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Europe in the shadow of war in Ukraine

“There’s no such thing as a winnable war
It’s a lie we don’t believe anymore”
Sting: *Russians* (1985)

In 2001, three weeks after the 9/11 terrorist attacks against New York and Washington DC, British Prime Minister Tony Blair addressed the Labour Party Conference with these words: “This is a moment to seize. The kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us reorder this world around us”.

Two decades later, and just three days after Vladimir Putin launched the invasion of Ukraine, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, when speaking before the members of the Bundestag, condensed a similar message into one word: *Zeitenwende*. Everything changes, but, when history turns around so much and so fast, it takes effort for governments to get a grip on the events. As we saw, it also takes time.

The war has shaken up the EU, which turned itself into an economic division in support of the defensive effort of a neighbour with whom four EU member states share a border. From the point of view of country size, Europe’s largest country invaded the second largest one. The effects have been not only European but global. It is primarily the population of Ukraine to whom Putin’s war has caused incredible suffering, but the indirect effects have been felt worldwide.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine, with its manifold consequences, have determined life and politics in Europe in 2022 and will continue to do so in 2023. It is very difficult to count in just how many ways Europe has suffered setbacks as a result, although, after a while, European leaders started to see more clearly the global dimensions of this tragic clash between two Slavic nations. European solidarity with Ukraine – in a military, as well as a humanitarian, sense – has been remarkable, but, for a long time, it remained a rather difficult task to reconcile the backing of Ukraine with the economic interests of the EU itself.

Variety of war aims

The Russia-Ukraine war of 2022 took the majority of Europeans by surprise. Very few expected Russia to launch a military invasion, even after 200,000 troops were concentrated around Ukraine's northern, eastern and southern borders. Also, very few expected that, if Russia attacked, Ukraine would manage to defend itself. And finally, very few expected that the defensive efforts of Ukraine could be so remarkably successful. The Russian forces were not only beaten outside Kyiv, but they failed to take over Kharkiv in the north, Zaporizhzhya in the centre and did not even get close to Odesa in the south. They took control of Kherson, but had to withdraw from there after seven months. From September onwards, Russian forces have been on the back foot, and sometimes on the run.

Why Moscow unleashed its armies to brutalise Ukraine and its population was, and remains, beyond comprehension for many outside observers. It became a major trend to personalise the question and sometimes focus just on the state of mind of Vladimir Putin, irrespective of the dynamics of US-Russia relations and the recent history of Ukrainian politics itself. Kremlinology was the pseudo-science of the cold war times; now it has been replaced with Putinology. But Putin himself often rephrased his policy, adding or deleting specific elements and metaphors. Within the fog of shifting Kremlin narratives, there has been one steady and consistent element: the objection to the eastward expansion of NATO. Requiring control, or at least influence over Ukraine, became a pivotal element in Putin's long-term strategy to stop, somehow, the US from pushing NATO into what they considered Russia's sphere of influence, especially after 2007.

However, Russia's war aims shifted in 2022 in response to its success or failure (more often the latter) on the Ukrainian battlefield. Instead of declaring war, Putin announced a 'special military operation', and aimed at regime change in Ukraine by storming the centre of the state. Once this failed, Putin gave up his hegemonic goals, and the campaign took a more territorial character, until the annexation of four Ukrainian counties after sham referenda. Finally, Russian attacks aimed at destroying infrastructure and terrorising the population into submission by rocket attacks. However, partial mobilisation in the autumn raised speculations about Russia's war aims and military strategy shifting again.

The war aims of Ukraine have been simpler, but, to some extent, also elastic. Restoring the pre-24 February status quo (including the continuation of an ethno-nationalist state building) was the original demand, and this also seemed to dominate the peace negotiations conducted with Russia in Turkey in March. However, as decisions were made on substantial arms deliveries (notably, 27 April in Ramstein), Ukraine started to voice a bolder aim to restore Kyiv's control over the entire territory of the country, including Crimea and 100% of the Donbas.

Given its supporting role and the great diversity of member states, the EU defined a war aim in an indirect and minimalist way, which was to ensure that Putin should not win the war he launched against Ukraine, which is also seen as a war against the peaceful European order in which borders cannot be redrawn through unilateral violence. This minimalist approach, however, allowed for different ambitions to co-exist. Some might have

assumed that the common goal was to help Ukraine win the war, and to allow the West to dictate the terms of post-war settlement; for others, Putin not winning may mean that he is forced to find some kind of negotiated solution with the Ukrainian leaders. European citizens probably remain very divided if asked about how long the war should last: until 1) the status quo before 23 February is restored; 2) Russia is pushed back to its boundaries prevailing before 2014; 3) Vladimir Putin is removed from office, and a regime change is implemented; or 4) the Russian Federation is partitioned into smaller entities, all without nuclear weapons and none being permanent members of the UN Security Council.

