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## Ukraine and the defence of the West

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*We would reach the worst state of affairs if tyrants, kidnappers, and thieves could do wrong and oppress the good and innocent with impunity and if it were not lawful for the latter to repel their aggressions and reprimand them.*

Francisco de Vitoria

A few weeks ago, I discussed the Ukrainian crisis with my third-year Philosophy, Politics and Economics students. The war had not yet started. After our analysis I concluded that the most likely scenario would be a partition of Ukraine with part of the territory integrated in one way or another into Russia and the neutralisation of the rest, preventing it from joining NATO and disarming it in order to turn it in any case into a vassal state of Moscow. It was clear to us that neither Europeans nor Americans were willing to send a single soldier to fight to change this sad course of history for Ukraine. I was surprised that some of my students disagreed with this diagnosis and argued strongly in favour of military intervention to prevent it. I explained to them that there was a clear risk of escalation and that it could trigger a third world war. But they had a strong moral conviction that it would be a crime to leave the Ukrainians alone and that if Putin could invade a country with impunity, it would endanger the whole of Europe. I then asked them if they would be willing to pick up a rifle to defend a country so far away. I was even more

surprised when several of them said yes, they would be willing. I found that lesson deeply inspiring, it made me particularly proud of my students and to some extent it gave me hope for the future of the West.

My students are well aware of Clausewitz's principle of polarity according to which "if one of the belligerents is determined to take the path of great decisions with arms, his chances of success are considerable, however little he is sure that the other is unwilling to do so". The Russian president could be fully convinced that NATO had no desire to use arms in any case. Granting that certainty was our main strategic mistake and the main reason Putin was able to launch this war of occupation. Neither grandiose speeches of condemnation, nor international isolation, nor massive economic sanctions dissuaded him from using force. What he probably did not expect was Ukrainian resistance with the steadfastness and effectiveness that he has encountered.

Some people think that the war in Ukraine is not our war. We admire the courage of the resistance, we support their cause, we sympathise with the millions of refugees fleeing the country, we punish Russia economically and we are even prepared to give some weapons to the Ukrainian army so that Russian superiority is not so ignominious, but in no case are we prepared to confront Russia or even do anything that might displease it too much. Every time Putin reminds us of his nuclear arsenal we are struck with paralysing terror. The Kremlin has us under an escalating blackmail from which we seem unable to escape.

The problem is that more is at stake in Ukraine than the freedom of Ukrainians or even the security of Europeans. Ukraine is today a decisive battle in the West's defence. If Putin achieves the strategic objectives of this aggression, it is hard to believe that he will refrain from pursuing new goals in the future, starting with the reintegration of the Baltic republics, the neutralisation of Poland or the "refinlandisation" of Finland, Sweden and, if no one prevents him from doing so, Western Europe as a whole. Russia will be able to continue expanding its area of influence in Central Asia and increasing its presence in the Middle East and the Sahel. But the biggest problem is not Russia, but its unlimited alliance with China. The West's inability to stop Russia, a relatively minor enemy, will encourage the Chinese giant to annex Taiwan, seize strategic control of the Indo-Pacific and continue its expansion around the world to become a global hegemonic power.

The message of a hypothetical Putin victory in Ukraine will also be that force is the only norm in the new international "order" and that it is possible to attack and even invade any country without anyone preventing it. Moreover, anyone who manages to equip himself with a nuclear arsenal will be free to impose his will without the West having any capacity to respond. The lesson that many can learn from a Putin triumph is that decadent Western democracies are powerless in the face of the growing power of totalitarian regimes, as we saw in Afghanistan.

Ultimately, what is at stake on the streets of Kiev and many other Ukrainian cities, even if we do not want to see it, is the survival of the West, of our values and our way of life.

The bottom line is that the West, especially Europe, is not ready to wage war. Not in terms of capabilities. After several decades of peace dividends, we have invested so little in our defence that today our armed forces have huge combat deficits. Only the United States today has the capacity to sustain a high-intensity war and yet with difficulties in manning a dual front in the Atlantic and the Pacific. The German government's reaction, announcing a significant increase in its defence budgets, is encouraging, but the question is whether it is too late. Other partners, including Spain, are being much vaguer in their commitment.

