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A changed reality: the role of the EU and the US in the transformation of Ukraine and Russia

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Abstract The historical causes of Russia's conflict with Europe have not been settled and continue to threaten the stability of the Old Continent. As the last empire of Europe, Russia is undergoing a painful transformation and disintegration, leading to aggressive foreign policy measures. Previous Western attempts to democratise Russia have proven fruitless. Bearing this unsuccessful experience in mind, it seems that the most plausible option to ensure Russia's further development as a European democracy is to make Ukraine an economic, political and social success story—a role model for Russian society that will work as a catalyst for bottom-up democratic changes in the country. In order to help Russia transform in the long run, the West must first concentrate on helping Ukraine by providing the country with real military guarantees, sufficient economic support for the implementation of structural reforms and an adequate level of geopolitical engagement, including the prospect of EU membership.

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Introduction

Europe has gone through paramount difficulties and tragedies throughout the twentieth century, dealing with two world wars, the Holocaust, the existence of gulags and tens of millions of deaths. After the end of the Cold War, Europe stepped into the twenty-first century with faith in its guarantees of peaceful prospects. Unfortunately, recent years have demonstrated that these guarantees are not as reliable as previously thought.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has engaged in another aggressive foreign policy adventure, this time in Ukraine. This has brought back the nightmares of the twentieth century, prompting experts to discuss the possibility of a Third World War (Lucas 2015) and to portray the prospect of a nuclear conflict as entirely likely (Fisher 2015). Intimidating as it may sound, this is the reality of the situation. The Western community cannot escape it by burying its head in the sand and shying away from openly responding to the pressing geopolitical questions at hand.

In this article I will briefly discuss the origins of the ‘Russian problem’ and its effects on the state’s foreign policy, describe the phase of development that Russia is currently undergoing, and provide the readers with guidelines on the actions that the Western community should take in order to help both Ukraine and Russia move forward successfully on the European path.

A fundamental challenge for the US and the EU: the unresolved ‘Russian problem’

The nightmares of the twentieth century were determined by two major factors. The first was comprised of two ‘tectonic’ conflicts: between Germany on one side and the rest of Europe on the other, and between an imperial Russia (the Soviet Union) and Europe. The second factor was the enduring isolationist politics of the US, leading to its unwillingness to assume leadership, both in consolidating European efforts and in stabilising Europe while securing freedom and democracy.

After the Second World War, the US significantly altered its foreign policy course from isolationism to ‘forced engagement’ in world affairs in the face of the rising Communist threat. Together with other European leaders, the US managed to eliminate the principal causes of the ‘German conflict’ by establishing what later came to be known as the European Union and by implementing the Marshall Plan, thereby laying the foundations for a stable, peaceful, democratic and thriving Europe.

However the reasons for Russia’s conflict with Europe have not been removed to this day and it is these that are determining Russia’s current behaviour and the ensuing

threat it poses to the whole of Europe and the rest of the world. The main reason for this situation is the fact that Russia still cannot be regarded as a democratic European country. On the contrary, Russia may fairly be called the last empire of the Old Continent, and it is undergoing a painful process of disintegration and internal transformation.

Russian history demonstrates that it has always been a typical feature of Russia to repeat, with considerable delay, what has previously—several decades or even centuries before—happened elsewhere in Europe. The only difference is that in Russia's case, it usually happens on a far more radical level. In this case, the British and French Empires were the last in Western Europe to collapse after the Second World War, while the Russian Empire did not start crumbling until as late as 1990—in a process that has still not finished.

What is currently happening?

Painting in broad strokes, I will try to provide a picture of what is currently happening on the eastern fringes of Europe. Then I will concentrate on what actions need to be taken on both sides of the Atlantic to mitigate this alarming situation.

