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The Eastern Partnership under the test of war in Ukraine

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On the eve of the fifth enlargement of the European Union in 2003, the [neighbourhood policy](#) was launched to "prevent further lines of division in Europe and to promote stability and prosperity" and to create, according to a now famous concept, a "circle of friends". The [Eastern Partnership](#), which emerged on 7 May 2009, is now being undermined by the Russian military invasion of Ukraine.

MILITARY INVASION OF UKRAINE, DARK DAYS FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION

On 21 February 2022, in a theatrical performance, Vladimir Putin signed the recognition of the two self-proclaimed secessionist republics of Luhansk and Donetsk on live television, which the Duma (the lower house of the Russian parliament) ratified the next day - not without having rewritten history by explaining that Ukraine was a Lenin's artificial creation. On 24 February, Russian troops invaded Ukraine. After the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008 in Georgia, and the integration of Crimea into Russia in 2014, once again this was a [serious violation of international law](#)[1]. The European Council condemned this 'unprovoked, unjustified military aggression' and supported 'without reservation the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders'.

[1] See the Foundation's comprehensive analysis of 21 February 2022: '[Russia, Ukraine and international law](#)'.

[2] See also Pierre Mirel: '[European Union-Russia after three lost decades, are we moving towards new cohabitation](#)'. *European Issues*, n° 483, 10 September 2018

[3] Quoted in Andrei Grachev's 'A New Pre-War? From hyperpowers to hyperpoker'. Ed. Alma, 2017.

[4] As in Brussels on 9 February 2021 when receiving Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal.

In a [Foundation study](#) from January 2016 Maxime Lefebvre noted the extent to which the opportunity to seek a new structure of security in Europe following the 1990 Charter of Paris had been neglected[2]. George Kennan, former US ambassador to Moscow, wrote in 2000 that "NATO's eastward expansion may become the most fatal mistake in US policy since the war ... (because) the Russians will have no choice but to interpret it as military action[3]", whilst the Warsaw

Pact had been dismantled. [Zbigniew Brzezinski](#) wrote in 1992 that securing peace "requires a long-term geopolitical vision for the emergence of a post-imperial Russia capable of assuming its place in the concert of democratic nations". And although it is true that both Germany and France rightly prevented Ukraine and Georgia's membership of NATO at the [Bucharest summit](#) in 2008, Point 23 of the conclusions stated: 'We have agreed that these countries will become members of NATO'. And Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg regularly confirms that their preparations for membership continue[4].

Should strategic dialogue have been attempted after [Putin's vehement speech](#) at the Security in Europe Conference in February 2007, a precursor to global confrontation? Or in 2018 as proposed by Emmanuel Macron? And could increase pressure for the implementation of the Minsk Agreements have reduced the risks in the Donbass? The lack of consensus did not allow it. In any case, this situation gave Putin no right to challenge the Euro-Atlantic choice of 73% of citizens for a free and independent Ukraine with the election of President Volodymyr Zelensky with this goal in mind in 2019. And the fact that the Kremlin ignored the president's offer of dialogue at the beginning of his term in office casts doubt on Putin's willingness to find a solution then.

VLADIMIR PUTIN, THE MASTER OF TIME, TRAPPED IN A MENTAL BUNKER

He also clearly never wanted to engage in the dialogue proposed in February 2022 by the US and French presidents and the German chancellor, hypocritically playing on diplomacy and military pressure in a carefully thought-out strategy. The Kremlin's red lines were precisely designed to prevent any dialogue.

Vladimir Putin's furious speech on 21 February raised questions about his true intentions. Was NATO just one of the grievances? The military aggression launched on 24 February confirmed that it was not. The masks have come off. The objective of Putin's revisionism goes far beyond that. It is multiple. His violation of international law in 2014 followed Kyiv's signing of the [association agreement](#) with the Union and not action taken by NATO.

It is much more a question of the Kremlin exercising its right to control the orientations of the states born of the dissolution of the USSR and to restore Moscow's pre-eminence. Above all over Ukraine, a key country in the nostalgic vision of a great Russia, without which the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is an empty shell. Putin has never accepted its independence and, above all, its European orientation. He aims to challenge the choices of the 'colour revolutions', to undermine the progress of the 'liberal model' that the EU's association agreements with the Trio promote, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

What 'dangerous examples' for Putin's Russia, which locks up its opponents, rewrites history and closed the NGO Memorial! Some say that this is not a new Cold War because Moscow does not have an ideology. We might doubt this since the master of the Kremlin, locked in a mental bunker, has become the champion of an illiberalism that intends to propose alternative democracy and values to its populist allies, together with Xi Jinping's [China](#). Even if it means attacking free and independent Ukraine. This is a dangerous rewriting of history and a return of the Russian empire by force. It is also '*the dignity, freedom and democracy of the whole of Europe that is under attack*' and that Ukraine is defending, as the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, declared. These are dark days for Europe, where the spectre of war has made a dramatic comeback.

THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP HOSTAGE TO MOSCOW MORE THAN EVER BEFORE

Until now the Eastern Partnership has moved forward '[between resilience and interference](#)'. Indeed,

Ukraine has changed more since 2015 than in the previous twenty years. Moscow's resentment is all the stronger because the reorganisation of trade has been spectacular. While bilateral trade with the EU has increased by 49% since the implementation of the free trade agreement, trade with Russia has dropped from 50% in 1995 to less than 10% today. However, the heavy Soviet legacy continues to slow down reform: high levels of corruption and weakness of the judiciary and the administration, particularly in the face of powerful networks of oligarchs. The transition has slowed down and economic development has been held back.

The same has happened in [Georgia](#) where the shadowy influence of oligarchs, often linked to Moscow, and political polarisation have played into Russia's hands, undermining what was once a model of reform. [Moldova](#) inflicted a double political defeat on its large neighbour by electing pro-European Maia Sandu as President and her party into [government](#) in August 2021. It is nonetheless vulnerable to Moscow's energy blackmail. Its major challenge, however, is demographic: while its population has decreased by a third in 15 years, by 2030 it could be only half what it was in 1995!

Despite the constraints, the Trio of associated countries had so far pursued integration with the Union. The Eastern Partnership offers a flexible framework where each country chooses its own path in a differentiated and adapted way. [Armenia](#) has only a "Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership" Agreement, one that [Azerbaijan](#) is also negotiating. The [sixth Eastern Partnership Summit](#), held on 15 December 2021, confirmed its main objectives: resilience of economies and societies, the environmental and digital agenda, accountable institutions and rule of law, split into twenty programmes with the technical and financial support of the European Union.

But recent upheavals have made the Eastern Partnership more a hostage to Russia than ever before. Georgia lost 20% of its territory in 2008. Ukraine has lost Crimea and may lose the republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, Moldova has been "cut off" from Transnistria. These occupations limit the sovereignty of states and

create permanent insecurity that hinders investment and hampers development. Armenia's sovereignty has also been undermined by its defeat in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, which makes it indebted to Moscow. Russia has won back the central role it played in the time of the USSR with a 1,960-strong peacekeeping mission over five years, in addition to its military base in Gyumri.

Azerbaijan's military victory has strengthened President Aliyev's authoritarian regime. It also allowed Turkey, thanks to its armed support, to gain a solid foothold in what Recep Erdogan considers a natural zone of influence. Did he not declare in Baku that the two countries form 'one nation, two states'? The connections between them can only develop thanks to Ankara's recent rapprochement with Yerevan, which is the Reis's primary objective.

As for Belarus, neither the strong responses of civil society, nor the sanctions of the European Union, have moved Lukashenko's dictatorial regime since its fraudulent elections in August 2020. He has just surrendered his sovereignty to Russia with the right to station troops permanently, to whom he has given free passage for the invasion of Ukraine from the north.

HISTORIC EUROPEAN UNITY IN SUPPORT OF MASSIVE SANCTIONS AGAINST THE AGGRESSOR

This invasion, this 'geopolitical terrorism', completes Russia's return to challenge the post-Cold War international order by force. But neither NATO nor its members can risk a third world war. Hence the importance of the sanctions in the history of the European Union adopted at the speed of light' by the Council, and where all instruments are being used. They have targeted the financial sector, transport, dual-use goods, and export control and financing. They have also excluded seven banks from the Swift interbank network, blocking the Russian Central Bank's assets and have closed airspace to Russian aircraft. Sanctions have also been imposed on the 351 deputies in the Duma who voted in support of the recognition of the two republics and on Vladimir Putin and his Foreign

Minister, Sergei Lavrov. As for the United Nations, in the face of the Russian veto in the Council, it was the General Assembly that asked Moscow to stop the war and withdraw its troops, with 141 votes against 35 abstentions and 5 against.

This was a strong, unprecedented, swift response, with the unanimous support of the Member States. Moreover, for the first time, the European Union decided to use the new [European Peace Facility](#) to provide Kyiv with military equipment to a value of 450 million €. And Germany suspended the accreditation procedure for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Sanctions have also been imposed on [Belarus](#). These severe sanctions are already affecting Russia's economy and there are many voices being raised against the war. A change from within would be welcome. Is this possible, while repression is increasing? In response, Putin will probably want to further strengthen his ties with China and further integrate his banking system with the yuan/renminbi. China, which is linked to Russia but is also Ukraine's largest trading partner, abstained in the Security Council but refused to talk of invasion. Its uncomfortable position will be a key element in the emerging world order.

The European Union also decided to allocate €500 million in humanitarian aid and €1.2 billion in macro-economic assistance to Ukraine. Let us salute the unity of the European Union, whose sovereignty has never been more relevant. It is to be hoped that the will to develop its strategic autonomy will emerge stronger from this war. The German government's spectacular turnaround in favour of modernising its army and increasing cooperation with its European partners will undoubtedly contribute to this. Or will it be the NATO camp with an accelerated militarisation of its members in Central and Eastern Europe? After this war, the European continent will not be the same. Will the European Union stand by helplessly and watch chaos unfold on the continent as interdependencies become apparent and the sovereignty of several states is undermined? Whilst Russia is also being pushed into the arms of China.

