

War pushes us TO RE-DEFINE EUROPE



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Comment

03/2022

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The aggression against Ukraine stems from Putin's speech as a re-founder czar. For at least fifteen years Putin has been theorizing the reconstruction of a great Slavic power dominated by Russia and based on order, hierarchy, illiberal ideology and contempt for the corrupt West. His rhetoric feeds on very different pieces of history, from the Great-Russian nationalism preceding 1914 to the legacy of Stalin by choosing the Soviet victory in the Second World War to legitimize the new Russian state: a war for liberation from the Nazis, of course, but also a war against the oppression of the peoples of Eastern Europe. To these historical roots we add the rhetoric of humiliation: that the Russian people suffered after the collapse of the USSR. The myth of the humiliated nation starts wars.

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Since 2014, Putin has been trying to conquer a country that he does not recognize as autonomous: for him Ukrainians are Russians led by an illegal government built by Westerners after the ousting of his emissary Yanukovych, hence the official rhetoric according to which he sends tanks to free the people from the 'drug-addicted' and 'Nazi' rulers.

However, this war has shown another truth: in order to exist you have to resist. Ukraine existed even before, but how much was it really recognized by Europeans? In fact, we were culturally subordinate to Putin's propaganda. We only saw Russia. The resistance to aggression has put Ukraine back on the mind-map of Europe.

This war precipitates us again in the twentieth century: on the one hand the tyrant, on the other – the Western democracies. In fact, it takes us back to the beginning of the twentieth century, to a historical era prior to the Great War, when the great powers had existed and international relations had not yet known the principle of self-determination. Russia and Turkey remain prisoners of that scheme, of a policy of annexations and partitions.

For seventy years Russia lived apart from Europe. When the USSR collapsed, we hoped that it could reconvert to Europe and the western democratic values. But this process has failed for now. In 1991, it seemed that the West was solid, that it was enough to be on the right side of the world to solve all the problems. But today there is no longer a credible model: there was Trump in America, sovereign winds started to blow in Europe. Today we have to take note that the West born in 1945 from a small Europe and giant America no longer exists: it is an obsolete historical object.

A new West must be re-invented, primarily a new Europe. This war gives us the opportunity to rethink it, to rebuild the foundation of a new EU with a streamlined governance system which is inclusive and effectively democratic. These could be the basis for technological and energy independence, common and assertive foreign policy and defense.

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Meanwhile, we are urgently facing this dilemma: can NATO beat Russia without waging war on it?

The answer to this question is decisive to the ongoing conflict. Mr Stoltenberg, secretary general of NATO, has been consistently stating: "We do not seek war with Russia". And therefore, he has ruled out the imposition of a no-fly zone over Ukraine. It goes without saying that a war of NATO with Russia would be a nuclear war.

Does not wanting war mean wanting negotiated peace? Instead, does it express the belief that sanctions, supplies of arms and volunteers to the Ukrainian resistance together with international pressure will bring Russia down?

The second option does not look credible, it can only be instrumental to prolong the martyrdom of Ukraine, and it also has dramatic effects over time on the economic, social and political cohesion of the EU.

It is also not realistic to wait for Russia to raise its hands. It is unlikely that it will do so while it occupies a large part of Ukrainian territory, whatever the effects – however serious – of the European and American sanctions on the Russian people and nomenklatura. But to bend the Russians, history teaches, it is not enough to isolate them and starve. It would take time. We don't have much of it. One can hope for a coup d'état that will install in the Kremlin a personality qualified to negotiate peace. With this we admit that we have sent the Ukrainians into disarray, saving our souls at the cost of their bodies. We defer to the wisdom of a Russian general or spy, which is even difficult to tell ourselves.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has desensitised us used to tragic paradoxes. To prevent it from leading to definitive madness, which is total war and the permanent destabilization of Eurasia, exploring the negotiation path seems to be a hypothesis worth to be considered. There is an urgent need for serious negotiations for an immediate ceasefire that would

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lead to a lasting agreement on the state of Ukraine. Before Russians cut off the Ukrainian' access to the sea, as they try to do by marching towards Mariupol and Odessa. And before other countries are involved in the conflict – by accident or intention.

A lasting agreement on the state of Ukraine should re-start from 2014 and Minsk agreement of 2015, by considering Russian requests over the status of Crimea and Donbass. That must be the starting point, together with consideration to re-introduce the clause of neutrality within the Ukrainian constitution.

Should we treat it as a dangerous set-back and giving a concession to the dictator? Not at this point in time. Ethical considerations do not necessary go hand in hand with geopolitics. The Europeans and USA have quite a number of cards to throw on the table of this negotiations. For instance, neutrality of Ukraine should be compensated by neutrality of Belarus (as agreed in Budapest in 1998). The whole apparatus of security red lines in Europe could be redefined, including the security of Baltic states, Moldova and Georgia. Furthermore, in parallel the Russian positions in the Mediterranean southern shores (i.e. Libya, Syria, Algeria), in Africa (i.e. Mali, Republic of Central Africa), and even Kazakhstan should be rediscussed. The military leverage in these areas is higher and Russian imperialism can be really rebuffed. This present aggression is the last move of Putin towards filling the vacuum left world-wide (from Iraq to Afghanistan) by USA, and this tendency should be reverted as soon as possible.

On the other hand, Putin is making it clear (since the meeting with Macron on the edge of the invasion) that he will negotiate only with Biden. This is how we should read the way he humiliated Macron when telling him: "I want to listen from the USA as they are the boss of NATO, not you."

China may have an important facilitating role, thanks to their strong interest in world stability, which is driven by trading welfare and the priority of belt-and-road initiative. The good relations with both Russia and Ukraine are a strong asset too.

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However, the major counterpart of Russia at the negotiating table can only be the USA. The EU leaders should make a maximum effort to convince Biden to play this role, which is crucial to avoid a nuclear confrontation, immediately stop the war and set a new security environment in Europe. The EU should guarantee consistent investment in a new common European defense integrated into NATO is a strong leverage as it could be a strategic common engagement for stability and security in Africa and Middle East against “malign actors”.

The commencement of such peace process would give the opportunity to Europeans to really get out, once and for all, from the XIX century logic that has been recalled at the beginning. A chance to reform the governance of the EU towards strong integration and to parallelly reinforce democratic practices.

Last but not least, the EU member states should eliminate any liking for the so called “illiberal democracy” and consistently enforce inclusion policies. These are the assets of the European socio-economic model, of its soft power. For instance, double standards cannot be tolerated anymore in our countries, and human rights should be equally guaranteed to any person seeking refugee status when escaping from war, as well as to any person resident in the EU.

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Centre for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 which deals with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CIR is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CIR creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CIR's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2021, CIR was again recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

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