First of all, what we are witnessing today is a continuation of the collapse of the Russian Empire, which began in 1990. The disintegration process took a new turn on the Maidan, and now Putin is doing what he can to stop the accelerated dismantlement of the remaining empire. He may be able to delay this inevitable historical process, spilling a lot of blood in the process, but it will continue to evolve regardless of his actions.

Second, my personal prediction is that Putin will stay in power as long as his physical condition allows him to. In the current circumstances, this could be the next 20 years. This means that Russian policies will continue on the same path and that the economic and social conditions in the country will deteriorate further. And this, in turn, means that Putin will inevitably look for new opportunities to demonstrate aggressive behaviour in order to maintain his domestic popularity.

Third, so far all Western attempts to stimulate democratic development in Russia from the outside have been unsuccessful and are bound to remain so during Putin's reign. The clearest example of this is probably the politically motivated murder of the well-known opposition figure Boris Nemtsov in February 2015, which symbolises the regime's increasing hold over the remaining democratic opposition.

Neither Germany's Eastern Policy, nor Washington's 'reset', engagement or appeasement policies; strategic partnership; or partnership for modernisation have brought about visible, positive changes in Russia. Continuing the same policies while Putin is still in power would be naïvely irresponsible. What is more, it would be criminally negligent to agree to Russia's demands to allow it to have zones of strategic interest with special rights to handle everything within them in the way it sees fit (Buckley and Hille 2015).

Fourth, bearing in mind all the previously unsuccessful attempts to effect change in Russia, the action most likely to positively influence developments there is the positive and successful development of Ukraine, along with opening up the possibility of the country integrating into the EU. In other words, the Western community's assistance in bringing about positive economic, political and social changes in Ukraine will also encourage similar developments in Russia in the longer term.

Fifth, this is exactly why Putin is pursuing a long-term strategy of preventing Ukraine from reform, because a successful Ukraine poses the biggest threat to Putin's kleptocratic regime (Dawisha 2014). This strategy implies that the aggression in Eastern Ukraine is more about creating chaos and an economic and political crisis, and stimulating public dissatisfaction than about physically occupying new territories—Putin's primary goal is to create another 'frozen conflict' that would severely hinder Ukraine's ambitions, such as joining the EU.

Finally, the Western community must have its own long-term strategy to prevent Putin from successfully implementing his plans in Ukraine. That is why assisting Ukraine is of crucial importance for the whole Western world rather than just for Ukraine, as this is the best way in which, in the longer perspective, to stabilise Russia. And Russia will only become stable when it is transformed into a European country—in terms of its actions and principles, not just in terms of geography. Thus the war in Ukraine is to be fought not only for the freedom of that country, but also for the sake of this kind of future in Russia and for the sake of ending the last 'tectonic' conflict between Russia and Europe.

Misinterpretations of Russia

The Western community has apparently forgotten the key lesson of the tragedies of the twentieth century: that aggressive rogue states are most provoked by a weak response to actions that breach international norms and agreements, rather than the opposite.

As the West watches Russia's aggression unfold in Ukraine, it is still having doubts about whether its response should be strong and unambiguous. Some of the larger EU capitals are afraid that a strong response might provoke even harsher Russian aggression. This is a misguided approach. A weak Western response, that allows Russia to draw red lines around its areas of interest as it pleases, is exactly what most encourages and continues to provoke Russia's aggressive behaviour.

Politicians in some Western capitals also do not seem to understand the geopolitical importance of what is being dealt with in Ukraine. Both the US administration and the majority of European leaders still believe that it is only Ukraine's fate that is being decided. What many do not realise is that it is also Russia's future and path of further development that are being decided in Ukraine. The Western response is still reactive, responding to Russia's actions, rather than proactive, dictating the region's agenda.

What should we do?

At the moment, we need to show Putin that his military strategy to create chaos in Ukraine is no longer going to succeed. We immediately need to start using a much more precise political language when we are referring to the aggression in Ukraine. We should stop calling it ‘the crisis in Ukraine’ or ‘the Ukrainian crisis’. Rather, we should call it precisely what it is: ‘Putin’s war’. We now are into the second decade of Putin’s wars: first there was the war in Chechnya, then in Georgia and now in Ukraine.

