain.

Thank you for your attention.

Pat Cox

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