

War in Ukraine: Confronting the new reality

Introduction

Today is day 61 of the war in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin's war of choice, a war that dare not speak its name in Russia. Excepting the implosion of the former Yugoslavia, Europe's longest period of peace between states has ended. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the Warsaw Pact, and the Soviet Union followed. Europe enjoyed a peace dividend. The Cold War was over but history had not ended. In Europe it slowly metastasised under Putin's increasingly dictatorial leadership and now has returned with a vengeance. We have entered a new age of uncertainty, obliging us to evaluate and address the new reality. In its starkest terms in Europe we are witnessing a confrontation between democracy and dictatorship. Ukraine is the first line of defence.

Putin and Russia

Putin's control over the levers of power in Russia is all embracing. Having railed against what he described as Western propaganda, suggesting that war was imminent in the light of massive Russian troop build ups along Ukraine's borders, Putin, in his words, launched not a war but a special military operation. Believing his own propaganda that a sovereign Ukraine is a threat to Russia he decided to get his retaliation in first. The registration of 15 representative offices of international organisations and foreign NGOs, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have been revoked. Dissent has been criminalised through fines and the risk of imprisonment for up to 15 years. Reports suggest that 15,000 Russians have been arrested for protesting against the war. Russia's last independent media outlets have been closed. Kremlin dominated print and broadcast media outlets totally control and disseminate the nation's deceitful war narrative, presenting Russia as liberator not aggressor, as defender and not despoiler of human rights, as avoiding civilian war targets while laying waste to homes, hospitals, schools and turning entire cities to

rubble, and as victim of fake news when presented with incontrovertible evidence of war crimes.

Setting the tone from the top, Putin called on March 16 for acts of “*self-purification of society*” within Russia against those who question his invasion, describing them as “*scum and traitors*” to be spat out on the pavement for undermining the unity of the nation. Opposition has been crushed. Putin’s 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 securocrat and kleptocrat-led plutocracy with a thin veneer of democracy, with no effective checks and balances and marked by elite impunity. Increasingly, Putin’s rule has transformed into a dictatorship in a society used to autocratic leadership. His military adventurism has been rewarded so far with a significant rise in his popularity to 83% support, up twelve points from an already high 71% in February.

His risk appetite has grown as his grip on Russia tightened. He has gambled his standing in Russian history, his future and that of his accommodating elite on the outcome of this war. He clearly dominates his narrow circle of advisors as a televised pre-war spectacle revealed. He relished his central stand-alone role when celebrating the eighth anniversary of the Crimean annexation at Moscow’s Luzhniki stadium on 18 March, surrounded by the Z symbol and a flag waving crowd. Paradoxically, in the light of his anti-Ukrainian propaganda and standing under banners reading “*For a world without Nazism*”, this coup de théâtre evoked for me, and I suspect for many others also, memories of a Leni Riefenstahl Nazi propaganda scene from Hitler’s Germany.

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. This was validated by re-writing the constitution through a consultation process whose single vote included multiple changes. Among them were pension and minimum wage improvements, and a genuflection towards Orthodox conservatism by adding constitutional references to faith in god and a ban on gay marriage. According to official results, 79% of valid votes supported the changes to the

constitution. Putin, should he decide and live to do so, now could serve in the highest office of state longer than Joseph Stalin and longer than any other Moscow leader since the Romanovs.

Putin and the Orthodox Church

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. The church is believed to have more than 100 million members. 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 - such as Putin's belief that the break-up of the Soviet Union was "*the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century*" and that the United States took advantage of Russia's moment of historical weakness in the 1990s - should not be underestimated in the mobilisation of popular opinion by both church and state. Russian ideologues and nativists 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. In the past Kirill has described Putin's strongman rule following the chaos of the Yeltsin

years as a “*miracle of God.*” In a sermon delivered on March 6 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. Kirill focused virtually all of his talk on the war in Donbas and made no mention whatsoever of Russia's widespread invasion and bombardment of innocent civilians and civilian targets across Ukraine. 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*”, suggesting, while referring to gay parades, that some of the Donbas separatists were suffering for their “*fundamental rejection of the so-called values that are offered today by those who claim world power.*” As they celebrated the Orthodox Easter last weekend Orthodox Christians across the region were more divided by nationality than united by religious belief.