But our main incapacity for war is not one of military capabilities but of mentality. After the horror of World War II and after the West's victory in the Cold War, many Westerners considered war to be inconceivable as a form of state-to-state relations in the 21st century, at least in old Europe. Comfortably ensconced in our Kantian bubble and lulled to sleep by our own opulence, we considered war to be something that had been superseded by history, something in any case of a barbarian world far from our borders, something inconceivable on our own continent. Moreover, the phenomenon of globalisation and its web of economic interests and social relations, the explosion of world trade and the institutional and normative development of the international liberal order made war something we would only see in films or television series.

The bloody battles a few kilometres from NATO's borders, the quasi-medieval sieges of Ukrainian cities, the millions of women and children fleeing the horror, the heroism of a resistance fighting for the independence of their homeland, but also for their will to be Europeans and to defend their democracy against tyranny, have partially awakened us from our lethargy. Even so, many people are appeasing their consciences when they see this disaster on television with fine words and gestures of solidarity, but they are not prepared to make in this war, which they see as alien to them, any sacrifices.

### **Strategic surprise**

The war in Ukraine has brought two unexpected surprises on the ground. The first is that the war machine Putin has created over the past decades is not as powerful or as effective as we thought and as he himself probably believed. The widespread corruption that characterises the regime seems to have infected his military as well, making it far more inefficient than expected. The information we have is limited and may be biased towards one side or the other, but a month into the war it seems clear that Russian forces are facing serious logistical problems that have slowed the advance of units, limited use of air assets, higher than initially estimated casualties, tactical difficulties on some fronts and troop morale problems. This has led the

Russian Army General Staff to a more indiscriminate use of attacks against civilian targets and a rethinking of the operation.

The second surprise is the greater than expected resilience of the Ukrainian army and people. The political and media leadership of President Zelensky, the overwhelming rejection of the invaders by the population, the adaptation of the Ukrainian army to guerrilla tactics (especially in urban areas), which slows down the advance of Russian combat units, weakens the logistical chain and causes a major disruption of the operation, weakens the logistical chain and causes significant casualties, the stubborn resistance of some cities such as Mariupol, the use of drones and anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, are putting the powerful Russian army in more trouble than expected and even pushing it back in some enclaves.

It is too early to know the outcome of a war that will be longer than expected, but the prospects for regime change in Ukraine seem to be receding. Even in the event of an increasingly unlikely Ukrainian defeat, the resistance is likely to continue to try to put a price on the occupation that is too high for the Kremlin and prompt it to seek a negotiated exit.

This stubborn Ukrainian resistance offers not only a moral example of faith in Europe and freedom, but also a strategic opportunity for Putin to be defeated, or at least not to achieve the goals of this aggression. To this end, it is essential that our leaders lose their fear and escape the blackmail to which Putin has subjected them. Paradoxically, it is the fear of escalation that could lead to all-out war. It is better to stop Putin today in Ukraine than to stop him tomorrow in Poland. To achieve that goal requires more action and fewer high-sounding words like Biden's in Warsaw.

### **Supporting Ukraine**

The West has denied Ukraine three times since the end of the Cold War. In negotiations for the handover of Soviet nuclear weapons to Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom forced Ukraine to give up its arsenal without offering any security guarantees in return. We subsequently offered Ukraine an expectation of NATO membership that the Ukrainians believed in but which we ultimately reneged on, leaving Ukraine totally vulnerable. And when in 2014 Putin invaded Crimea and incited the revolt in the Donbas region, we in the West de facto accepted that annexation with light economic sanctions on Russia. The Ukrainian people do not deserve to be let down again at this decisive moment.

To do this, we need to support Ukraine militarily more effectively than we are doing. The difference in strength between Russia and Ukraine at the beginning of the conflict was at least ten to one. Arming the Ukrainians, a little may only prolong the war, but it will not prevent Putin from achieving the objectives for which he started this invasion. We Europeans began by sending

helmets and flak jackets and only when the invasion was imminent, did we decide to provide them with some defensive weaponry (especially anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles). But the strategy cannot be an Afghanization of Ukraine, giving them weapons of very limited power and range. If Russia is to be forced to negotiate an end to the war, Ukraine must be provided with more weapons and combat capability. The Polish Mig29 fiasco was a good example of the limitations of our support. We need to equip the armed forces with longer-range anti-aircraft systems, anti-ship missiles, tanks, and combat aircraft. It is not just about new systems; it is about capabilities. For example, providing real-time intelligence to Ukrainian forces is essential. The Russian military appears to have entered a phase of escalation in which massive shelling is being used as a way to soften resistance in the cities. These attacks are causing an alarming increase in civilian casualties. Enhancing the capabilities of the Ukrainian resistance is therefore not only a moral obligation, but a strategic necessity.