The absence of an own will of the EU was covered up by references to the intentions of the Ukrainian government, while it has been evident that the latter has not been an autonomous decision-maker. Especially since April, when the western military and financial aid to Ukraine was stepped up, Ukraine became even more dependent on US policy and Washington's war aims. And those are less difficult to figure out. The US (with the UK on its side) primarily wanted to use this conflict to weaken Russia, not only to reduce its capacity and make it less likely that it would terrorise its neighbours again, but also to make it less likely that in other parts of the world Russia would appear with military goals and interventions that contradict those of the US. The White House also wanted to line up western and central Europe into a genuine global conflict 'between democracy and autocracy', in which China and Russia are designated as main adversaries of the liberal West (which, in reality, is a northwest, given the divergence of views in the southwest in terms of political economy, in general, but, more importantly, regarding the judgment on Putin's war and the role of the US in Ukraine and other conflict zones).

The Russia-Ukraine war also became instrumental for the US to introduce a sanctions regime that will ensure, in a new international economic order, western Europe will be disconnected from Russia's markets and from its energy and raw-material resources. It has been a long-term preoccupation of Washington to unplug Germany, in particular, from the cheap oil and gas supply of Russia, but the moral suasion efforts of previous years have not been successful. Ahead of the invasion, about which the White House had reliable and unequivocal intelligence for about six months before it happened, the US was ready with a list of economic sanctions, starting with the cancellation of Nord Stream 2, that would implement the grand strategy to reorder economic relations much faster than with the list of arms supplies that would be needed by Ukraine to expel the aggressor. The latter effort was only made in a serious way in the second half of April, after the Ukrainians proved that their state was not about to collapse and the shambolic invasion army could be repelled.

Western responsibility?

When a war begins with an act of aggression, it is obvious, at least from a legal point of view, that the aggressor is fully responsible. Nevertheless, once this war broke out, in a variety of discussions, it was argued that western actors, governments and organisations might also bear at least some partial responsibility.

Since the outbreak of the war of aggression, a large amount of superficial talk highlighted the responsibility of Germany and a few other European countries because of their policy to trade with and invest in Russia, and in particular for purchasing natural gas and oil from the state headed by Vladimir Putin. From an accountancy point of view, this is not an incorrect observation, but from a long-term policy perspective, it is not really a substantial one. Russian oil and gas could have found markets elsewhere in the long run, which is the relevant time frame to be applied here.

It is like suggesting that those who saw *Saving Private Ryan* in the cinemas 20 years ago were responsible for the Iraq war, which was launched by the US, UK and Poland without a genuine justification and legal basis. And what matters in reality is not the revenues from one specific commodity, but the overall economic strength of the country, and the relative power of the would-be aggressor and would-be target.

Even without selling gas to Germany, Russia would have grown its economy faster than Ukraine. From the much-criticised Nord Stream 2 pipeline, not a single molecule of gas has arrived in Germany and, consequently, not a single penny was gained by Russia. Since the end of the cold war, and especially since Russia's World Trade Organization membership in 2012, the whole world developed trade and investment relations with Russia, and countries geographically close to Russia found it economically rational to buy sources of energy. Germany, which is particularly criticised for building the Nord Stream pipelines, was actually right to diversify routes, while, on the other hand, it failed to diversify the sources of energy, especially of natural gas.¹

More interesting is what US experts John Mearsheimer and Jeffrey Sachs highlight all the time, which is the responsibility of NATO, and the United States in particular. Russia was not attacked by the US, but growing US military presence and influence through NATO cooperation and otherwise in its neighbourhood, together with the US meddling in Ukrainian domestic politics and the civil war in the Donbas, which became a major irritation, threatening, among other things, the Russian naval positions in the Black Sea region.

Although the NATO factor cannot be considered irrelevant, Mearsheimer is probably wrong to suggest that the US government misunderstood the situation. It might be more accurate to speak about strategic ambiguity: offering NATO enlargement but not meaning it beyond a certain point, insisting on an 'open door' policy, but freezing the eastern frontier of NATO in practice. This strategic ambiguity became particularly striking in 2021 with the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan (which might have signalled to Russia, as to the rest of the world, that the Biden administration aimed to cut costs of foreign military engagements). Altogether, floating NATO membership for Ukraine for over a decade was a strong enough message to infuriate Moscow, but it did not do much to deter an invasion, even if some thought that amassing troops around the border was just a bluff.

1 Germany's dependence on Russian energy was almost inevitably increased by the hysteria following the Fukushima disaster in Japan and the destruction of energy-exporting Iraq and Libya by the Atlantic powers; the overestimation of the potential in renewables and the long-lasting stagnation of the eastern (formerly German Democratic Republic) regions, which would have been the primary beneficiaries of Nord Stream 2 delivering cheap natural gas.