Putin and Ukraine

When launching the war on 24 February Putin insisted that he was fighting to , to save the Russian-speaking community in Eastern Ukraine, saying the “*goal is to protect the people who are subjected to abuse and genocide from the Kyiv regime.*” He extended the war aims by adding that “*To this end we will seek to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine and bring to justice those that committed numerous bloody crimes against peaceful people, including Russian nationals.*”¹

Putin’s obsession with Ukraine is not new. In 2002 Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, encouraged by the Kremlin, appointed the Donetsk politician Viktor Yanukovich as prime minister. Yanukovich shared Kuchma’s desire to maintain close ties with Russia and was publicly endorsed by Putin to succeed Kuchma in the 2004 presidential elections. Yanukovich’s pro-western opponent, Viktor

¹ 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.”

Yuschenko, was poisoned in an attempted assassination. In a November run-off Yuschenko had a commanding lead in exit polls but Yanukovich was declared the winner, leading to the Orange Revolution, and to the Ukrainian Supreme Court overturning the results and ordering 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 Ukraine.

In 2010 Yanukovich won the presidency and promptly bowed to Russian power. In April 2010 he struck a deal with then Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, to extend until 2042 Russia's lease of the port at Sevastopol, the Crimean base of the Russian Black Sea fleet. In exchange, Ukraine received a reduction in the price of Russian natural gas. In March 2012 the Yanukovich administration initialled draft agreements with the EU and, subject to fulfilling a number of conditions, these 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. He 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 Russian Ukrainian relations and merits consideration. For the vast bulk of Ukrainians the Maidan revolution is referred to as the Revolution of Dignity. Maidan started with students but ended up mobilising an entire society. Like any mass movement it was diverse and attracted many strands but to describe it in Putin's terms as driven by anti-Semite, Russophobe, neo-Nazis is a travesty, a self-serving 'Big Lie' that no amount of Russian repetition and propaganda should be allowed to defame. 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. They were choosing to step into a different future not back to a jaded past. They were not stooges to be manipulated by any

external hidden hand. This movement came from somewhere deep within the consciousness and will of the Ukrainian people themselves.

Old style security crackdowns and an ill-advised legislative package that *inter alia* criminalised protestors and thus thousands of citizens escalated tensions, resulting in the first deaths on Maidan. On 20 February 2014 more than a hundred protestors were gunned down on Independence Square. Public opinion was outraged. The foreign ministers of Germany, France and Poland together with Vladimir Lukin, President Putin's personal representative, and President Yanukovich and the leaders of the opposition parties met into the early hours of the 21st and concluded a deal, witnessed and signed by all except by Lukin.

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. He seized the opportunity to redouble his propaganda that Maidan, though including decent people with reasonable aspirations, was in effect a neo-Nazi Russophobe conspiracy.

With breath-taking opportunism Putin seized control of Crimea in March 2014 and annexed it, superficially validated by a referendum. 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 separatist groups 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. Kyiv for its part accuses Moscow of waging an undeclared war in the region, by supplying troops and heavy weapons to Donbas.

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, witnessed by his preference for video engagement with senior advisers, or, when meeting in person, going to extreme lengths to physically distance himself from his interlocutors. The distance between him and President Macron and Chancellor Scholz in their Kremlin

meetings before the war was launched added an image of diplomatic distancing to his preference for social distancing.

The Director of the CIA, Bill Burns, accurately, in my view, says of Putin that he *“stewed in a combustible combination of grievance and ambition and insecurity.”* This powerful blend 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.”* He argued 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 that 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 bombs and bullets in a reign of war and criminal terror visited upon the civilian population and infrastructure of Ukraine through destruction, death, displacement, injury, rape and torture.

Putin’s perception of the West

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. 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. By way of example, 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 him the EU was weak, distracted by Brexit, by internal divisions about fundamental values and migration, 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, Putin's support for the discredited Assad regime in Syria and the obliteration of Aleppo by Russian military forces. 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.

