



WORLD ORDER UNDER THREAT: DEFENDING EUROPEAN SECURITY FROM RUSSIAN EXPANSIONISM

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This essay is a follow-up of my paper on the rise of Russian Nazism I published here a couple of months ago. Its preparation was prompted by my perception of significant changes the world order undergoes and challenges it faces currently. This developments, in turn, creates a new global context for the study of regional problems, including the issues related to Eurasia and Central Asia.

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During the celebrations held in the Russian Federation on June 9, 2022, dedicated to the 350th anniversary of Peter the Great's birth, the moderators tried to draw parallels between this historical figure and the current rule of Vladimir Putin. In his speech, the Russian president tried to convince everyone of the existence of this parallel: "Peter the Great returned and strengthened the territories, this fate also fell to our lot," he said,ⁱ forgetting to mention that if Peter the Great during his reign initiated the modernization of Russia, bringing it closer to Europe, then Putin himself has achieved the opposite effect - undermined the country's economy, provoking sanctions from Western countries, thus significantly increasing the gap between Russia and Europe.

Anyhow, in this speech Putin voiced his next argument justifying his decision on a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. Now we have a whole bunch of motivations for his decision, including "denazification" and "demilitarization" of Ukraine, then the liberation of Donbass from the Ukrainian "Nazis", and now - "return of territories". This change in Putin's motives and rhetoric indicates at least two things:

1. All previous invasion targets have proven unattainable. The main goal was the elimination of Ukrainian statehood and the prevention of this country's further drift towards the West. It turned out to be exactly the opposite: despite the huge human and economic losses the Ukrainians have suffered, their nationhood has only strengthened - now the former split of society into western and eastern parts has been overcome. Also, Ukraine is already a de facto member of the North Atlantic community, as evidenced by the flow of Western military aid to assist its resistance against the Russian invasion.

2. Because of the failure of the blitzkrieg and the plan to change the ruling regime in Ukraine, the Russians are facing the need to adjust the purpose of their aggression. From now on it got to

be the annexation of a part of the Ukrainian territory, namely the entire Donbass and the Kherson region. It is in this vein that Putin's speech is read - it signals a change in priorities and the need for respective measures. As a result, the go-ahead has been given for a return to the agenda called "Novorossiia", the past name of the nowadays Eastern and Southern parts of Ukraine which was under the 19th-century control of the Russian Empire. If earlier Putin rejected the idea of restoring and "returning" "Novorossiia" back to Russia, which the former Putin's advisor Vladimir Surkov voiced and promoted back in 2014,ⁱⁱ now he himself initiates it, a sign of Putin's political doctrine getting radicalized.

However, the narrative about the lost territories was heard earlier in Putin's rhetoric. This narrative, combined with others promoted by the Kremlin dictator, should be seen as one of the signs of the transformation of the Putin regime into a Nazi-kind regime. This is the case when the thief's hat is on fire, as the Russians say, or when the thief would reveal himself by accusing others of theft: likewise, Putin is throwing accusations of Nazism at the Ukrainians, but if seriously review the concept of Nazism, one would see that it should be applied to the Putin regime itself. The very nostalgia for the imperial past and the "lost" territories, combined with other indicators, such as denying the existence of Ukrainians separately from the "Russkyi Mir" (Russian world), gives us the right to call this regime Nazi. Earlier I published an essay on this topic, which was put up for discussion on academia.edu. In the main theses of that essay,ⁱⁱⁱ I have nothing to change yet, except only another argument in their support.

Some observers try to be careful calling Putin's ideology Nazi and prefer to qualify it only as neo-imperial. This is a correct definition, but far from being sufficient. If we accept the thesis about the Nazi character of this regime, the leaders of the Western world will have to recognize this phenomenon as the number one issue on the global scale and take appropriate measures to curb this neo-Nazi regime. Then talks about not letting Putin be humiliated, as well as the advice to the Ukrainians to accept the loss of some of their territories, ostensibly as a compromise for the sake of peace would not take the place. History, as one can see, repeats itself almost one-to-one when some European leaders are again, as in the distant 1930s, trying to appease the Nazi ideology-driven aggressor. That time Europe had eventually to pay a heavy price for such short-sight real politics.