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MEMBERSHIP PROSPECTS FOR THE TRIO? A NEW HELSINKI CONFERENCE?

The 2013-2014 agreements with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine represented a compromise between some EU member states that wanted to offer them a membership opportunity - led by the Baltic states, Poland and Sweden - and those that opposed it. This compromise was reflected in their dual structure: a progressive political association with the European Union in an Association Agreement proper; and gradual economic integration through the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). The latter would bring the three countries to the doorstep of the European Economic Area once some 120 EU directives have been transposed.

As the Kremlin has hardened its positions in recent years, the same member states have tried to put the Trio's EU membership back on the agenda. This has now been achieved with the submission of Ukraine's application by President Zelensky on 28 February, followed by Georgia and Moldova on 3 March. With the support of eight countries of Central and Eastern Europe^[5]. In a [resolution](#), the European Parliament decided that it supports granting 'candidate' status, while encouraging Kyiv to implement its DCFTA. With unusual speed, the Council asked the European Commission to prepare the three opinions, in accordance with Article 49 of the Treaty (TEU). This in no way prejudices the position of the Member States, for whom these opinions are advisory.

To ignore this request would be considered a victory for the master of the Kremlin, as Ukraine fights for its integrity, its independence and the values it shares with the Union. The Council's hopeful position is therefore a strong symbolic response to the three countries' need to anchor themselves in the European Union in these days of bloody war. Their candidacies illustrate the appeal of the European Union to those states on the continent that wish to freely and voluntarily share elements of their sovereignty and values with the 27 member states, so as not to succumb to forced integration into Russia or alignment with its political regime.

Nevertheless, these candidacies represent a very great challenge for the European Union. Without prejudging what the Commission will say, three constraints can be highlighted at this stage. Opening accession negotiations would be a headlong rush for the European Union's cohesion, which would weaken it even more, at a time when consensus among the 27 is largely lacking in relation to sensitive issues. And the Western Balkans, which were promised membership twenty years ago, are still not members. This is a constraint that a new governance of the European Union would help to overcome. There is also a risk of a rush to reform while the DCFTA still has a long road ahead before it is complete, unless another model of relations with the European Union is invented, between DCFTA and accession, an enlarged and revisited European Economic Area. There is still the risk of the perception of an endless extension of the European Union's borders. At the very least, opinions will finally open up this essential debate.

One should recall here the ambiguity of the 2014 agreement with Ukraine, in that it kills the hopes of some ever integrating the Union, whilst it does not attenuate the anger of others, and made the European dream of some extremely costly. A realistic Union should stop fostering an illusion and generating frustration, while fuelling Eurosceptics rhetoric.

There is, still, one major obstacle to these three accessions, the occupation of parts of their respective territories in republics recognised by Moscow. To enter into negotiations ignoring this state of affairs would be to accept the policy of force that has detached these territories from sovereign states. But to refuse, precisely because they are divided, would render the policy of the three countries and of the European Union hostage to Russia. However, since the accession of Cyprus, a divided island, the European Union has established as a principle the absolute necessity for any candidate to settle its border disputes, hence the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Thus, whatever the approach, Putin will have succeeded in blocking any accession to the European Union, as well as to NATO. Without a continental approach including a new relationship between Brussels and Moscow, it would be a bitter pill

^[5] Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria.

to swallow to accept new accessions as they stand. It is the geopolitics of the continent that will be at stake in a long-term process, in any case.

If we acknowledge that "*the Western area of influence has expanded without a continental structure of security*[6]", we are indeed at the centre of this new East-West confrontation, as President Macron has stressed. In 1973, these two blocks were brave enough to launch negotiations which led, two years later, to the [Helsinki Agreements](#). Something we did not do between 1990 and 2000! When the guns have fallen silent and the time is right, a new "Helsinki Conference" should be launched, as proposed by Finnish President Sauli Niinistö, for the 50th anniversary of the agreements in 2025. As in 1973, security should be the focus. But also borders which have been violated by Russia. And of course, the economy, with the pursuit of sectoral agreements between the Union and the EEU and the free movement of people, as envisaged in Saint Petersburg in 2003 with the 'four areas' of cooperation.

This journey through the countries of the Union's eastern neighbourhood attests to the illusions lost

since the golden age of 2003-2005 when *soft power* was supposed to transform them, confident that democracy and the market economy would naturally impose themselves after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Was this European post-Cold War irenicism? While the European and global context was about to be turned upside down, giving lie to the idea that history was coming to an end.

Faced with the invasion of Ukraine, the European Union has responded quickly and forcefully, using all the tools of its economic, commercial and financial power at its disposal, as well as the attributes of its common foreign and security policy. May this crisis restore its credibility! Josep Borrell believes that his responses to this war mark the 'birth of geopolitical Europe'. Aren't its neighbours the perfect place to prove it?

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[6] Michel Foucher, 'Arpenter le monde-Mémoires d'un géographe politique', Ed. Robert Laffont, 2021.

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