

**‘The Russian Invasion of Ukraine, February 2022:
Seeing the Other Guy’s Point of View for a Longer-Term Peace in Europe’**

Right up until the decision by Russian President Vladimir Putin to initiate a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this author assessed that the military build-up on the borders with Ukraine was a gigantic bluff, an act of strategic coercion to intimidate Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy into a compromise, such as ceding to Russia control of the Crimean Peninsula and the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Such tactics are part and parcel of the act of strategic coercion, involving the threat of force, or the limited use of force, in order to intimidate or leverage a targeted state into granting concessions that it would not make without duress.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine that commenced on 24 February 2022 however, underscores a rather darker motive. This is evident based on scrutiny of Putin’s 21 February speech that claimed that Ukraine was an artificial construct on ‘traditionally’ Russian land. Putin accused the Ukrainian Government of ‘aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism’, with ties to ‘extremist cells, including radical Islamist organizations [that] stage terrorist attacks at critical infrastructure facilities, and for kidnapping Russian citizens’.¹ This pattern of using the language of self-defence to cloak an unprovoked aggression was likewise repeated in Putin’s 24 February speech that announced the ‘demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine.’² Similarly, Putin has demanded the demilitarisation of Ukraine and Western recognition of Russian sovereignty over the Crimean Peninsula as a precondition for a ceasefire.³ Such demands, in conjunction with Putin’s track record of aggression of Ukraine since 2014 (and his earlier 2008 war against Georgia) are indicative of ambitions that go beyond coercive demands. Taken alongside indications of Putin’s attempts to install a puppet regime in Ukraine,⁴ Putin’s actions are consistent with what strategic coercion theorists refer to as ‘brute force’. Brute force is, in effect,

¹ Cited in Max Fisher, ‘Word by Word and Between the Lines: A Close Look at Putin’s Speech’, *New York Times*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/world/europe/putin-speech-russia-ukraine.html>.

² Cited in ‘Airspace closed in Ukraine, western Russia as Putin orders attack’, *Al-Jazeera*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/24/russia-shuts-airspace-along-western-border-with-ukraine-belarus>.

³ Zoya Sheftalovich, ‘Putin sticks to his demands, kills 11 in attack on Kharkiv’, *Politico*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/peace-talks-set-to-begin-as-russian-war-on-ukraine-heads-into-5th-day/>.

⁴ Zack Beauchamp, ‘Putin’s ‘Nazi’ rhetoric reveals his terrifying war aims in Ukraine’, *Vox*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.vox.com/2022/2/24/22948944/putin-ukraine-nazi-russia-speech-declare-war>.

armed aggression comparable to Nazi Germany's wars of conquest against a sovereign nation,⁵ in violation of longstanding norms of conduct in international relations.⁶

The underlying rationale behind such ambitions is understandable given the formative aspects of Putin's career in his younger days, that have defined his view of Russia's place on the world stage. Without downplaying the seriousness of Putin's unprovoked aggression, it may be helpful to view things from the perspective of longstanding Russian geostrategic interests, a point underscored by former President George H.W. Bush in his memoirs: "don't confuse being 'soft' with seeing the other guy's point of view."⁷ As a young KGB officer posted to East Germany during the 1980s, Putin was an eyewitness to the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The years that followed marked repeated humiliations of the Soviet state that the young Putin had committed his career to serving. Apart from the USSR's disintegration, post-Soviet Russia was struck by severe economic dislocation, a plight that was also personal for Putin, who moonlighted as a taxi driver to pay his bills.⁸ Internationally, Russia was diplomatically impotent against the eastward expansion of the European Union (EU) to incorporate most of the USSR's western client-states, including the former Soviet Republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania;⁹ this same period saw Russia's military impotence in the face of the NATO air campaign against Serbia, long seen by Russia as its principal client Slavic state on the Balkan Peninsula.¹⁰

Putin was doubtless galled by such a downfall in Russia's status. This is evident based on various anecdotes during Putin's early political career. In August 1999, with the ailing then-

⁵ Patrick Bratton, 'When is Coercion Successful?', *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 58. No. 3 (2005), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2050&context=nwc-review>, p.3.

⁶ John B. Bellinger III, 'How Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Violates International Law', Council on Foreign Relations, 28 February 2022, https://www.cfr.org/article/how-russias-invasion-ukraine-violates-international-law?utm_medium=social_owned&utm_source=fb&fbclid=IwAR3qfV1pFALZpWNBbcZdjbIq69JZM8LcoKMIV2cmh9niycrGGfvxXsXXnOQ.