Secondly, Ukraine must be given more economic support. Beyond essential humanitarian aid, debt relief to enable it to cope with the war and the subsequent reconstruction of the country would be an important first step.

Finally, more political support is needed. Ukraine must immediately be accepted as a candidate country by the European Union. Those who are resisting in so many Ukrainian cities are not only fighting to defend the independence, sovereignty, and integrity of their homeland, they are also fighting for a European vocation, which for them symbolises freedom. Europe cannot now turn its back on those who are risking their lives for that ideal. At a key moment for our own survival, we must be sufficiently far-sighted to ensure that technical issues, however important they may be, do not cloud our political judgement. Of course, the integration of a country at war cannot be immediate, there will be many issues to negotiate and the conditions for integrating a devastated country will have to be unique but giving Ukraine the prospect of integration into the Union as a candidate country at this time is vital to strengthen resistance and is also a moral obligation for Europe.

Our military, political and economic support must also be consistent and sustained. Western credibility is at a low ebb after episodes such as Afghanistan and Iraq. When the cost of war is felt in our economies and the number of refugees overwhelms our capacities, some will be tempted to force Ukraine to capitulate on the grounds that an unfair settlement is better than a just war. But it is the Ukrainians who have earned the right to decide what is just and what is unjust. At that point we cannot betray Ukraine again without finally destroying what remains of our weakened credibility.

## **Averting humanitarian catastrophe**

Putin is using Ukrainian refugees as a strategic weapon. The tactic of razing entire cities to the ground, as he has done in Mariupol, and terrorising the whole of Ukraine, including the cities closest to the NATO border, has a twofold objective. On the one hand, ethnic cleansing to facilitate the annexation of at least part of Ukrainian territory, on the other, to create division and tension among NATO allies. Responding to this humanitarian catastrophe is first and foremost a moral obligation. We cannot have a Syria on Europe's doorstep where civilians are massacred with impunity. But it is also in our strategic interest to respond to this criminal use of refugees as a weapon of war.

The European Union, notably Poland, is responding in a way that is commensurate with the tragedy in Ukraine. The millions of refugees who have crossed the EU border are being commendably welcomed by Western societies. This wave of solidarity that is sweeping through our societies must be reflected in the political decisions taken by our leaders. The reception of women, children and elderly people fleeing war is not enough. Western governments cannot stand idly by in the face of the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Ukrainian cities besieged by Russian troops. In the first phase of the conflict the Russian army may have acted with some restraint, but Putin's change in strategy is resulting in a growing number of civilian casualties, many of them women and children. The subjugation of these populations to constant shelling, destroying basic infrastructure and preventing any kind of supplies is subjecting millions of Ukrainians to hunger, cold and disease with no way of escape.

Negotiations to establish such humanitarian corridors have often been boycotted by the Kremlin authorities. It is clear that Russia's membership of the UN Security Council makes any such UN-sanctioned operation impossible. Is a NATO- or EU-led humanitarian mission to alleviate this catastrophe possible? The risks would undoubtedly be high, but non-intervention in any form also has a high cost, especially in moral terms. The responsibility to protect life is one of the hallmarks of our Western civilisation and is a fundamental principle of our foreign policy. Simply watching the systematic destruction of these cities on television may be not only morally unbearable, but politically unacceptable.

There are many options that should be explored. One would be the creation of a free city in Lyiv, the former city of Leonidas, only 60 kilometres from the Polish border, which could become a symbolic city like Berlin in occupied Germany during the Cold War. Another option would be to organise civilian evacuation operations by land, air, or sea. An air bridge could also be created with Kiev to deliver humanitarian aid.

A clear red line must also be drawn on the use of weapons of mass destruction, whether chemical, biological, or radiological, in this war. The use of such weapons should be met with an immediate and forceful NATO response. Such a response should be proportionate to the type

of weapon used and the damage caused, but under no circumstances is the use of this type of weapon acceptable in any scenario, especially within a few kilometres of the Alliance's border.

### **Economic warfare**

The Biden administration has based its entire response to Russian aggression in Ukraine on economic sanctions, but it may be making the same mistake that President Roosevelt's administration made with its sanctions on Japan in 1941. The US underestimated Japanese fear and honour then and overestimated the effectiveness of those sanctions. In the case of Russia, we can also be overconfident of their effects, underestimating Russia's ability to evade them and its alliance with China to cushion them, while at the same time being unaware of the political and strategic entrenchment they can lead to.