Such a shift in global priorities the collective West undergoing is due to a simple fact - if the Chinese regime has not yet taken practical steps to undermine the international law-based world order, then the Putin regime is already undermining it most crudely and violently. In violation of international law, this regime commits military aggression against a European country and war crimes on the occupied territories, blocks the trade in Ukrainian grain which exposes the world to the danger of a food crisis, and uses the export of its energy resources as an instrument of blackmail against Western countries that support Ukraine by supplying weapons to it and adopting sanctions against Russia.

Yet, even in the United States itself, which is leading a coalition of democracies to help Ukraine, not everyone, even the ruling elite, gives the highest priority to the agenda of curbing the newly emerged Nazi regime and it. By indications, there are at least two camps in the U.S. today lobbying for different approaches to the war in Ukraine. One camp is advocating for as much military assistance to Ukraine as possible so that it cannot only defend itself but also inflict a military defeat on the Russians. The other camp is trying to convince the U.S. political leadership to not go too far in confronting Russia, both to prevent a nuclear conflict with it and to engage

Moscow in containing China, or at least to make it neutral in that containment policy. Speaking on 23 May 2022 at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Henry Kissinger, Former U.S. Secretary, urged the United States and the West to not seek an embarrassing defeat for Russia in Ukraine and recommended to Kyiv that they should cede a part of Ukrainian territory to Russia to help end the invasion.^{iv} Likewise, *The National Interest*, an influential American magazine published by the Center for the National Interest, a public policy think tank leaning toward the Republican Party, proposed a fifteen-point peace plan, according to which Ukraine would cede Donbass and Crimea, forget about joining NATO and even receiving military aid from the West, in exchange for the Russians withdrawing from the Kherson region and for guarantees of its sovereignty by major world powers.^v

However, the second camp's expectations of a peace deal with the Putin regime are nothing else but an illusion. First, if the Russian Nazi regime is not neutralized now, Putin will perceive this as a weakness of the West and as proof that nuclear blackmail is working effectively. This will encourage him to resort even more to this blackmail in confronting the West, and even shift the spearhead of its aggressive policy from Ukraine to the Baltic countries and even to Finland and Poland, which were also once part of the Russian Empire and, therefore, can be considered by Moscow as "lost" territories to be "returned".

Another beneficiary of such an outcome would be China which would perceive it as a *carte blanche* to invade Taiwan, understanding that after the first negative reaction from the US and collective West, they would also accept some kind of deal with Beijing. China will resort to more aggressive politics against the West, realizing that the latter will not go too far in restraining Beijing's claim for China's own "lost" territories.

Besides, Putin has already staked on a strategic alliance with China, based on the anti-Western and anti-liberal platform. Therefore, it would be more expedient to first weaken one link in this tandem, Russia, to eventually deal with one, China.

In addition, given the emergence on the world stage of actors comparable in their danger to the past Hitler's Germany, who challenge the world order, it is necessary to strengthen the protection of this world order itself, making adjustments to its architecture. Looking at how the Western countries have reacted to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and how they made decisions in this respect, one can get the impression that the existing international institutions that consolidate the forces of liberal democracy against such challenges are not effective enough. The problem is that within the framework of NATO and the EU in their current form the member-states sometimes are not always able to overcome contradictions between them, due to the discrepancy in how their ruling elites understand their countries' national interests. This, combined with the principle of consensus embedded in the decision-making system of these institutions, sometimes complicates the adoption of timely and truly effective decisions to protect the entire Euro-Atlantic community and its closest allies from such kind of aggression that was launched by the Putin regime.