It was not at all obvious because of the fuzzy communication on this matter for years, but, in reality, the invasion of 24 February found Ukraine without actual military allies. The only point of reference for protecting Ukraine was the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which was violated by one of the signatories (Russia), and while the western signatories (US and UK) immediately started to deliver more weapons and training to soldiers, the results were only visible in the autumn, that is, six months after the invasion. France and Germany were not signatories of this Memorandum, but they were also expected to act as if they were. At the end of the day, while it is not irrelevant to speculate about what exactly various western actors could have done to reduce the risk of Russian aggression against Ukraine, nothing compares to the fundamental responsibility of Russia itself, and more specifically of Putin and his acolytes, who took the decision on the invasion within a rather narrow circle.

Europe infantilised

In a staff meeting on 13 October, the EU's High Representative and Vice-President (HRVP) of the Commission (aka foreign policy chief), Josep Borrell, stopped beating around the bush and exposed the long-term underperformance of the External Action Service. He said he was supposed to be the best-informed foreign policymaker, by having such an extensive diplomatic staff, but he did not think he actually was. Borrell's frustration was surely justified, although the problems experienced in 2022 had much deeper roots than just a lack of information and underperforming diplomats.

It was not so much the question that the services of the European actors were lacking, but the political level at which, throughout 2021, these were missing from negotiations with Russia on Ukraine. These were practically monopolised by Washington, even after the US had already briefed its NATO partners about the certainty of the Russian invasion. And once the war began, the EU found itself at a low level of the command chain.

For years, the EU has been working on the concept, and policy, of strategic autonomy. This dossier suddenly disappeared into a deep drawer in February 2022. Europe suddenly switched to security mode, which also meant following the leadership of the US. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg decided to postpone his long-awaited transfer to the central bank of Norway. All three functions of NATO ('to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down') were exercised in full, although then NATO Secretary General Lord Ismay was referring to the Soviet Union, this time it was the Russian Federation whose power and influence had to be cut.

The EU had to change speed or direction (or both) on many issues. Climate policy is an important example. For two years, even at the time of the pandemic, the EU's number one policy was the Green Deal. After February 2022, the EU mantra was that Europe could double down on climate goals thanks to the war. However, the reality has been much grimmer. Since the EU's announcement to shift to non-Russian supplies resulted in an immediate skyrocketing of natural gas prices, Europeans started to import shale gas, which is environmentally much more harmful, and some countries saw the opportunity to

return to coal. Others made it easier to chop down trees, as the only option for the rural population to cope with the rising risk of energy poverty.

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen emerged as a lead coordinator of the European support effort, but her strategy was not without risks. In order to provide moral support to Ukraine's war effort, she started to overstate the chances of Ukraine joining the EU. She used bogus language (e.g., about Ukraine belonging to the European family) to make Ukrainians believe that somehow their country could naturally fit into the EU structures, as we know them today. When speaking publicly with Ukrainian politicians about the chances of EU accession, she did not reject the populist narratives suggesting that the speed of EU accession depends on the bureaucratic performance in Brussels, as opposed to the country in question matching EU standards and rules. Seriously speaking, if Ukraine had been anywhere close to EU membership, it would already have been a candidate before February 2022. Nevertheless, the European Council granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova at the end of June 2022, giving evidence of the geopolitical *Zeitenwende*.

At the same time, when von der Leyen spoke to EU citizens, she constantly downplayed the expected costs of the derationalisation of energy policy and of turning the EU into an economic hinterland of war in Ukraine. No wonder Europeans were disappointed when the sanctions imposed on Russia were not helping to force the aggressor to end its campaign and leave Ukraine alone, and even more when the continent was sliding into a most-unprecedented economic recession, together with a long-term reduction of growth potential and living standards.

Under the shock of the war, European leaders decided to frame energy policy as part of a global struggle between democracy and autocracy (which essentially is a hybrid world war for the rebalancing of the global economy), but shortly after they started to appeal to autocratic Arabic leaders for critical oil and gas deliveries. In May, Sweden and Finland decided to apply for membership to NATO, only to find themselves at the mercy of human rights champions Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Viktor Orbán to fulfil their newly developed ambition, and faced by tough choices regarding the fate of Kurdish freedom fighters. All this showed that, while war tends to simplify thinking and people tend to see the world in black and white when a conflict gets polarised, there are certain complexities we cannot escape, even under such stressful circumstances.

Limits of western support and unity

Support for Ukraine by North America and western and central Europe took various forms from the very start of the war. This Transatlantic community delivered military and financial aid, as well as humanitarian assistance to millions of refugees. At the start, Americans and Europeans were unclear about how much military aid and how quickly it could be provided, while the speed and intensity of economic sanctions on Russia appeared to be robust. Western politicians' rhetoric never missed references to 'unwavering support', while the limitations of this support were also quickly visible.

