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What is President Putin so afraid of?

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Faced with the brutal and unjustified military aggression of Putin's Russia against Ukraine, the vast majority of European citizens have realised what seemed unlikely until now: the possibility of a war in Europe^[1]. A cruel and devastating war, both materially and morally, a war of occupation of a sovereign country and a free people. Undoubtedly the aggressor will be held accountable for his crimes before the international community and nothing will be forgotten.

The EU is watching, perplexed but united and in solidarity with the heroic struggle of the Ukrainian people who are valiantly defending their independence and their freedom, which is also ours. The borderline between Western civilisation based on values and respect for human rights and authoritarian regimes that trample on the dignity of their citizens has been crossed in the blood of the victims, many of whom are civilians. The European Union, as a global actor, is facing its limits as it tries to curb the hideous logic of war against which it was built 72 years ago.

Ukraine is paying an extremely high price for its freedom. Not being a member of the European Union, it is fighting for the preservation of our core values and the European project. MEPs recognised this in the resolution they voted on 1 March this year, in which they called for Ukraine to be granted candidate status for membership of the EU. This symbolic gesture was welcome, expected and justified not only emotionally but also rationally: Ukraine is a country with great economic and human potential, capable of giving a new impetus to the European integration process. On 23 June the European Council approved this request.

More than eight months after the start of the Russian aggression, it is even more difficult to guess the final intentions of the Russian President.

At the start of the invasion, he said he wanted to re-establish the "empire of yesteryear" and establish his absolute power over Ukraine, which is an essential part of his plan.

Today, faced with the difficulty of achieving his political and military objectives, Putin is threatening to use tactical nuclear weapons. This can be interpreted as an admission of impotence when it comes to winning the conventional war. In fact, the Russian army has revealed its weaknesses in terms of preparation, intelligence capabilities, as well as logistics. In addition, combat morale is extremely low. According to some American analysts, Russia, so proud of its military potential, has a third world army. No one doubts its destructive capacity and firepower. It is criminal to use it against the civilian population and infrastructure. Russia remains faithful to its traditional military doctrine, which undermines the ethical values enshrined in international conventions.

However, beyond the political, economic or psychological considerations that may shed light on the origins of this war, there are facts that should be recalled. They have an undeniable impact on the fate of Ukraine and on the structure of Europe's security.

Firstly, the rivalry between the United States and Russia over military supremacy in the European theatre is certainly influencing the Ukrainian crisis, but it does not seem to me to be the primary cause of the artificial war provoked by Vladimir Putin. No democratic state can question the right of another to freely decide on its economic or military alliances, or even dare to threaten it by force to dictate its choices and interests. But the perception of Putin's Russia is very different: as an autocratic state, it has perceived NATO's enlargement, the deployment

[1] This text is part of the "Schuman Report on Europe, State of the Union 2022", editions Marie B, Paris, 2022. It is updated.

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of anti-missile systems on the Polish and Romanian borders and, above all, the EU-Ukraine association agreement (rejecting the Russian offer to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union) as a threat to its integrity or, at least, as a great humiliation.

This perception was accentuated by the American decision to withdraw in 2001 from the 1972-2002 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM or ABMT) between the United States and the former Soviet Union. This was the first time in recent history that the United States withdrew from a major international arms treaty. In response to the withdrawal, the Russian president justified the creation of new strategic weapons. For its part, the US considers that Russia has been developing destabilising weapons systems for more than 15 years, in direct violation of its obligations under the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty.

Secondly, the failure of military planning and the moral injury to the West (US and NATO) arising from the withdrawal from Afghanistan, proving the indisputable weakness of the Allies, may have encouraged Putin to press ahead with his ambitions in Ukraine. The combination of high gas prices following the economic recovery and the European Union's heavy dependence on Russian gas has provided Putin with a powerful additional argument for risking a military adventure given his reserve of 600 billion in foreign currency which would allow him, especially with Chinese financial support, to circumvent possible Western financial sanctions.

In this context, the Russian president has reverted to the tradition of the militarised Soviet empire that sold "fear", by means of an oversized, modernised and strongly reinforced army since his arrival in power on 31 December 1999. Knowing his background as a KGB agent, it is not surprising that the military-security and techno-industrial complex in which he is engaged receives special attention.