The threat of massive economic sanctions failed to dissuade Putin from initiating the attack and their application is unlikely to stop the war no matter how much economic damage these sanctions are undoubtedly doing to the Russian economy. Moreover, the historical experience of economic sanctions, whether in the aforementioned case of Japan, inter-war Germany, the embargo on Cuba or sanctions on Iran, to give just a few examples, has never succeeded in achieving their objectives and in most cases has only led to a hardening of the regimes they were intended to combat and in many cases to resentment that lasts for generations. These sanctions are also a double-edged sword: at the same time as they devastate the Russian economy, they also cause significant damage to Western economies. And the Russian people's capacity to suffer in the face of poverty is undoubtedly far greater than in consumerist Western societies. Finally, there is a moral question: do the Russian people as a whole deserve to be punished for the decisions of a tyrant like Putin?

Economic sanctions are necessary but not sufficient. They must be applied with precision so that they do not generate regime consolidation and people's resentment against those who impose them. And they must be smart so that the damage they do to our citizens does not outweigh the damage to those responsible for the aggression. I do not believe that our aim should be to create a North Korea in Europe of Russia's size and military power.

In any case, as long as sanctions do not affect oil and gas exports, their ability to stop the war will be limited. Hydrocarbons account for 50 per cent of Russian exports and are therefore vital to the financing of the war. Moreover, the sharp rise in oil prices as a result of, among other factors, the war in Ukraine itself means that de facto revenues to sustain the Russian war machine have increased. Russia receives 25 billion dollars a week from its exports of these fuels.

The US, Canada and, progressively, the UK have embargoed the purchase of Russian oil and gas. Energy dependence on the EU has prevented allies on this side of the Atlantic from taking such

a decision. But while we look for medium- to long-term supply alternatives, we should consider a mechanism whereby payments for Russian oil would be made into a fund whose transfer would be conditional on the withdrawal of its troops from Ukraine. This formula would prevent the complete shutdown of the Russian hydrocarbon industry, which could then continue to maintain its production and avoid an energy collapse in Europe and a further increase in oil prices worldwide. This fund could be managed jointly by the United States and the European Union.

On the other hand, it is urgent to continue expanding the target of sanctions not only to the families and front men of Russian oligarchs and corrupt leaders around the world; the Navalny list (the Russian opposition leader imprisoned by Putin) is a good reference to continue closing the circle on the economic mafia that sustains the Kremlin. Western companies, partners and law firms that work for them and make huge profits from acting as a front for them must also be identified and prosecuted.

### **Conclusion: A decisive battle in the defence of the West**

Zbigniew Brzezinski believed that "without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine bribed and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire". We have to understand that Putin's real goal is not just Ukraine but goes far beyond that. If Putin emerges victorious from this war, if he succeeds in obtaining the strategic objectives for which he initiated this aggression, we will witness the rebirth of an empire that will have NATO as its main enemy. All of Europe would then have to submit to Russia's security interests or face the consequences. The alliance of this new Russian empire with China would in turn give birth to a new world order in which totalitarian regimes would emerge as hegemonic powers in the face of impotent Western democracies. Ukraine is therefore a decisive battle for the defence of the West.

The heroic Ukrainian resistance gives us an opportunity to modify our strategy and avoid such a dark course of history. Our immediate goal must be to defeat Putin, secure Ukraine's independence, and sovereignty, and avoid a humanitarian catastrophe greater than the one that has already occurred. More determined and effective support for Ukraine, increasing our pressure on Russia and drawing the red lines that will force us to exercise our legitimate right of defence are essential to this end. In the longer term we must work to strengthen an international order that prevents further aggression and to reintegrate Russia into that order as a country with which we can address joint challenges. We have no interest in a defeated, resentful, and impoverished Russia, but we must avoid a triumphant Putin at all costs. Finding a balance between these two extremes is a formidable challenge.

Some think that our only objective in Ukraine should be to avoid at all costs an escalation that could lead to nuclear confrontation, but as Francisco de Vitoria wrote almost five centuries ago,

"there could be no security if the fear of war did not keep the enemy at bay". The historic moment needs strong leadership in Western countries that will resolutely defend our freedom. Leaders who impose red lines on tyrants instead of imposing them on themselves. Leaders whose pulse will not tremble when it comes to saving the innocent.

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