If we start using such precise language, we will immediately face up to the reality, which is that Ukraine is defending itself against the entire military might of Russia. When Putin is facing a much weaker opponent, as Ukraine is today, he moves forward without hesitation. That is why we need to realise that the responsibility to stop Putin’s aggression lies on the shoulders of the Western community.

‘Gangster wars’

On this note, I would like to share some of my personal experience. In 2010, when I was serving as the prime minister of Lithuania, I had the chance to have an unofficial meeting with Putin, then prime minister of Russia. After the meeting I was left with the impression that Putin was the type of person I was used to encountering in my younger days. In Vilnius, where I grew up, we had a district around Red Army Avenue where young Russian-speaking gangsters loved to demonstrate that they were stronger than anybody else. Putin reminded me completely of those local young gangsters.

As youngsters, what we learned from our experience in Vilnius was quite clear: you could not negotiate with the guys from the local gangs. If you tried to negotiate with them, they would immediately perceive this as a sign of weakness, and they would make a move. The only effective tactics were to beat them back, call the local police or run away.

What Putin is doing in Ukraine is not special or new. When we give it a complicated name—‘hybrid warfare’—we are moving away from reality. And the reality is that Putin is fighting a ‘gangster war’ in which one will either need to fight back or call the police, or one will be beaten up, robbed or even murdered. What one cannot do is show weakness—by employing statements such as ‘there is no military solution’, or by trying to negotiate while being much weaker than the enemy. If Putin believes that Ukraine will not be assisted by the US administration providing the needed weapons or threatening stronger sanctions, then it will only be a matter of time before Putin moves on Mariupol, Kharkiv or Odesa.

That is why it is so important to demonstrate to Putin that he is no longer the stronger party in Ukraine. This is the responsibility of the whole Western community, not just President Poroshenko. Let us not run away from our responsibility to stop this ‘gangster

war'. We have to make a simple choice, without removing the possibility of implementing a SWIFT banking ban on Russia or providing Javelin anti-tank missiles to Ukrainian military forces, and make it clear to Putin without waiting for his next move.

Saving Ukraine

As noted above, Putin has a long-term strategy to prevent Ukraine from reforming, developing a prosperous economy and integrating into the EU, because Ukraine's success in these areas would set a positive example for the Russian nation and would be very dangerous for the survival of the Kremlin's regime. That is why it is so important to assist Ukraine, not only in defence matters but also in the implementation of the necessary reforms and the stabilisation of the economic situation.

Over the last several months, I have frequently visited Ukraine to advise the government on their reform agenda, based on my experience in Lithuania. From a political perspective, Ukraine is at the same point as the Baltic states were at the beginning of the 1990s. One could even joke that the real European-style reforms in our region only begin when the monuments of Lenin have been removed throughout the country, as happened in the Baltics in the early 1990s and as has started to happen in Ukraine since the events on the Maidan.

Ukraine is looking like a real post-revolutionary country, with a lot of young and well-educated professionals in the government and plenty of romantic idealism, but with a large deficit in political experience that is hindering political coordination between the different institutions and stakeholders.

Reforming Ukraine

Judging from my experience of reforms in Lithuania, I believe that suitable conditions exist in Ukraine for the effective implementation of an ambitious reform agenda. In order to push forward major structural change, two important factors need to be brought into play: there needs to be a good team of reformers (already present in the current government), and there needs to be a good level of crisis (of which there is too much).

The Ukrainians have already started pushing through major reforms. The government is currently abolishing the huge energy subsidies, which stood at a total of around 10 % of GDP when reforms in the sector started (Aslund 2014), and is also starting to implement crucial reforms in the management of state-owned enterprises. Both of these reforms will diminish the room for oligarchic corruption. In addition, police reforms are also taking place (in July, at least in Kyiv, modern police forces started operating on the streets), and an anti-corruption bureau and an office of the business ombudsman have been created in order to fight corruption in a more efficient way and increase the level of public trust in the state authorities and institutions.