A historical point of inflection

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 many democracies across the world who geographically are dispersed but who collectively constitute the revived West. 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 under Angela

Merkel, Gerhard Schroeder and others before them appear to have evaporated in the heat of the moment. The long shadow of Germany's belligerent and Nazi past, long since exorcised, vanished as Chancellor Scholz more than doubled the defence budget to €100 billion and committed Germany henceforth to spending 2% of its GDP on defence. He explained in the Bundestag: *"The issue at the heart of this is whether power is allowed to prevail over the law. 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."*

To the relief of its allies, German democracy is stepping up through rearmament to defend Europe's peace, security and freedom against Russia's new fascism. Ironically, history has come full circle. The EU also broke with long standing taboos in creating the European Peace Facility from its own resources with an initial €500 million to provide weapons for Ukraine's defence. Vacillation was displaced by decisiveness, complacency by urgency.

Sanctions

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 600 international companies have suspended activities or entirely withdrawn from Russia. A growing number of its banks are excluded from the SWIFT international clearing system. About half of its 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. This deprives Russia of access to dollars, euros, sterling, Swiss francs and the Japanese yen. Russia has the money to redeem its foreign exchange debts but cannot access it, making default a distinct possibility with ratings agencies placing it in junk bond territory. The IMF expects a deep recession in Russia with

a major decline in purchasing power due to higher inflation and rouble devaluation.

There should be no doubt that Russian diplomacy will be busy assessing how best to minimise and evade the worst effects of sanctions. For advice they can turn to North Korea whose entire nuclear and ballistic research and development programme has been financed by its autocratic regime in the face of some of the toughest sanctions ever imposed on a state. Shell companies, dodgy commodity traders, cyber-criminality, and banks and ships of convenience that facilitate illegal transactions are vital ingredients in the industrial scale evasion of North Korea. A degree of ambiguity by China and Russia, both nominally signed up to UN sanctions, purportedly also has contributed to Kim Jong-un's successful evasion. There is no doubt that Russia will pay a heavy economic price because of the sanctions but their effective policing will involve an elaborate cat-and-mouse and catch-me-if-you-can game, complicated by China's ambiguous response to Russia's invasion, its allergic attitude to external interference in its internal affairs, and its empathy for its new best friend.

Energy Dependency

One significant comfort for Putin is the continued dependency of several EU states on Russian energy imports, especially gas. This remains a source of hard currency earnings for Russia and, of a high share of government revenue thereby enhancing Russia's capacity to wage war. It is a dilemma for those highly dependent importing states who are caught between risking economic recession and political divisions at home and moral opprobrium abroad. Some fear that Russian counter sanctions could cease all energy exports to the EU. Everything is possible, but for both parties, exporter and importer, the prospect of imposing more damage on themselves than their adversary appears to be a limiting factor for the moment.

Diplomatic setbacks

Russia has been expelled from the Council of Europe for its unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine. It suffered another diplomatic defeat at an emergency special session of the UN General Assembly which demanded that

Russia “*immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders.*” Only Belarus, North Korea, Eritrea, and Syria, supported Russia’s own vote against the resolution. A third setback was delivered earlier this month when the General Assembly voted to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council after high-profile allegations of atrocities committed by Russian soldiers during the war in Ukraine.

Security and Defence

Denmark is planning to hold a referendum on its EU security opt-out. Finland and Sweden, both traditionally militarily non-aligned, appear to be on the threshold of seeking NATO membership. This would be a powerful riposte to Vladimir Putin’s unprovoked war in Ukraine bringing NATO closer to Russia’s border as he fights a war in part to enforce the opposite proposition. Russian threats of “*military and political consequences*” including nuclear weapons’ deployment in the Baltic is a form of intimidation unlikely to deflect either sovereign state from exercising the right to make their own strategic choices. As states that practice active neutrality they would add some real Nordic and Arctic weight to NATO.

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.

The NATO Secretary General observes that: “*Meaningful dialogue, as we strived for before, is not an option for Russia.*” At a recent NATO Summit leaders agreed, he said, “*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.” 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.

On every front, politically, economically, diplomatically and strategically Putin is paying a high price for his war of choice.