What was clarified in the hours following the invasion of Ukraine, and confirmed again and again in subsequent months, was that the northwest did not wish to enter into a direct confrontation with Russia. This became perhaps the most important lesson of the last six months, even if it was a lesson learned during the very first month of the war. We quickly learned that the unwavering support of the west would certainly not amount to deploying troops or nuclear weapons on Ukrainian ground. After short exchanges in March, it was also clarified that the west would not offer no-fly zones for Ukraine, and fighter jets from the stock of NATO member state air forces would not be provided either. Various western countries (primarily the US and UK, but many others too) sent light and heavy weapons, but often this did not mean the newest and most powerful versions of the given weapons.

In other words, European politicians were busy continuing gesture politics in support of the narrative of Ukrainian nationalism, while providing further military aid was about to encounter two barriers. One serious limit was the objection of the US and other western governments to provide weapons that could be used to hit Russian territory (highest power HIMARS rocket launchers or ATACMS rockets), and the other one was, especially towards the end of 2022, the concern about reaching the minimum levels of arms stockpiles preserved by western countries should a worst-case scenario materialise.

The Ukrainian army has been reinforced and managed to roll back the invaders through a counteroffensive. In the last quarter of the year, Ukrainians also managed to hit certain targets (e.g., air bases) deep inside the territory of the Russian Federation. But, at least until the end of 2022, the counteroffensive remained far from pushing back the Russian armed forces to the pre-February positions, let alone pushing them out of the entire territory of Ukraine.

The obvious and apparent limits to military support underlined the importance of economic warfare, even if the actual potential of the latter has been and remains dubious. Sanctions on Russia have been in place since 2014, but new ones were rolled out with the speed of light and in unprecedented forms. In a normal operational mode of European institutions, much smaller initiatives go through a thorough process of impact assessment, sometimes not once but twice. This did not happen in the case of the sanctions on Russia or the major decisions on energy policy, at least not in the weeks immediately after the invasion. At the same time, the impression was created that economic sanctions could be effective substitutes for military aid, but it was never properly explained how this would work out. Due to the somewhat fuzzy rhetoric of political leaders, Europeans might have, therefore, remained confused about the actual purpose of the economic sanctions. Were they rolled out to block Putin's capacity to wage a protracted war in Ukraine; simply to punish Putin and the ruling circles of the Russian Federation; to trigger a regime change in Moscow; or, perhaps, to undermine Russia's military might and purge its aggressive nature for the long run?

What some Europeans realised at the very start, and many more towards the end of the year, was that the new age of economic warfare is much more costly for Europe than for the US, which used the new global situation to enhance the competitive edge of its economy in a variety of sectors, starting with the export of liquid natural gas. The US

doubled down with the so-called Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), heralding a new era of industrial protectionism. Only at the end of 2022, and after the Nord Stream pipelines were blown up by unidentified saboteurs, did France and Germany express discomfort with the US strategy to reshuffle the cards of the global economy, of which management of the war in Ukraine is just one deal. Together with Olaf Scholz's courageous visit to China (4 November), this was a sign of Europe not being prepared to go against its own economic interest beyond a certain point. Western Europe cannot afford to reduce its own economic powers and needs to keep all options open, even if it is more difficult to make the case for prosperity at a time of hostility and global conflict.

Learning to love the war

Notwithstanding the tremendous damage the war has been causing and will continue to cause, primarily to Ukrainians, but also to many others in eastern Europe and elsewhere, European public discourse became quickly dominated by the view that war has no alternative, especially not diplomacy. The 'West' should basically support Ukraine as long as it wishes to fight, and Ukraine should define its war aims autonomously. Such claims were based on the false assumption that Ukraine can take autonomous decisions while its military capacity almost entirely depends on western and, particularly, US aid.

With ever-increasing western commitments to the war came the management of expectations, suggesting that 'we are in this for the long run'. There should be no fear of increasing costs or the repercussions of sanctions. Although it is not very well defined (unless we mean unconditional surrender by Russia), Ukrainian victory is the only acceptable outcome of the war. There should be no fear of escalation, and those speaking about nuclear risk or world war three are either cowards or supporters of Putin.

Sky television's favourite defence and security expert, Professor Michael Clark from King's College London, was suggesting that the Russia-Ukraine wars could last six to seven decades, and where we are now is only the second one (the first one took place in 2014-2015). And if permanent warfare is not comfortable, let's speak about 'unpeace', as proposed by the British-American Kremlinologist Fiona Hill, who borrowed this comforting expression from Mark Leonard of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

In essence: Europe's homework is to overcome its aversion to military conflict. Europeans should forget about being from Venus, while the US shoulders the responsibility (and direct costs) of keeping the challengers of the west at bay. Mugged by the reality of Russian aggression, we should all move to Mars. This interplanetary metaphor was first applied to geopolitical analysis by the neoconservative American author Robert Kagan, whose spouse, Victoria Nuland, was the main government official shuffling the cards on Ukraine on behalf of the US in both 2013-2014 and 2021-2022.