⁷ George Bush, *My Life in Letters and Other Writings*, (New York: Scribner, 1999), p.185.

⁸ Mary Ilyushina, 'Vladimir Putin claims collapse of Soviet Union forced him to work as a taxi driver', *CBS News*, 13 December 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/vladimir-putin-says-ussr-collapse-forced-him-to-work-as-taxi-driver/>.

⁹ Mira Milosevich, 'Russia's Westpolitik and the European Union', CSIS, 8 July 2021, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210708_Milosevick_RussiaWestpolitik_EuropeanUnion.pdf?YamFdB7RvBHWs7w15n9wiJotRCqoik9Q.

¹⁰ Dimitar Beshev, 'Understanding Russia's influence in the Western Balkan', European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, September 2018, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Strategic-Analysis-2018-11-Beshev.pdf>.

President Boris Yeltsin mired in the quagmire of the Chechen uprising, staffing chaos, and economic mismanagement, Putin had impressed Yeltsin with his proposals for efficient government, the restoration of law and order, the economic revival of Russia, and the modernisation of the military, resulting in Putin's appointment as Prime Minister.¹¹ Such policy priorities were reflected in Putin's efforts to strike a 'grand bargain' with Russia's oil oligarchs, enabling Putin to lift Russia out of the economic chaos of the 1990s,¹² whilst generating a war chest of resources to revitalise Russia's great power status. Concurrently, the Machiavellian ruthlessness with which Putin suppressed the Chechen insurgency struck a cord with ordinary Russians who saw Putin's strongman approach to leadership as a welcome source of order and stability,¹³ away from the chaotic inefficiency and economic impotence of Yeltsin's Presidency.

Such a backdrop is analogous to the situation that befell Germany during the first half of the 20th century. Following the Armistice Agreement that brought the First World War to a close, France was resolved to impose such punitive terms as to prevent Germany from ever again re-emerging a great power. The resulting Treaty of Versailles was notable for the harshness of its terms: Germany was stripped of 65,000 km² of its territory and 7 million of its populace, restricted to tight restrictions on its armed forces, and forced to accept Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, under which Germany bore responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War. Whilst France may have found it 'emotionally satisfying' to impose such harsh terms, such measures had the effect of arousing German resentment. The subsequent Great Depression, in leading to widespread unemployment, fused with lingering German anger and nationalism arising from the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles, a toxic cocktail exploited by Hitler's ultra-nationalist rhetoric that sought scapegoats for Germany's social and economic ills, resulting in Hitler's rise to Chancellor of Germany in 1933. France, in attempting to impose harsh punitive measures on Germany to ensure its own security, thus found itself on the receiving end of Hitler's Panzer divisions in 1940.

¹¹ 'Russian Duma confirms Putin as prime minister', *CNN*, 16 August 1999, <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/europe/9908/16/russia.putin.03/>.

¹² 'Russian oligarchs, take note: you don't break a bargain with Putin', *The Independent*, 11 July 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/analysis-and-features/russian-oligarchs-take-note-you-don-t-break-a-bargain-with-putin-552717.html>.

¹³ Geoffrey Hosking, 'Why are Russians attracted to strong leaders?', *OUP Blog*, 4 May 2012, <https://blog.oup.com/2012/05/russia-putin-elections-power/>.

The parallels between Weimar Germany and post-Soviet Russia are striking – amidst the combined impact of social and economic chaos and high-profile blows to the national pride, the resulting sense of disillusionment and dislocation felt by a populace engenders a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty for their future. Under such circumstances, a populace may be more willing to trust leaders who offer stability, even if they are driven by darker intentions. Through the use of nationalistic, populist rhetoric and jingoism, the dark charisma of such leaders may enable them to lie and manoeuvre their way to a position of power, from which they can then engage in constitutional gerrymandering to eliminate challenges to their authoritarian rule, whilst further pursuing their ultranationalist agendas. The tragedy of both of these empirical episodes is not the failure of diplomacy prior to the outbreak of hostilities (whether in 1939 or in 2022), but, rather, twofold: first, in the failure of the victorious powers to offer magnanimity and reconciliation to a great power that had temporarily fallen on hard times, but which still retained the ability and aspirations to seek re-establishment of its place on the world stage; and second, in failing to heed Putin's war against Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and Russian support for the insurgency in Donbas and the Assad regime in Syria as warning signs of Putin's ambitions to revive Russia's great power status through conquest.

