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Europe and Putin: Should realism prevail over reality?

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In France in June 1940, the crushing defeat of its army at the hands of the Wehrmacht led to two different interpretations of the situation. One, that of Marshal Pétain and his supporters, based on the overwhelming military superiority of Hitler's forces, argued for an armistice. The other, embodied by General de Gaulle, advocated continuing the fight alongside the United Kingdom, based on their significant assets, mainly the empires of the two Allies. Above all, de Gaulle had grasped the global dimension of the conflict, which would inevitably lead to the entry of the United States into the war, whose 'immense industry' would provide the Allies with the means for victory. A gamble that, in the semi-belligerent state of the United States at the time, was not at all improbable. In short, in June 1940, the choice of realism and reality meant nothing less than the tragic alternative of submission to the victor or total war alongside the Allies.

From the Munich Conference in September 1938, the trap of June 1940 was in place, paving the way for a reversal of alliances and culminating, in August 1939, in the German-Soviet Pact: Churchill's formula of the choice 'between dishonour and war' expressed it clearly. The dishonour only increased the likelihood and scale of the war.

What was true yesterday remains true today: the 'Munich 1938' moment has returned to Europe. From the outset, Putin has largely followed the Führer's strategy and warlike methods, which started with the reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936: the annexation of the Sudetenland, ratified by the Munich Conference, was both the culmination and the unveiling of the logic at work from the beginning. In post-Soviet Russia,

there have been the two Chechen wars, the war in Georgia in 2008 and the Ukrainian conflict that has been going on for more than ten years, with the 'Revolution of Dignity' in Maidan Square, followed by the annexation of Crimea and the conquest of a third of the Donbass, and finally the entry into the war against Ukraine in 2022.

While Putin is not Hitler, he shares with that dictator a revisionist project to abolish the international order in place when he came to power. In both cases, war is not the means of resolving a singular conflict, a territorial dispute having exhausted diplomatic channels. It does not end with its resolution: on the contrary, it systematically results in the acceptance of a reality, the conservation of conquered territories, in exchange for a promise to limit oneself to the gains obtained. But once satisfied, the previous claim gives rise to the next one, as General de Gaulle clearly demonstrated in 1961, after the erection of the Berlin Wall, rendering any form of appeasement futile from the outset: "[...] *At a certain point of threat from ambitious imperialism, any retreat has the effect of overexciting the aggressor, pushing him to double his pressure and, finally, facilitating and hastening his assault. All in all, [...], the Western powers have no better way to serve world peace than to stand tall and firm.*"

Thus, in a revisionist strategy, war takes on a permanent character. It is coupled with an internal dimension that makes it an ordinary mode of government: it is the justification for the repressive and predatory nature of power over society. Permanent war outside, perpetual autocracy inside.

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Russia, in its successive versions, formerly Tsarist then Soviet, now Putinist, defines itself not as a nation, but as an empire. A nation has borders, an empire does not: it can only be imagined in terms of its indefinite nature and its permanent extension. The nation is based on a principle of unity that organises the limits of its territory but also of the political regime that governs it. Conversely, the empire, which rejects any territorial limits, thus finds the basis for the potential infinity of its power. Much more than nationalism, it was imperialism that triggered the total wars of the 20th century, even if the latter invoked the former to justify their endeavours.

This is one of the fundamental problems that Europe has faced since the rise of Vladimir Putin.

In 1945, defeat led Germany to renounce the idea of empire and choose to become a nation. The decisive effects of this option were visible in 1989-1990 when reunified Germany confirmed its acceptance of the Oder-Neisse line and renounced the territories lost beyond it when the Third Reich fell. This was a choice that post-Soviet Russia rejected, and its implications are now being tragically felt. Russia's renunciation of empire in favour of nationhood is probably one of the essential conditions for the resolution of its identity crisis caused by the implosion of the USSR and for lasting peace on the European continent. But without the duty of remembrance that the Germans have fulfilled since Nuremberg in 1946, would the Russians be capable of it, even after Putin?

In post-Cold War Europe, a quarter of a century of Putinism clearly shows that the question is not one of rectifying borders that were clumsily drawn in the aftermath of the fall of the USSR, but rather the reconstitution of a lost empire on the outside and the sanctification of autocracy on the inside. In the eyes of the Putin regime, the offence committed by Georgia and Ukraine is that they want to be democratic nations and no longer the stepping stones of an autocratic empire.