Neoconservatives have been showing the way to much more than full solidarity with Ukraine. Their trademark has been a fusion between liberal internationalism and hegemonic unilateralism. As in previous cases, this recipe has helped to undermine multilateralism and

frame the contemporary conflict as a clash of civilisations, even in 2022. This was a most obvious sign of neoconservatives, an epistemic community advocating US supremacy and orchestrating military interventions, having completed their transition from the Republican Party, which they influenced from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush, to the Democrats, following their disappointment with Donald J. Trump, who is a controversial figure in US politics, and particularly dangerous to democracy, but took a position against generating new wars.

For many, the support for Ukraine stemmed from sympathy with the perceived underdog, without any historic knowledge or security doctrine. For others, this became a historic opportunity for revanchism, that is, for paying Russia back for grievances of 200 or 300 years in a war in which only Ukrainians need to risk their lives, while many others along Russia's borders would benefit. Ukrainians' will to fight has been held up as evidence that war is the only decent option, even if this will had to be qualified by the suppression of political pluralism within Ukraine and the ban on fighting-age men leaving their country. Creating legends on the Ukrainian side ('Ghost of Kyiv', defenders of Snake Island etc.) and exposing atrocities by the Russian forces helped to maintain the fighting spirit within Ukraine but also among supportive nations.

Given the dramatic effects on food prices and the manifold repercussions of economic warfare (starting with energy costs but also well beyond these), the West started to incur significant costs stemming from the war, while the primary human losses have been suffered exclusively by Ukrainians. Therefore, much of the public sentiment in the West, especially among younger people, treated the Russia-Ukraine war as if it were fantasy football. One takes sides, wears the colours of the team being supported, and wishes that the next fixture ends with victory for our favourites and loss for our opponents. What was remarkable after 24 February was how quickly the public sentiment could shift to total belligerence, shepherded by a myriad of 'security experts' who could afford to be ignorant about economics and indifferent to the human and environmental consequences of warfare.

Annalena Baerbock (Germany's answer to Luigi Di Maio of Italy) managed to say in a Prague meeting that she wanted to deliver for the people of Ukraine, no matter what her German voters think. Simplification, exaggeration and pretending that the current case is somehow unique and does not need to be contextualised have all been ingredients for the overall framing of the clash between, on the one hand, the West, which equals democracy and a rules-based international order, and, on the other hand, the Russians, who are genetically imperialists, if not fascists. No wonder, this wholesale militarisation of public thinking and discourse favoured a shift towards Eurocentrism, civilisational conflict and right-wing ideologies in European domestic politics, influencing all major elections of the year. The elections in Hungary, France, Sweden, Italy and Israel had one common element: significant net gains by far-right political forces. This development was bad enough for progressives in Europe, but it was not the main cause for continuing the war. What was missing from April onwards was the openness of the two sides, Moscow and Kyiv, to sit down at the negotiating table, and this remained the case until the end of 2022.

The inconvenient peace

“Agreeing peace requires courage – more courage than continuing the war – to engage in dialogue and compromise”; these were the words of HRVP Josep Borrell on 11 August 2022. He made this statement in the context of the war in Ethiopia, but the approach should also apply to the war that is geographically closer to us: the one in Ukraine.

In fact, in 2022, it was not only agreeing on peace that required courage but merely speaking about it sometimes. For a while, in March 2022, peace talks between Russia and Ukraine went on for weeks in Turkey, and not without any hope. But once those talks broke down, western discourse became dominated by the notion that, under the current circumstances, peace could only be unjust. There should be peace in the end, but only after Ukrainian victory. The right place for decisions was not the negotiating table but the battlefield.

Juxtaposing peace and justice became so widespread that the ECFR decided to ask Europeans in ten countries about which one they considered more important than the other. The pollsters of EPSR found Europeans sharply divided over how the Ukraine war should play out, with some favouring peace and others wanting ‘justice’. The survey showed that 35% of Europeans were in the ‘peace camp’, favouring an end to the war as soon as possible. On the other hand, 22% of respondents wanted ‘justice’, punishing Russia for its invasion and fully restoring Ukraine’s territory. Among those surveyed, Poland had the most respondents wanting ‘justice’ against Russia, while Italy, Germany and Romania had the most favouring a peaceful end to hostilities.

When this survey was produced, western solidarity was just entering the phase when weapons deliveries started to make a difference on the Ukrainian battlefields, and at the same time, campaigning for EU membership of the country that stood up for its independence from the larger and aggressive neighbour also intensified. This, together with piling up economic sanctions against the aggressor, meant that solidarity was pointing towards an escalation of the conflict rather than bringing it to an end, or at least a halt.