Thanks to him, Russia has effectively maximised its international influence by relying mainly on its military power. In fact, the country is trying to become a leading global player again (former President Barack

Obama referred to Russia as a "regional power") having achieved several undeniable successes, such as in the Syrian conflict. Vladimir Putin has effectively ensured the role of policeman in the South Caucasus (Armenia-Azerbaijan war) and in Central Asia (citizens' revolt in Kazakhstan).

This newfound capacity for influence satisfies Russia's ambitions as a superpower, restores the image of the "shattered empire" and restores the pride of Russian citizens. The capacity of Putin's Russia to cause harm has also been widely used in the EU's neighbourhood and in Africa (deployment of Wagner's mercenaries), playing the role of the "trouble-maker" to weaken the European perspective in the Western Balkans (encouragement of nationalism and rearmament in Serbia) and the geopolitical interests of the EU and its member states. The examples are legion.

However, eight months after the aggression, it is clear that President Putin did not fully appreciate NATO's categorical response to the invasion of Ukraine. On the contrary, Putin has even "succeeded" in consolidating NATO's role as a security pillar and fortifying its perimeter of action. Indeed, Sweden and Finland, two countries traditionally reluctant to join this politico-military organisation of a defensive nature, have asked to join, which was endorsed at the NATO summit in Madrid in June. The political, economic and military solidarity of the vast majority of the Atlantic Alliance countries has greatly increased the military effectiveness of the Ukrainian army. President Erdogan's Turkey is playing an ambiguous role pursuing a mercantilist approach.

Thirdly, unlike the European Union, which is considered an economic giant but a political dwarf, today's Russia has neither the demographic nor the economic means to fulfil its ambitions as a 21st century superpower. Its economy has a relatively limited critical mass compared to its strategic rivals, the United States and China: even its performance pales in comparison to the large European economies. Russia is a country in demographic decline (its population is equivalent to that of Germany and France combined), its Gross National Income (GNI) in current dollars is less than

that of Italy and four times less than that of Germany-France combined! Despite its great wealth in fossil fuels, mineral raw materials and cereals, its exports are not very diversified and depend on international market prices. Moreover, according to recent studies[2], inequalities in the distribution of income and national wealth are reaching very high levels, making Russia one of the most polarised countries in the world. In the event of a sustained conflict, this could threaten the regime's social stability. In fact, 50% of the Russian population has only 17% of the income and their average annual income (€7,700) is fourteen times lower than that of the wealthiest 10% of the population (€104,600). This privileged segment of the Russian population gets almost half of the annual national income and captures 74% of the country's wealth. It is worth noting that these parameters of social inequality are practically similar to those that existed at the beginning of the 20th century under the Tsar's regime, before the Soviet revolution.

Moreover, eight months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the numerous economic and financial sanctions adopted by the West are beginning to take their toll on the Russian army's supplies of missiles and fighter planes, due to the lack of semi-conductors previously supplied by Western countries. A large majority of experts believe that if sanctions persist in the medium term, they will have an undeniable impact on the industrial and technological performance of the Russian economy. For example, the electronic chips needed for advanced military technologies and supplied by China to Russia are of inferior quality to those produced in the West.

Due to lack of supplies, Russia has had to resort to Iranian long-range suicide drones in flagrant violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which Russia itself adopted. This is yet another example of the lack of "UN coherence" and the lack of respect for international law by President Putin's Russia.

Fourthly, as an autocrat, Vladimir Putin feels threatened by the European Union's system of liberal democracy, which is the opposite of his method of government.

In terms of defence, he has been busy humiliating the European institutions, sowing division within the Union and destabilising some member states with his network of cyber-attacks and disinformation.

It is clear that transparency and the rule of law, which are the pillars of democracy, are a major threat to Vladimir Putin and his entourage. They are therefore working to neutralise them with the help of repression coupled with effective propaganda (according to Transparency International, Russia ranked 129th out of 180 countries in 2021). Putin constantly resorts to dissimulation and lies. He has not spared French President Emmanuel Macron who has shown great determination and patience in his diplomatic efforts to avoid war. Faced with a Putin who tries to justify his aggression of Ukraine by the need to "denazify" the Ukrainian elites, it has become legitimate to talk about the necessary "de-Putinisation" of Russia. A large-scale objective.

In this context, it is important to emphasise the manipulative power of Russian propaganda that ensures that most Russians support Putin's military operation in the belief that Russia is being attacked not only by President Zelenskyy's "hordes", but also by NATO and the Western world in general.