None of this backstory lets Putin and his regime off the hook – the decision to turn a geostrategic dispute between Russia and the transatlantic community over an appropriate diplomatic status for Russia in Europe into an unprovoked invasion of a sovereign country rests squarely on Putin and his cabal of oil oligarchs and military hardliners. It should be recalled that in the weeks preceding the crisis, the US and EU had made repeated efforts to achieve a diplomatic resolution of the tensions between Russia and Ukraine; the fact that Russia had continued to build up its armed forces on Ukraine's borders during these talks in preparation for the initiation of Putin's invasion of Ukraine is indicative that Putin had never been serious about a diplomatic resolution of the standoff in the first place, but had never wavered from seeking to assert Russian control of Ukraine.

The need to demonstrate resolve against Putin's aggression notwithstanding, it will also be necessary to avoid the mistake that France made after 1919 (or the transatlantic community made after the collapse of the USSR). There is growing evidence of Russian opposition to

Putin's invasion of Ukraine, as reflected in the surge in anti-war demonstrations that have broken out in Russia, a number that would likely be far larger were it not for the Kremlin's crackdowns on public dissent.¹⁴ Elsewhere, Russian celebrities and the offspring of key Kremlin officials and allies have added to the voices of dissent against Putin. In conjunction with the impact of harsh international sanctions on Russia – measures set to increase in the days and weeks ahead – it is notable that a number of Putin's own supporters have begun to jump his ship.¹⁵

Such developments portend the possibility, howsoever faint, of an outcome considered by commentators as unthinkable, as recently as the weeks prior to Putin's invasion of Ukraine – the possibility that domestic opposition to his regime swells and infects the oil oligarchs and security apparatus that Putin's regime is dependent on. Given the combined impact of Ukrainian tenacity, Russian casualties in an unprovoked war, international isolation, and harsh sanctions, it is conceivable that Putin's key allies may sense the tide turning against them. As Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz note, 'Putin's downfall may not come tomorrow or the day after, but his grip on power is certainly more tenuous than it was before he invaded Ukraine.'¹⁶

Whilst such an outcome is not pre-ordained, it is plausible. In the event of such an outcome, whilst it may be tempting for Ukraine, the EU, and the US to contemplate the 'emotional satisfaction' of harsh long-term punitive measures against Russia, such an approach will feed long-term Russian resentment, ignore the large numbers of Russians who are hostile to Putin, and make it harder to seek reconciliation with a post-Putin Russia. In the event that Putin's gamble in Ukraine backfires on him and ousts him from power, it would be more fruitful for the international community to recall the measures that enabled the post-1945 political rehabilitation of Germany. France's then-Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman, had the vision to realise that long-term path for peace required cooperating with West Germany to 'find again its place in the

¹⁴ 'Anti-war protests held in cities across Russia, 2,000 people arrested', *Reuters*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/police-detain-more-than-900-people-anti-war-protests-across-russia-monitoring-2022-02-27/>.

¹⁵ Charles Riley, 'Two Russian oligarchs call for an end to Putin's war', *CNN*, 1 March 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/28/business/oligarchs-russia-ukraine-fridman-deripaska/index.html>; "'NO TO WAR': Russian fury bursts open as Putin bombards Ukraine", *Politico*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/no-to-war-ukraine-russian-opposition-fury-bursts-open-vladimir-putin/>.

¹⁶ Kendall-Taylor and Frantz 'The Beginning of the End for Putin? Dictatorships Look Stable—Until They Aren't', *Foreign Affairs*, 2 March 2022.

community of free nations'.¹⁷ Schuman's resulting experiment, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), included West Germany as a founding member, marking the beginning of a process of reconciliation between former adversaries that has since evolved into the EU.¹⁸ Whilst resolve and unity is necessary to affirm that Putin's regime is in violation of longstanding norms of international relations, it will also be necessary to be magnanimous to the people of Russia in ensuring the consolidation of democracy in post-Putin's Russia. As Nelson Mandela said, 'If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.'

¹⁷ Cited in Beyond Intractability: The Conflict Information Consortium, <https://www.beyondintractability.org/lfg/exemplars/rschuman>.

¹⁸ Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008), p.180.