So, after three years of war that have led to a stalemate on the front line, and with the withdrawal of

military and financial support from the United States to Ukraine taking shape, what can the Europeans do? The challenge, which has now become impossible to evade, is proving to be of historic importance, unprecedented since the creation of NATO in 1949, with the American schism: It is first and foremost reflected in a break with the traditional policy followed until now, not only under President Biden, but also, to some extent, by the Trump I Administration, whose support for the Ukrainians was demonstrated in 2019 by the supply of military equipment - notably Javelin anti-tank missiles - to President Zelensky.

Above all, the United States is reversing its alliance with Russia, which, according to observers, is motivated by the desire to detach it from its '*unlimited friendship*' with China. President Macron's visit to Washington on 24 February, despite its warmth of tone, did not change the new course of American politics: at the very moment it took place, the United States joined Russia at the United Nations to vote against Ukraine and the Europeans, and announced on the same day that it would probably increase tariffs on European imports by 25%. The same happened during the visit of British Prime Minister Keir Starmer on 27 February. But above all, the media lynching of Volodymyr Zelensky on 28 February by Donald Trump and J.D. Vance in the White House, in a scene worthy of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, was intended to express, in the clearest possible terms, the irreversible nature of the new course of US European and international policy.

The violence of the shock wave caused an indisputable and salutary jolt to the Europeans. At their meeting in London on 2 March, and again in Brussels [on 6 March](#), the Europeans demonstrated their awareness of the new situation and their determination to act together. The emergence of an autonomous European military effort seems to be taking shape around a central core of states formed by the United Kingdom, France, Poland and now Germany, if we are to judge by the statements of the future Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, who said that '*Europe must achieve independence from the United States*', expressing his wish to include a fund of €200 billion in the future coalition

agreement to significantly increase the resources of the Bundeswehr.

The new strategic imperative to which Europeans are adhering or resigning themselves must now be translated into action, both in the Ukrainian conflict and in the longer term, with regard to Russia: ultimately, the stability of Europe will only be durably assured by driving the Russians back to Russia. Their imperial designs will not cease with the respite of a ceasefire. We must anticipate the risk of seeing them spread, within two to three years, or even sooner, before Europeans have reached the critical threshold of their rearmament, at least to the Baltic States due to the size of the Russian minorities, or even to Poland which, together with Ukraine, is one of the keys to controlling Europe.

Europeans must be aware that, as things currently stand, a cessation of hostilities over the next few months would at best only be a reprieve. From then on, the line to follow imposes itself: should they resign themselves, without being naive, to the realism of the cessation or suspension of fighting, practically sealing a capitulation to the Tsar of the Kremlin, or reject in advance the destiny of a servile Europe by choosing Roman virtue? A course of action that, all in all, results from the reality of the data and the objective trends at work, and that would allow them to stop suffering the waking dreams of Putin's imperialism, as the Polish Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, so clearly pointed out.

With a power ratio of ten to one, potentially unlimited military and financial resources, indifference to the lives sacrificed, the conversion to a war economy on one side, significant but limited resources provided by the West, anxious to avoid direct military engagement on the other, and finally, a Ukrainian people fighting for survival, exhausted by the conflict, and, especially, the parsimony of the resources granted to it, the Russian army has not succeeded, in thirty-six months, in achieving what the Wehrmacht had obtained in a month and a half of Blitzkrieg in 1940 in France: the country's capitulation and the fall of its political regime.

Since 2022 and, in fact, since 2014, the Russian army has only managed to consolidate the conquest of 18-20% of the Ukrainian territory that its militias already partly occupied before the '*special military operation*'. In 2023, it was unable to counter the onslaught of the Wagner militias and remains powerless to take back the territories conquered from the Ukrainian army in August 2024 in the Kursk region. The nibbling away of a few square kilometres on the front line does not herald the adversary's imminent collapse. On the contrary, in recent days the Ukrainian army has demonstrated the strength of its resistance. Military experts make no secret of the Russian army's inability to defeat the Ukrainian army, due to the exhaustion of equipment and lack of ammunition. Everything suggests that the Russian economy, which is commonly remembered as no larger than Spain, is incapable of bearing indefinitely the burden imposed on it by the war in Ukraine.

Since the First World War, warfare has no longer been limited to the clash of armies on the battlefield; it has also involved economies and societies. And in this respect, Europe is far superior to Russia. With 2% of their GDP and without going to war, the Europeans, including the United Kingdom, already spend more than €400 billion on defence. In Russia, military spending is expected to total €130 billion in 2025, or 6 to 7% of GDP, up 23% last year; it is therefore almost three times lower than that of the Europeans. In addition to this quantitative data, the war has continued to weaken the Russian economy, which has been profoundly disrupted by European sanctions and reduced to selling its oil and gas at bargain prices, while its dependence - not to say its subservience - on China, as well as on North Korea and Iran - has continued to grow. In other words, while time has allowed the Russian army to correct the errors and shortcomings of the first months of its involvement, the prolongation of the conflict is mainly to Russia's detriment, contributing to its increasing weakness and, in the long term, its exhaustion.