As for the cultural-historical aspect - according to President Putin - the West is rotten and only the Slavic world, with the support of the Orthodox churches, can save the world from moral catastrophe. Thus, Putin is defending the values he seems to believe in with the methods of a barbarian. This quite explosive combination gives him the strength to act against the law according to his wishes.

Fifth point: the "Europeanisation" of Ukraine since the Maidan revolution has been a nightmare for Russia. Indeed, the Ukraine of 2014 is very different from that of today. And last summer's popular pro-democracy revolt in Belarus against the dictator Lukashenko has only multiplied fears of possible contagion. In this context, it is important to remember that Putin's Russia betrayed Ukraine, and Ukrainians have not forgotten this.

[2] World Inequality Report 2022

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In 1994, following the Budapest Memorandum, the already independent Ukraine handed over all its nuclear weapons to Russia (220 nuclear missile vehicles, including 176 intercontinental missiles with 1240 nuclear warheads and 44 bombers equipped with over 1000 long-range nuclear missiles). At the same time, Ukraine signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in exchange for international guarantees of territorial integrity and security. In February 2014, Vladimir Putin violated these guarantees with the military occupation and annexation of Crimea. This betrayal was not sufficiently sanctioned by the international community and remains frozen in the Ukrainian collective memory.

Finally, the last point is that, in the face of China's unstoppable rise, Russia's Asian territories are in danger of shrinking to nothing. China's demographic and economic pressure in Eastern Siberia is a fact.

The figures speak for themselves: on one side of the border, 7 million Russians and over 110 million Chinese on the other. Beyond energy cooperation, an obvious priority sector for both countries with the construction of new gas pipelines to supply China with Russian gas, Russia has been dragging its feet in building the infrastructure, notably the bridges needed to link the railways and the population of the border towns in the Far East.

There is certainly a strong conjunctural alliance, which since the joint declaration signed by both countries in February this year has become "an unlimited association" between China and Russia to expel the West, especially the US, from Central and Southeast Asia. This close ideological understanding also aims to weaken the influence of the Western model of liberal democracy in Africa and Latin America. In this context, and from the Taiwanese perspective, China is carefully observing the international community's response to Russia's aggression of Ukraine. The concept of empire is embedded in China's collective psychology as an essential identity element of its national character. This is also the case in Russia, which, as Ryszard Kapuscinski described it, is "*a huge country inhabited by a people who for centuries were*

animated and unified by imperial ambition". This explains, to some extent, the residual popularity of the Russian president's authoritarian regime despite the poor economic performance and deteriorating material conditions of a large majority of Russian society.

Russia has no chance of prevailing over China in the economic and commercial spheres and its demographic weakness accentuates its powerlessness. We should recall the thoughts of Mao Zedong, who in 1964, on the subject of border disputes with Russia, stated that during the tsarist period, China had ceded more territory to Russia than to any other imperialist country, declaring that "*this list is too long, and we have not yet presented the bill for it*". Despite the current marriage of convenience and a harmony in defending mutual interests against the West, the Chinese have a long memory and may one day remember Mao's words.

In view of all these facts, the threat to Ukraine is largely motivated by fear of the European model and its values. Vladimir Putin fears democratic contagion in Ukraine far more than NATO missiles.

Faced with the Russian aggression of Ukraine, Europe must therefore remain united, shrug off its inhibitions and not give in to Russia's blackmail. Over these eight months, the European Union has shown resilience in enduring the economic and social costs closely linked to the war provoked by Putin. He is using Europe's heavy dependence on energy (gas and oil) as a weapon of war.

High inflation and a most likely recession, the duration of which cannot be predicted, are the high price to be paid by European small and medium-sized enterprises and a large part of the European population. This state of affairs is the result of erroneous strategic decisions taken unilaterally by some EU countries twenty years ago, without prior discussion or consultation. In September 2007, the European Parliament sounded the alarm on the potential risks linked to energy dependency and its use as a weapon of pressure. It asked the European

Council to establish a common foreign policy on energy. Unfortunately, its proposals went unheeded.

The day Europe combines its economic power and the democratic attractiveness of its model with strategic autonomy, it will be unbeatable. Russia's aggression of Ukraine is an urgent reminder that a Common

Foreign and Security Policy, including the field of energy, and supported by a common defence worthy of its name, is no longer an option, it is a necessity to preserve the achievements of the European model, and even to ensure its survival.

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