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Three Lessons and Three Clues about Putin's Foreign Policy toward Ukraine and the West

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Vladimir Putin has made no secret of his intention to turn the CIS countries into the “friendly” vassal states of what he has called a “resurgent Russia.” The first wake-up calls came in 2003, when the Kremlin bullied Ukraine and Moldova. Moscow deployed military engineers in the Kerch strait in an attempt to change the demarcation line and take control of the maritime routes between the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea. The standoff with Ukraine ended in a framework legal agreement that established mutual control and bilateral cooperation in the Sea of Azov.

Today, Russia is using this agreement to harass Ukraine's international trade and fishing industries, openly abusing and violating its provisions, which are written too broadly and therefore allow for different interpretations. Despite the efforts of different Ukrainian governments between 2003 and 2014, Russia has never been willing to clarify these provisions.

The first lesson for foreign leaders who want to deal with Russia is that Putin sees mutually binding agreements only as a tool to find a chink in the other's armor; he will then wait for the best moment to transform this into a cage.

Also in 2003, Putin's close associate Dmitriy Kozak attempted to impose “federalization” on Moldova as a “peaceful resolution” to a decade-long conflict between Moldova and the unrecognized “Transnistrian Moldovan Republic,” a Russian-controlled and -managed enclave. On that occasion, the Russian plan was rejected even by Moldova's ruling Communists, who found themselves in agreement with the pro-European opposition.

Today, Dmitriy Kozak represents Russia in the Normandy Four negotiations format. He demands that Ukraine accept the “special status” of the Russian-occupied areas of Donbas, which Kremlin propaganda has been framing as “people's republics” since 2014. The key elements of this “special status” are very similar to the “special status” of “Transnistria” and “Gagauz autonomy” that Kozak tried to enforce in Moldova in 2003.

The second lesson is that Russian proposals for compromises and arrangements may look reasonable at that moment, but will be detrimental for the other side in the medium term. Russia has no other goal than changing the other's perception of what “security” and their “interest” is, in order to give Russia the ultimate legal and

cognitive power to decide when its security and interests are threatened or violated.

In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, forging a R2P claim with Putin's false assertion of “genocide” against the “South Ossetian people.” This aggression against Georgia was neither condemned nor punished. Following the war, Russia recognized the occupied parts of Georgia as “independent states” and “allies” and posited that this was grounds for protecting them any time Russia deemed it necessary.

In 2014, the Kremlin used unilateral accusations of an “unconstitutional coup d'état” in Ukraine and “genocide of the Russian-speaking people” to occupy Crimea and areas in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine. Today, Russia threatens to recognize its proxy entities established in the occupied Donbas as “independent states” and to legitimize its open military build-up in the region.

The third lesson is that Russian diplomacy serves as a tool to legitimize the use of military force and deny the targeted countries their universal right to self-defense.

All this leaves an impression that few conventional instruments serve to achieve predictability, confidence, and peace in relations with Russia. However, several instances in Ukrainian–Russian relations provides us with clues as to how this can in fact be done.

The first clue came in 1995 under the leadership of the late SBU [Security Service of Ukraine] head Yevheniy Marchuk. He led a successful campaign to contain and deter Russian subversive action in Crimea. These strong preventive measures and the neutralization of Russian agents in Crimea demonstrated that Ukraine was determined to protect itself. As long as Russia is not fully prepared for conflict, then it can be prevented, and countries should take radical measures to prevent conflict at this early stage. Today, it means that the EU must approve a mechanism of imposing severe economic sanctions and deploy rapid response forces closer to possible areas of conflict if Russia starts military preparations. The events of February 2022 prove that only if it faces a complete shutdown of trade and a strong response across Europe will Russia decrease tensions and a conflict be avoided.

The second clue became visible in 2009 after the Russian gas blackmail of Ukraine failed. The Kremlin

had to accept that the contracts between Gazprom and Naftogaz fell under the jurisdiction of an independent arbitration institution in Stockholm. The Russian interest in stable commercial relations with the West was so strong that in 2016 the Kremlin agreed with the arbitration ruling in favor of Ukraine; it paid the associated fines in 2019.

Thus, a stable resolution of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia might be possible if it is connected to business opportunities for the biggest Russian companies. From this point of view, Germany has one of the most powerful levers for delivering peace to Donbas. Germany can not only determine the fate of Nord Stream 2, but also define how much Russian energy makes it to the European market. In other words, it would be reasonable to reward Russia for true de-escalation with access to the EU oil and gas markets or punish it with restrictions and a reduction of its share if it continues aggression.

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COMMENTARY

The Reasons for Russia’s Proposals

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In December, Russia invited the United States to sign a treaty and European NATO member countries to commit to an agreement on “security guarantees.” While the contents of Russia’s suggestions were not surprising, the timing, the no-compromise approach, and the public form of the invitation raised a lot of questions.

Ever since Vladimir Putin’s historic speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, the Russian government has consistently expressed concerns about trends in European security affairs, particularly NATO expansion and American involvement. Russia was somewhat pacified by former U.S. president Donald Trump’s isolationist foreign policy; once Joe Biden took office in

The third clue to be gleaned from Ukraine’s experience is that Russia cannot prevail if the opposite side is united. In 2014, despite weak defensive capacity and a disrupted economy, Ukraine withstood hybrid and open aggression because most political and civic forces put aside their differences and worked together. This saved Odesa and Kharkiv from hybrid occupation. Therefore, if the West wants to deter Russia, the EU and NATO member states must forget their disagreements and look for any opportunity to help near and distant neighbors. This is true across the political divides within the bigger alliances of the EU parliament and within the EU member states. It also applies to the European Social Democrats and other Left forces: after all, the background for the establishment of the 1st International in 1864 was solidarity with the Polish uprising against Russian tsarism.

early 2021, however, it became evident that restoring transatlantic solidarity was a top priority. The intensity of American foreign policy interactions with European partners triggered another wave of concern. The timing and the contents of Russia’s proposal in December 2021 relate to this change in American foreign policy position. Whereas the Trump administration appeared to be trying to undermine all the arms control treaties to which the US was a party, the Biden administration is taking a more constructive approach. The new administration has extended the START 3 treaty and expressed a willingness to negotiate arms control issues. Accordingly, Russia and the US launched a dialogue on strategic sta-