This is why a ceasefire, even one guaranteed by the Europeans alone, would mainly benefit Russia, which, more than Ukraine and its supporters, needs time to

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consolidate its control of the conquered territories and regain its strength. This was already the Russian line of negotiation during the *Minsk I and II* agreements (2014-2015), which Putin never intended to honour. It would be the same again if the new *tsar* were to obtain a '*Minsk III*' from the West, in the hope that President Zelensky would be overthrown in favour of a pro-Russian '*Gauleiter*'. Some have imagined that he could, now that the American disengagement is a done deal, lend himself to the charade of a European guarantee, but this would most likely exclude the presence of NATO military forces in Ukraine. But could we really believe that Putin would accept - something that Gorbachev refused - that soldiers from NATO member countries would be stationed on the same territory as the Russian army? This is what the head of Russian diplomacy, Sergei Lavrov, made very clear to the Europeans gathered in Brussels.

Putin intends to win what he could not win by the unlimited sacrifice demanded of the legions, through the capitulation of the West. The Russian line has been constant since 1994 and the [Budapest Memorandum](#) which, in exchange for Ukraine renouncing the nuclear weapons stored on its soil, already provided for the guarantee of its territorial integrity by Russia, the United States, the Europeans and China.

A new ceasefire in Ukraine would thus produce the same effects as the previous ones. This is why it should not lead to the temptation to interrupt the European military effort: first of all, in its industrial component with the continuation of its rise in power which constitutes, effectively, the real first lever of the construction of a truly European defence, that is to say a credible and operational alternative to equipment acquired off the shelf from American manufacturers. Then, with the continued growth of military spending in national budgets. These should aim for 3 to 3.5% of GDP within two to three years, as the French President expects, because of the imperative at stake. This is the line that seems to be prevailing with the extraordinary European Council on defence in Brussels on 6 March. In advance of the meeting, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, announced [a multiannual plan](#)

of 800 billion € in the form of military expenditure included in the authorised threshold of 3% of GDP deficits, i.e. an annual effort by the Member States of 1.5% of GDP, and European loans for the balance. The "*Zeitenwende*", announced but not implemented by Chancellor Scholz, seems to be there and is now taking on a European dimension.

But the defence of Europe is, of course, about more than just an accumulation of resources. The never-ending wars of Putin's revisionism not only bring into play the overwhelming difference in resources available to Westerners, even limited to Europe, but also that of strategy and will. Successive conflicts of a sufficient level to secure the territorial gains of the Russian army were contained until 2022 below the threshold that would have triggered a direct military confrontation with the West, which could therefore content itself with a policy of '*appeasement*'. And, while the '*special military operation*' caused, to Putin's surprise, a new level of confrontation with NATO, the latter did not go beyond semi-belligerence, a policy to which the Biden Administration firmly adhered, despite the urgent appeals of President Zelensky and which the Trump II Administration decided to abandon.

Even deprived of American military support, the Europeans cannot give up on the ultimate goal of wresting Ukraine from conquering Putinism. Brzezinski said it: without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire. In this respect, morality goes hand in hand with strategy: Ukraine quite simply controls the future, security and freedom of Europe. At what price would it recover from its submission, albeit temporary, to the Tsar of Russia? A territorial regime to which it could consent, in return for the territorial sacrifice, could be inspired by that of the status of the FRG after 1945: liberal democracy, sovereignty and freedom for Western Ukraine, enshrined by accession to the European Union and NATO. But would Putin - and his new ally Trump? - accept that Kyiv should now become what Berlin once was, namely the outpost of European freedom and armies? There is good reason to doubt it.

Faced with Putin's succession of wars, Europeans once again face the dilemma of servitude or all-out war. As Raymond Aron reminded us in 1951^[1], To avert the risk of total war, it is necessary to assume the risk of limited wars. In this case, it is less a question of material resources than of '*courage and faith*'. The key to Europe's destiny lies in the steadfastness of

spirit and credibility of its leaders, as well as in the deterrence of the adversary, even if this does not absolve them from the duty of facing up to adversity. There is still time for Europeans to convince Putin that he is not facing Chamberlain and Daladier, but Churchill and de Gaulle.

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[1] Raymond Aron, Les guerres en chaîne, Paris, Gallimard, 1951

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