Alternative Narratives

For many but not all democracies Putin is a pariah. Last December President Biden held a Democracy Summit. Among its invitees were Brazil, India and South Africa. All three were among the 35 states that abstained from condemning Russia’s invasion at the UN General Assembly. The narrative of indignation of the West is not universally shared. The joint China Russia Statement of February last presents a counter narrative arguing that: *“Certain States’ attempts to impose their own “democratic standards“ on other countries, to monopolise the right to assess the level of compliance with democratic criteria, to draw dividing lines based on the grounds of ideology, including by establishing exclusive blocs and alliances of convenience, prove to be nothing but flouting of democracy and go against the spirit and true values of democracy. Such attempts at hegemony pose serious threats to global and regional peace and stability and undermine the stability of the world order.”* This counter narrative is broadly shared by the Global South who point to hypocrisy and double standards in the West, even extending to the differentiated response to receiving Ukrainian refugees with open arms while building fences to keep others out.

De-globalisation

As the integrating tools of effective globalisation such as the SWIFT system or the role of the dollar in global trade are harnessed as instruments to sanction and isolate Russia there is a risk, and over time even a probability, that

alternative competing systems will emerge. These would challenge current Western created and dominated systems both promoting new power centres such as China and insulating them from future exposure to sanctions. The Covid pandemic and the global shortage of computer chips have led to a growing chorus of calls for on-shoring production. The current crisis may accelerate this trend towards de-globalisation.

Food price crisis

There is a more immediate global effect arising for the invasion of Ukraine and the war being waged in the Black Sea ports. The war has cut off supplies from Ukraine, the world's leading exporter of sunflower oil and a major producer of cereals such as maize and wheat. The World Bank President says the world faces a human catastrophe as food prices soar hitting the poorest the hardest in terms of nutrition. The UN Food Prices Index tracks the world's most-traded food commodities such as cereal, vegetable oil, dairy, meat, and sugar. Food prices are at their highest since records began 60 years ago. The World Bank speaks of a "crisis within a crisis" because of the inability of developing countries to service their large pandemic debts, amid rising food and energy prices, suggesting that as many as 60% of the poorest countries are either in debt distress or at risk of being in debt distress. The Paris Club of Western creditors holds about half of this debt and China the rest.

Refugee facilitation

As regards the EU, Putin may have hoped that triggering a mass wave of refugees from Ukraine would be another weapon politically to destabilise the Union. Here too he underestimated Europe's response. For the first time ever the temporary protection directive was invoked facilitating the flight of what now stands at five million Ukrainian refugees. The EU's frontline states and Moldova have responded with compassion and generosity on a grand scale. The need and capacity for EU policy improvisation will remain critical as the war continues to unfold and so long as ambiguity remains about when, how, and on what terms it will end.

EU applications

President Zelensky's insistence on applying for an accelerated EU membership perspective for Ukraine has put enlargement firmly back at the centre of the Union's political agenda. Moldova and Georgia have quickly followed Ukraine's example. This is a nettle that the EU has been slow to grasp over the past decade because of a mixture of enlargement fatigue, high thresholds of conditionality for accession and divided political preferences at the European Council. It carries major implications for the EU in terms of security and defence, budgetary dynamics and institutional capacity and is set to be a necessary but difficult internal debate. Having spilled its blood for freedom and its sovereign right to choose its own future, embraced by the EU and by wartime visits to Kyiv by the Presidents of its political institutions, it seems to me that a contract of expectations on candidate state status already has been entered into implicitly.

Energy security and energy transition

The EU is committed to be the first net carbon zero continent by 2050. In principle the drive to reduce energy dependency on Russia should complement and even accelerate the EU shift away from fossil fuels to renewables. This is the stated policy intention. In practice this cannot be taken for granted. Recall that as leaders and national delegations left COP 26 in Glasgow, as recently as last November, they were confronted by post-Covid global energy supply chain problems and rising energy prices. Their first response was not to think of decarbonisation through the lowering of fossil fuel dependency, on the contrary. President Biden called on Saudi Arabia to deliver more oil and released resources from the US strategic oil reserve, something he has repeated more intensely following the invasion of Ukraine. In the prevailing circumstances of late last year the EU was calling on President Putin to deliver more gas, something the EU continued to do up to early February of this year even as war clouds gathered on Ukraine's borders. Chinese authorities reverted to more coal-fired electricity generation to counter fuel shortages. Faced with problems these responses reveal the trade-off governments are prepared to make in practice between economic growth and decarbonisation. The preoccupation everywhere, but because of the war in Ukraine especially in the EU today, is more with energy security, affordability and accessibility. In the short to medium term sourcing LNG alternatives to Russian gas in the USA or the Gulf will

necessitate heavy capital expenditure in storage facilities and regasification plant and equipment whose necessary economic shelf life will challenge the achievement of radical decarbonisation.