By the end of June, Ukraine (together with Moldova) became candidates for EU membership. However, it was somehow side lined that, between escalation and EU membership, there will have to be de-escalation, ceasefire, peace and reconstruction, and perhaps also a period of reforms. Not even theoretically can we jump from the escalation of warfare to EU membership, and in practice it is definitely impossible, and all the interim steps will have to be designed, engineered and implemented.

However inconvenient it is to talk about it, peace is a precondition for reconstruction and EU integration. And for peace to be lasting, it has to be built on mutual understanding. Peace to last cannot be perceived as unjust. In other words, it has to be genuine. The concept of proxy war was invented a long time ago, but there is no such thing as proxy peace.

What became even more inconvenient than talking about future peace was mentioning the peace before this war. The reason is that, in reality, the Russian aggression on 24 February was not the start of the war; it only turned an internationalised civil war into an

interstate war. The domestic political conflicts in Ukraine turned violent in 2014, triggering interventions by the US (politically) and Russia (militarily) on the two sides. The Minsk agreements aimed at restoring peace, and what is today particularly inconvenient is to admit that the outcome of the war could be more favourable for Ukraine than what maintaining the Minsk II framework would have been, through the application of the Steinmeier formula (originally proposed in 2015).² The inconvenient truth is that international diplomacy did not invest enough in the implementation of the Minsk agreement, and thus, was not able to avoid a devastating war – perhaps because the Russian threat was considered a bluff.

Some commentators, like Branko Milanovic, pointed out that the United Nations, whose job would have been to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table, was nowhere to be seen, except for two facets: the deal that was hammered out to secure grain exports from Ukraine through the Black Sea, and the safety and security of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant. No visible attempt was made to build a broader ceasefire or de-escalation strategy out of these two interventions. Nobody invoked the spirit of Martti Ahtisaari or Richard Holbrooke, and advocating diplomatic talks and a ceasefire, while the West continued to supply arms to the Ukrainian side, was often condemned as some kind of heresy.

In 2009, Barack Obama received the Nobel Peace Prize “for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples”. He did not need to be an actual peacemaker to receive this prize. The Russia-Ukraine war is a big enough conflict to reward those who actually invested political capital in avoiding it. Politicians who made great efforts to restore peace in Ukraine and avert Russian aggression (e.g., Frank Walter Steinmeier) could also be nominated for a peace prize. Not least because the Minsk framework remains a point of reference for those whose job it will be to design the next peace, however inconvenient this might be.

History taken hostage

Various interpretations of history have played a crucial role in the two sides of this war in deepening the conflict and making dialogue and eventually a *rapprochement* more difficult. The Russian build-up for the war in 2021 included the creation of a narrative that would help to influence public opinion in Russia, but potentially also to disarm some of the opposition in other countries to the enforcement of Russian dominance over Ukraine. Vladimir Putin’s infamous essay on the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians (July 2021) was a mixture of historical facts and fictitious interpretations, overstating the togetherness of Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian nations and essentially denying the fact that Ukraine could be an independent nation and state.

² The Steinmeier formula was an attempt in 2016 by the then German foreign minister to ensure implementation of the Minsk II agreement (2015) by calling for elections to be held in the separatist-held territories in Donbas under Ukrainian legislation and the supervision of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In October 2019, the Ukrainian government actually expressed its agreement with the Steinmeier formula.

Putin's provocation was not the first one, and it also created a specific battlefield. History often took the place of normal political discourse, and became a tool of the propaganda war on various sides. For example, history was instrumentalised by references to 1956 (the year of the Hungarian uprising against Stalinist leadership suppressed by Soviet army intervention) when Poles, Czechs and others in the region wanted Viktor Orbán to hate the Russians as much as they did and abandon his overt and covert pro-Putin stance. World War II images were used and abused, from appeasement bashing to comparing Putin to Hitler. Like previous adversaries of the US (Slobodan Miloević, Saddam Hussein etc.), Vladimir Putin was often compared to the leader of the Third Reich, and even a new nickname – Putler – was coined for him.

Poland's right-wing government continued to demand reparations from Germany for acts during World War II, although without labelling them as genocide. At the same time, memorials for liberation from Nazis by the Soviet army are being taken down and the German Bundestag, in November 2022, declared that the Soviet Union committed genocide in one of its member states, Ukraine, in the 1930s. Indeed, a remarkable reinterpretation of 20th-century history is underway.

Putin's version of Russia-Ukraine relations, with his broader world view, was feeding on the concept of Eurasianism, represented among others by Alexander Dugin, whose daughter was, probably mistakenly, assassinated in August 2022. Dugin and similar thinkers have cultivated an ideology of Russia being distinct and virtuous, as opposed to the decadent West. Meanwhile, in the West, the mirror images of Dugin emerged, agreeing with the Euroasianists regarding the existence of the civilisational Iron Curtain, but considering the West immaculate and virtuous and the East to be hopeless regarding reform and convergence.