This, however, does not mean that these institutions, NATO and the EU, should be dissolved. On the contrary, they must be further strengthened, as the United States and several leaders of the collective West are trying to do so. At the same time, these institutions must be supplemented by new, less cumbersome and smaller in their membership, but more mobile and effective in their decisions and actions in response to emerging challenges. There are already signs of such

new institutions, in the form of regional and other kinds of coalitions of interests, are already emerging. In one case, such a small coalition has already been created, AUKUS, a tripartite security pact in the Indo-Pacific region, created in September 2021 by Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. This initiative was developed further in June 2021 when five countries, including The United States, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, launched an informal group aimed at boosting economic and diplomatic ties with Pacific island nations.^{vi}

In addition, the US administration has been making efforts to create and expand a coalition of countries that have either already introduced or could join the sanctions against the Russian Federation.^{vii} Attempts to form such a global coalition of democracies have been in the past. In December 2021, the U.S. convened a summit of democracies,^{viii} the very fact of an invitation to which was the criterion of whom the U.S. administration qualify real democracy. For example, the Orbán government of Hungary was not invited to this forum,^{ix} apparently because the ruling elite of this country has proven to be defiantly illiberal. The same goes for Turkey, even though democratic elections are held in both Hungary regularly.^x However, such a coalition of liberal democracies is still lacking in sustainability, since it is not focused on targeting and solving specific practical goals, and therefore is devoid of an articulated mandate. Now that the need has arisen to consolidate liberal democracy in the face of the growing threat from the *Velicoruskiy* (Great Russian) Nazism, such a coalition acquires a concrete practical meaning. Readiness for such a critical engagement with the Putin regime would be a good indicator of who is who in world politics, the line of demarcation on the world stage between the camp of liberal democracy and the rest of the world.

Another initiative that is gradually taking shape and deserving attention is Boris Johnson's idea of creating a subregional union of countries^{xi} for the existence of which Putin-style Nazism poses an immediate existential threat and which therefore takes the most active and uncompromising position concerning the aggression against Ukraine. In addition to Ukraine itself, these are the Baltic states, Poland, as well as other Eastern European and Scandinavian countries that also face a threat to their security from the aggressive, neo-imperial policies of the Putin regime. The United Kingdom could become a sponsor and leader in this sub-regional initiative, thanks to its weight in world politics and the global economy. Such an initiative undertaken by London demonstrates its readiness to fill the vacuum of strategic leadership that has arisen in Europe due to the rather ambiguous and sometimes conciliatory position taken towards the Russian military aggression in Ukraine by such two leaders of the European Union as France and Germany.

Interestingly, despite this initiative to create a sub-regional military-strategic coalition that has not been yet realized in practice, it has already begun to exert its influence on the behavior of the leaders of France and Germany. At the beginning of June President Macron stated recently that one should not allow Putin to "lose face"^{xii} as a result of a military defeat in Ukraine, hinting at the need to make territorial concessions to him, to end the war. But following his visit to Kiev on June 16, 2022, he finally unequivocally spoke in favor of the full restoration of the territorial integrity of Ukraine by achieving a military victory over the Russian Federation.^{xiii} It is quite obvious that this statement indicating a shift in his approach to the war in Ukraine was made, at least partly, given the threat of France losing its leadership position on European security issues and ceding this leadership to the UK. The latter has been much more proactive over the last several months, compared to France, in taking care of the national sovereignty of not only

Ukraine but also most Eastern European countries that feel might increasingly concerned about the perspective to become the next target of the Russian aggression.

The Guardian interpreted Boris Johnson's initiative as a sign that Britain intends to use the war in Ukraine to "return" to Europe.^{xiv} London would indeed be eager to establish itself as a leader in matters of European security, at least the security of Europe's eastern flank. There, in Eastern Europe, there seems to be a fear that the European Union maybe not be in a hurry with military assistance, if the Russian military target some of them. This sense of vulnerability creates a demand for additional security guarantees for this European region, and Boris Johnson's initiative responds to this quest very timely.

What can prevent further consolidation of the camp of liberal democracy, which guards the world order, in its struggle with Russian neo-Nazism? I would single out, first of all, the factor of domestic politics in countries that are part of this camp. Especially in countries that lead this community the political pendulum can swing towards ultra-right populism, as it was in the very recent past. Such a threat exists at least in the United States, which leads this camp doing in this respect quite well under the current Biden administration, and also in France and Italy where the ultra-right wing is quite strong and has some ties with the Putin regime. The political elite in Germany may again be strongly influenced by big businesses that invested in Russia or had profitable trade with it in recent past. These trends may at some point weaken the global coalition of liberal democracy. Therefore, it is important to update without delays the system of protecting the world order and collective security of the Euro-Atlantic community, so that if populists come to power, they would not be able to dismantle this system during their rule.

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