Thus the government in Ukraine is not only fighting Putin's war but is also implementing major structural reforms, which will form the foundations needed to transform Ukraine into a European-style democracy with an open economy.

However, there are a lot of problems concerning the implementation of these essential reforms. There is an evident lack of political experience, a shortage of skills in strategic political communication, a deficit of traditions of effective cooperation between the government and the parliament, and a scarcity of clear party structures inside the coalition. These factors are creating a lot of political chaos, which could very easily cause real political instability for the ruling coalition.

EU membership prospects

The Western community must assist Ukraine in implementing the ambitious reforms that it has decided to undertake. In the middle of the 1990s, when the Baltic states were undergoing similar reforms, our countries received effective assistance from the West, not only in the form of expert advice but, most importantly, in the form of a clear political promise of future membership of the EU and NATO if we implemented all the necessary reforms to transform ourselves into a European democracy with an operating market economy. This promise kept us on track, despite all the political mistakes we made.

What is now needed is a very clear political statement from the EU's leadership, declaring that Ukraine also has such membership prospects. We are all aware that this is not an easy task to achieve. We unfortunately missed a good opportunity during the 2015 Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga, mainly because of a lack of Western unity and leadership, combined with the enduring futile efforts to appease Russia.

Alongside the prospects of EU membership, Ukraine needs its own 'Marshall Plan', a true financial assistance plan. In the EU we are spending hundreds of billions of euros on rescuing Greece, while, in comparison, Ukraine looks like it has been abandoned, despite the fact that it is the ultimate front line against Russia's revived revanchism, which is threatening the future and stability of the whole European project, not just Ukraine.

In order to avoid requesting more taxpayers' money for this financial assistance, the EU could reallocate funds from its 2014–20 financial framework. During this period, the EU has agreed to use a total of around 1 trillion euros for various purposes; Lithuania alone will receive around 10 billion euros of that amount (European Commission 2014). If the member states of the EU could agree to reallocate just 3 % of the total funds for a new Marshall Plan for Ukraine, we could create a financial instrument worth 30 billion euros. In this scenario, Lithuania would still receive around 9.7 billion euros (instead of 10 billion euros). This would probably not be a tragic development for the countries of the EU and at the same time would constitute a reasonable and timely investment in the geopolitical security of the whole of the EU.

Therefore, in my view, based on our experience in Lithuania, Ukraine can still become a successful country with a European democracy and an effective market economy. Ukrainians need to believe that they can achieve this goal. Likewise, we need to do our part and the Ukrainians want to see proof that we will deliver. So let us do what we need to do.

Action plan

All in all, this is what the West needs to do in order to enhance the security of Ukraine and Europe as a whole:

- we need to show Putin that from a military point of view, he is no longer the stronger party in Ukraine;
- we need to use our expertise to assist Ukraine with the implementation of structural reforms;
- we need to offer a clear promise concerning Ukraine's future prospects for EU membership; and
- we need to create a special 'Marshall Plan' for Ukraine to ensure sufficient funding.

Evidently, this agenda is not a very large one: it contains only four general actions that the Western community must execute if it is to stay united in the face of the new threats of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

We have the opportunity not only to transform Ukraine into a European country, but also to create the conditions for the development of a European-style Russia and to offer a positive example for the other countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. The Europeanisation of Russia begins with success in Ukraine. Together we can deliver such a success. But this will require organic leadership from the US and the EU to assist Ukraine and, at the same time, to help Russia in the longer term, which should be regarded as the fundamental geopolitical challenge of the early twenty-first century. There is no better way to ensure that Russia becomes a European-style democracy in the long term than by assisting Ukraine today.

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