In December, Ursula von der Leyen contradicted this east-west schematism and came under attack for drawing a parallel between Russian and British imperialism, when speaking to the joint session of the houses of the Irish parliament (Oireachtas). The European Commission president claiming that Ireland "knows what it means to struggle for [the] right to exist", was heavily criticised by British conservatives like Jacob Rees-Mogg. In reality, von der Leyen was too generous to the British, neither exposing disastrous military adventures of the UK in recent decades, nor criticising the dubious role the former British PM Boris Johnson played in relation to the war in Ukraine.

The excessive and inappropriate metaphorisation of World War II was criticised by Anatol Lieven. He pointed to the role of a small conflict (Austro-Serbian rivalry over the control of Sarajevo) in generating World War I as a much better comparator than World War II. Had leaders known in 1914 what the consequences of the explosion of the Bosnian powder keg would be, they presumably would have been keener to find a negotiated solution. The same would apply to the dispute around Crimea and Sevastopol. However, referencing World War I has remained an atypical approach, just like rare comparisons to the post-imperial wars of the British and the French (the former being the case with von der Leyen), and also rare analogies with the post-Yugoslav wars of secession, which dominated southeast European history in the 1990s, with grave consequences ever since.

The dispute around the Donbas can be compared to the case of Alsace-Lorraine. Having not only a mixed population, but, more importantly, the reserves of coal and iron ore, Alsace-Lorraine was a theatre of geopolitical competition and war between Germany and France. The German Empire annexed it in 1871, but the borders changed again after World War I. The long-term settlement of the conflict was provided after World War II by the launch of the European Coal and Steel Community (and subsequently the EEC) by France and Germany together with four other western European countries. However, as long as Russia and Ukraine are in a conflict, the utility of such comparisons remains limited, while the manipulative use of World War II references will remain with us.

To offer another example in this series, the total confusion regarding the long shadow of World War II was on display at the United Nations, where, following a practice introduced in 2012, Russia has put forward a motion to condemn the glorification of Nazism and collected over 100 votes (4 November). The opposition, with half as many votes, included the US, the UK and Germany. Call it a Hegelian ruse of reason, but it was very fitting when, at the end of this turbulent year, the German authorities had to foil a domestic conspiracy that was about to overthrow the democratic order of the country.

Trouble in the garden

Josep Borrell's staff meeting, which has been mentioned already once in this chapter, became famous for different reasons, and it was the less fortunate description by the HRVP of Europe as a garden that is surrounded by the rest of the world, which is mostly a jungle. Borrell actually stressed that the 'gardeners' needed to take care of the 'garden', and called on European nations to engage with the rest of the world. Borrell said, "we have built a garden. Everything works. It is the best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity and social cohesion that humankind has been able to build – the three things together".

Even if later this statement was corrected to ensure that wrong interpretations did not start circulating around the world (including the Global South), the controversy was inevitable. In the subsequent months, there were two global events where it was demonstrated that the relationship between Europe and the rest of the world was not so simple that the garden-jungle dichotomy would be the best one to use.

Firstly, the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27) took place in Egypt, where one of the main conclusions was that the high-income countries of the world would need to contribute more to solving the energy transition of weaker countries. As on many other occasions in the previous half-century, the conference was surrounded by lots of talk about reparations to be paid by former colonial powers in Europe (and North America?) to former colonies in the Global South. At the end, the talk of northern responsibility was not totally unproductive, since COP27 closed with a breakthrough agreement to provide 'loss and damage' funding for vulnerable countries hit hard by climate disasters.

The other major global event where the complexity of north-south relations came to the fore was the FIFA football world cup hosted by Qatar. The small Arab monarchy overlooking the Persian Gulf has been at the centre of criticism, ever since it was given the right to host this high-visibility tournament. The precarious working conditions of those building the new stadiums was exposed and invited voices to call for boycott, similarly to the host's record regarding the rights of LGBTQ+ people. To silence critical disputes, at least for the time of the games, FIFA President Gianni Infantino (the man who is not Michel Platini) rebutted the critics of Qatar by pointing to the long history of European colonialism. According to Sepp Blatter's replacement, "Europeans should apologise for 3,000 years before they give moral lessons". Thus, the weeks of the Qatar games were more rather than less political than the average world cup of FIFA. German footballers, who long campaigned for gay rights, protested the ban on such gestures.³ And when Carlos Queiroz, the Portuguese coach of the Iran team, was fed up with questions concerning the relationship between footballers and the Iranian regime, he asked: why Gareth Southgate is never asked about what the UK has been doing in the world, e.g. for example, leaving behind the women of Afghanistan after 20 years of tragic intervention. After all these sideshows, it is hard to decide whether it was a political or an apolitical decision by FIFA leaders to reject the offer by the Ukrainian president to address the audience of the final between Argentina and France.