The war

It is to Ukraine that one must turn to confront the most urgent reality of all, war. Russia assembled the largest military force in Europe since the Second World War and invaded Ukraine on four fronts on 24 February, Kyiv from the North, Kharkiv from the North East, Donbas from the East and the Kherson Oblast from Crimea. In the previous five years Ukraine had spent \$20 billion on defence, Russia \$350 billion. Russia assumed a quick victory and seems not to have made contingency plans for alternative scenarios. Kyiv was the prime target with the aim of decapitating the government of President Zelensky and replacing it with a puppet spare part elite. Doubtless there were numerous FSB sponsored sleepers in place awaiting their mobilisation. Russia's biggest failure was to underestimate the Ukrainian will to resist. They were not the only ones to do so. It is hard to know if this was an intelligence failure or a case of pandering to the boss in Moscow who exhibited disdain for the very idea of a Ukrainian nation. Zelensky showed remarkable personal courage at a critical stage when his personal fate hung in the balance. He began and has dominated war on a second front, a communications war. He personified Ukraine's heroic resistance when he declared that: *"When the Russians come they will see our faces and not our backs."* This was not just a reference to the army but to the entire society.

Finally armed with lethal portable weapons, their huge motivation to defend their homeland and agility in battle, the Ukrainians inflicted huge losses and a humiliating defeat on Russian forces who completed their withdrawal from the Kyiv front by Day 42 of the conflict. As for the Russians, low morale, poor motivation, inadequate supplies, poor logistics, a failure to have eliminated Ukrainian air defences at the outset and extraordinarily, unsecured communications on mobile phones and old fashioned radio sets all contributed to this defeat, diminishing some of the mystique surrounding Russian military prowess.

Atrocities

It is said that truth is the first casualty of war. In this case, the first of Putin's lies is that it is not a war. That the war is not aimed at civilians is another lie, contrary to all the visual, social media, and eye witness accounts available. Bombed homes, hospitals, schools, shopping malls, a theatre full of refugees in Mariupol, and a queue of refugees in Kramatorsk tell otherwise. As Ukrainian forces returned to cities, towns and villages abandoned by retreating Russians the full horror of the occupation was revealed. Bucha, Irpin, Motyzhyn and many other places invaded our consciousness and consciences as the evidence of atrocities such as summary killings, torture, and rape emerged from the streets, the basements and the mass graves. One could add the conscription of civilians and forced deportation of citizens from occupied territories to any potential charge sheet. This opens a third front of this war, the search for justice for victims to vindicate their human dignity and rights and the values on which the current but challenged world order rests, as expressed in the UN Charter.

These truths are denied in Moscow, dismissed as fake news, but have led to a formal request by 39 member states of the International Criminal Court: *"To investigate any acts of war crime, crimes against humanity and genocide alleged to have taken place on the territory of Ukraine from November 2021."*

A prosecutor has been appointed and the investigation has begun. Multiple agencies, including the EU, are involved in sifting through and gathering evidence. Since the three great military powers, China, Russia and the USA have not ratified the Rome Statute they are not subject to ICC jurisdiction unless referred by a vote of the UN Security Council on which they enjoy a veto. It remains to be seen if Putin or his generals will ever be brought to justice even if the ICC sought to do so.

War in the South and East

Russia's war has been much more successful in the South, with the notable exception of the sinking of its Black Sea fleet flagship, the Moskva. There the battle for control of Mariupol has been relentless and devastating. It is a key strategic target for Russia that would deprive Ukraine of a major centre of

production and of a vital port on the Sea of Azov, while also directly connecting Crimea to Donbas and through to Russia itself. It now joins Grozny and Aleppo on Putin's list of infamy but is a prize he now claims as a victory despite continued Ukrainian resistance at the Azovstal plant. At the time of writing it remains the war's gravest humanitarian crisis.

