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RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE AND UKRAINE'S CHALLENGE TO EUROPE

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As I write, it is already the 63rd day of Russia's brutal war against Ukraine. The world is admiring the incredible resilience and determination of the people, the government and the military of Ukraine. Yet in Ukraine thousands of civilians are dead, towns and cities are reduced to rubble, and human suffering is immense as every day the Russian military pounds countless civilian targets with missiles, artillery and bombs.

What are challenges and opportunities does the war create for NATO, for the European Union (EU), for European governments and for the Western liberal order? Many have observed that Russia's war against Ukraine is a war that offers exceptional moral clarity. Russia is a vicious aggressor that is attempting to obliterate Ukraine's sovereignty and that has demolished Europe's security architecture built over the decades since Helsinki. Russia is committing war crimes against civilians on a massive scale. Russia is also leveraging the threat of a nuclear disaster – both by attacking nuclear power plants in Ukraine and by threatening the use of nuclear weapons to deter Western military assistance to Ukraine. Moscow's nuclear saber-rattling, playing into the fears of citizens and officials across the West, is designed to create divisions and discord. Finally, and most unexpectedly, Russia is leveraging the dependence of many West European states on Russian gas to punish selected countries and to destabilize Western economies, while driving up the value of the ruble and also the price of gas. This flies in the face of how politicians and others understood Western Europe's and especially Germany's dependence on Russian oil and gas – as a mutually beneficial, mutually binding relationship that would deter both sides from behaving erratically or weaponizing the relationship.

Altogether, this has certainly created a turning point for Western governments and institutions – a watershed moment or, as I prefer, a wake-up call. Russia's war has been made possible by complacency on the part of many European governments – and it bears repeating that this wake-up call comes at a horrendous cost to Ukraine.

For the EU, the war may create a window of opportunity to affirm that it is an international institution that is anchored in liberal democracy, building its geopolitical power on this founding principle. As Sophie Meunier and I argue, Hungary's Fidesz government is trying to decouple the EU from liberal democracy. But I expect that it will encounter more determined resistance from EU member governments as a consequence of the war. The EU is also now faced with the opportunity to revive the EU enlargement process. In order to do so, it needs to find the political will to allow the pre-accession process to function, at least roughly, like a meritocracy. Progress through the EU pre-accession must be tied to progress in adopting and implementing EU acquis and EU-mandated institutional reforms. Progress cannot be halted by capricious demands and general EU malaise, as has been the case over the last decade for candidates from the Western Balkans. A politically ambitious and technically rigorous EU enlargement process could greatly help Ukraine. Ukraine could help the EU and other candidate states by jolting it to committing to such a process. As Oxana Shevel and Maria Popova argue, Ukraine belongs in the EU for a host of reasons including its impressive state capacity at the local, regional and national level and its remarkable political will to qualify for accession. The EU has come together with a show of support for Ukraine and a timely promise to consider Ukraine's application for EU membership. But it has a long way to go before it finds the political will (again) to embrace EU enlargement as one of its most powerful foreign policy tools and to put in the work to implement a pre-accession process that incentivizes high quality political, economic and administrative reforms. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, for all of his bravery, leadership and integrity, cannot conjure an EU that does not exist.

For NATO, the war is bringing a sense of purpose that it has not enjoyed for decades. The United States has strongly committed to the defense of NATO countries and has moved US troops to NATO's eastern flank. For now, concerns that the US is disengaging from Europe and drifting away from its commitment to Article 5 can be shelved. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has also catapulted Finland and Sweden into applying for NATO membership – and the US is ready to grant them an Article 5 security guarantee from the moment they formally apply. But NATO also appears weak, bickering about military aid to Ukraine and, all too often, reassuring Putin that it will not interfere. Ukrainians can wonder why civilian lives a km or two across their western border are guaranteed by the full force of NATO while Ukrainian lives are not. This question has become more difficult as it has become clear that Russian troops are targeting civilians and committing war crimes including torture, rape and murder – and these crimes are very widespread. Yesterday, a 40-country “contact group” assembled by the US to secure heavy weapons for Ukraine has met outside of NATO structures. I expect NATO to abandon many of the new ‘projects’ that it took on to prove its usefulness in a post-Soviet world and return to safeguarding the collective security of its members.

What is most important and where the most critical positioning and contestation is playing out is at the level of national governments. It is here that crucial decisions about sanctions against Russia and about military aid to Ukraine are taking place. Germany has perhaps changed the most. It is strategizing how to end its dependence on Russian gas and asking itself how it justified, for so long, enmeshing itself economically with the Putin regime. It has sent some weapons to Ukraine, ending a longstanding practice of not sending weapons to conflict zones. But for now, Germany is blocking some of the toughest economic sanctions and still purchasing Russian gas. The quantity and quality of the weapons Germany has sent so far to Ukraine have been low. For the SPD, “Scholzing around” may be a reflection of the short-term economic interests of SPD voters, but unfortunately it also appears like a reflection of the deep (and corrupt) economic relationships that some SPD-connected elites have had with the Kremlin. Austria, Switzerland and Italy face similar domestic political debates.

For their part, some ethnopopulist and far right parties across Europe that for years openly supported the Putin regime are changing their positions and distancing themselves from the Kremlin. But this does not mean that they are changing their ethnopopulist and anti-pluralist appeals. In Poland, the ruling ethnopopulist Law and Justice Party (PiS) has re-invented itself by offering very strong support for Ukraine's government and welcoming over two million refugees. While Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky has called out Viktor Orban for his support of the Putin regime, he has applauded the PiS government for its very considerable assistance. But there are no indications that PiS has suddenly adopted liberal democratic and pluralist values at home. Indeed, for years, PiS has worked in tandem with Fidesz to weaken and belittle the EU and the liberal democratic European values that many Ukrainians are fighting for. The ruling ethnopopulist party in Slovenia also tried to remake itself by performing solidarity with Ukraine, but last weekend the voters threw them out. Elections in the Czech Republic in the fall and in Slovenia last weekend show us that Orban's power as the leader of an ethnopopulist bloc in the EU may well be dimming.

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