The greatest shockwaves of Qatar were actually not reported from the Persian Gulf but Brussels itself, following several arrests after detecting signs that the host country of the football tournament was using illegal tools, including bribes, to influence the views and rhetoric of European officials and decisions of the European Parliament. It was also discovered that not only Qatar, but also Morocco, had been involved in buying the influence of EU institutions. These revelations by the Belgian police caused a genuine crisis within the European Parliament and, in particular, in the most affected groups: the socialists and democrats.

The lack of progress in relations between the EU and the Global South was also illustrated by assessments of the one-year-old Global Gateway programme. It is not only that stakeholders had to take note of the 'failure to deliver', but a gala event held in the metaverse to explain the Global Gateway concept to 18-35 year olds was also criticised after it was discovered that no more than a handful of users logged on – despite the EU spending €387,000 to host it. To provide some moderately happy end to this controversial chapter of 2022, the prime minister of the Netherlands, together with the Dutch monarchy, apologised for the role their country played in the slave trade through the centuries. Undoubtedly, this gesture was very important, by which the Netherlands made itself eligible to continue to give moral lessons, within FIFA but also well beyond.

3 Germany's national football team had been planning to wear the OneLove armband in support of LGBTQ+ rights in Qatar until the FIFA leadership announced at the last moment that they would face sanctions for doing so. In response, the players posed with hands over their mouths to indicate they felt they had been silenced.

Light at the end of the tunnel?

Twenty years ago, British Prime Minister Blair spectacularly mismanaged the *Zeitenwende* of his time. Through a sequence of errors, he contributed to turning a big problem into a much bigger one and wasted all his political capital on a military adventure that was not only illegal, but also caused tremendous economic, environmental and geopolitical tragedies. It remains to be seen whether European leaders of our time can avoid dangerous traps and hugely consequential errors.

Europe closed the year 2022 remarkably united in unwavering support for Ukraine, and even a new financial aid package was adopted, together with another round of sanctions on Russian officials, as well as business and media persons. On the other hand, European views remained diverse regarding expectations about the European post-war security architecture, and the possibility of restarting economic cooperation with Russia once this war is over.

It is, therefore, quite remarkable that, even without a coherent all-European view about the future, a new continental organisation was launched on 6 October: the European Political Community (EPC). The EPC has offered a broad framework to include the UK, as well as potential future members of the EU. For sure, the EPC would need to be further developed to prove its additionality and its potential to help members fulfil their ambition for peace, prosperity and justice. But as a first act, it is still an important one to start the construction of order when much of the daily action is still tied up in the ongoing war and efforts to deal with its immediate consequences.

The EPC leaves it open whether there would be a new Cold War to overshadow the life of the next generation of Europeans, or whether there would be further EU or NATO enlargement towards the east. At the end of 2022, it is not at all clear what peace will look like between Russia and Ukraine, or even who would be capable of brokering peace or just a ceasefire. But the need for a faster arrival at this negotiated phase has been more frequently expressed.

After the European Parliament in late November declared Russia to be a state supporting terrorism, one would have expected this declaration to lead to a further diminishing of diplomatic relations with Russia, if not a complete disconnect from Moscow and the current rulers of the Kremlin. Instead, Joe Biden declared that he would be ready to negotiate with Putin about ending the war. Most certainly, this was not just another gaffe by the frail president, since, in November, General Mark Milley, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, also declared that the war in Ukraine is unwinnable by purely military means and suggested that Ukraine is now in a position of strength and that this winter might be the right moment to consider peace talks with Russia.

No Ukrainian or western politician should be denounced for not having an appetite to negotiate with Vladimir Putin, especially when Russian rockets and drones continue to hit Ukrainian targets. Whatever the outcome of the war and the shape of the new international order will be, Putin's reputation will not be repaired any more. Putin and his *siloviki junta* secured for themselves a place in history books as authors of Russia's moral fall, diplomatic

isolation and economic decline. On the other hand, Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's unlikely president, not only managed to unite his country for the war of independence but also became a worldwide hero, who drummed up international support and solidarity for his country beyond expectations. It is mainly thanks to him that most Europeans today judge Ukraine not for what it was before the Russian invasion, but for what it might become after this war ends.

Until 2022, the EU's Ukraine policy was a derivative of its Russia policy. From this year onwards, the EU's Russia policy will be a derivative of the Ukraine policy. For the time being, this is the maximum Ukraine can achieve, and it should not be underestimated. What this alliance should concentrate on is to ensure that the broadly defined West remains as united and resolute in reconstruction support as in the military one and helps establish the preconditions of sustainable reconstruction.