After Russia's Kyiv debacle the invasion's points of attack are now concentrated on Donbas in the East and in the South. This is a different terrain requiring heavy weapons which have been a constant demand of President Zelensky. More of these are now being supplied. The West which for years was reluctant to supply Ukraine with lethal weapons has developed a graduated response in terms of the scale and nature of weapons supplied, seeking to avoid escalation and direct conflict between NATO and Russia. The longer the war has continued, and the more Ukraine has exhibited military prowess, the more the West has been willing to deliver. Shock at the scale and nature of Russian atrocities has accelerated and deepened the flow of arms and ammunition to Ukraine. A Russian Brigadier General has spoken of creating a corridor linking the Russian mainland to Transnistria in Moldova, which would suggest conquering Mykolaiv and Odesa and turning Ukraine into a landlocked state. War not words will decide the outcome.

Birth of a new nation

For Putin and the Russian elite this war of choice is existential, one they cannot afford to lose. What the outcome will be and when it will happen is a matter of total conjecture during the fog of war. Putin started the war, and unless he is totally defeated militarily, he can stop it whenever he chooses to declare victory. Since he lies with consummate ease and dominates the message in Russia that could be any time and in any circumstances, including, but I do not expect it, on 9 May, as Russia celebrates its Great Patriotic War victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War. Controlling the Donbas appears to hold the key to his current thinking. It is clear he will never succeed in controlling all of Ukraine, his original aim. If the tide of the war turns decisively against Putin escalation is entirely possible. When the war ends, as long as he remains in power, do not expect Putin to cease his efforts to destabilise Ukraine by other means.

Ukraine, self-confident in its capacity to wage war, may also shift its war aims and seek to expel the Russian occupier. Putin derides Ukraine and Ukrainians but he has become its most potent unifying force, in forging the birth of a new Ukraine whose independence will have been earned not just through a referendum in 1991 but through the blood sacrifice of its people today. I belong to a generation of Europeans whose entire lifetime has afforded us the chance to spill our sweat and not our blood, to build prosperity on a foundation of sustained peace. Putin's savage 21st century war reminds us that peace cannot be taken for granted. It brings to mind a phrase that I thought belonged to history: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* - It is sweet and fitting to die for the homeland. As Ukrainians today, military and civilian, seek meaning for their suffering and loss they refer to their heroic dead not as a glorification of war but as a mark of respect for their sacrifice.

This could be a long war demanding a sustained unity and effort by the West, not just in terms of arms' supply but also of macroeconomic support for a Ukrainian economy in crisis and eventually for its post war reconstruction. Mid-term elections in the USA could undermine the Biden Presidency in November. Long term policy continuity and coherence are not necessarily assured given the alarming prospect, even after his attempted insurrection and refusal to accept the last presidential election results, that Trump could contest the US presidency in 2024. For the moment there is rare bi-partisanship in Washington DC on Ukraine. If Western democracy buckles under the strain it is much more likely to be from nativism and populism within than any realistic threat from autocracy externally.

Post war

The war will end and when that happens the business of diplomacy and politics will return to centre stage. For as long as Vladimir Putin is in charge there will be at least as much political sensitivity to stepping down sanctions against Russia as there has been in imposing them. Sanctions are a slow burn but the longer and deeper they cut the more they will deprive Putin of the ability to buy off the masses with welfare and wage bribes as the Russian economy shrinks, inflation rises and stagnation grows. In the short term Putin is using this new isolation to

mobilise public opinion but over time as the effects bite this will be a strategy of diminishing returns for him.

In the longer term what to do about Russia cannot be ignored. Isolating it forever is not an option. Putin is not Russia. The saving of Russia is for itself to decide, but if change comes a geopolitically alert and engaged EU must be ready for it.

Peace-making is a tough task for all sides in a conflict. It will involve hard and probably divisive compromises. Ukraine will need to be able to frame these in a wider and positive vision of its future. The European Union should be part of that vision, an anchor of freedom, hope and opportunity reassuring Ukrainians that their enormous sacrifices have not been in vain.

Slava Ukraini