

Closing Argument

Sleepwalking to Solidarity? Russia, Ukraine and the European Dream

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I

Some dreams are so vivid that it is hard to tell you are sleeping. When you concentrate, though, you can see things happening that do not make sense. That is when you realise that the world you are in is different from the world you were expecting.

The Belarusian government's hijacking of Ryanair Flight 4978 on 23 May 2021 was one of those discordant moments. It happened against the backdrop of mass protests against the bogus re-election of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko the previous August. Suppressing opposition wherever it could be found, Lukashenko ordered his special-operations forces to divert the plane once it entered Belarusian airspace. They fabricated a bomb threat and forced the plane to land in Minsk. Once the plane was on the tarmac, authorities arrested two of the passengers, the Belarusian journalist and activist Roman Protasevich, who was on his way from Athens to Vilnius, and his Russian girlfriend.

The European Union reacted strongly, imposing a flight ban on Belarusian airspace and other economic sanctions. In retaliation, the Belarusian government outrageously deposited refugees flown from Iraqi Kurdistan on Belarus's borders with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. It was an ingenious application of pressure on a point of EU moral and political neuralgia. Air piracy and the weaponisation of migration signified what seemed like a step change in the re-emerging confrontation between East

and West.

The Europeans' awakening to a new reality fed the accusation that, until then, they must have been asleep. Russian provocations had steadily intensified for years in their significance and brazenness. The invasion of Georgia and the occupation and annexation of parts of Ukraine were only the most obvious. Propaganda, cyber attacks, assassinations in Western Europe, and interference in European and American elections showed Russia was willing to break the rules well beyond its self-declared sphere of influence.

On 22 February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin formally recognised the 'breakaway' provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk. Two days later, Russian troops massed on Ukraine's border rolled in. Those who had staged in Belarus tried to take out the Ukrainian capital Kyiv. The 'new' situation had been at least 15 years in the making.

II

In *The Sleepwalkers*, a history of the origins of the First World War, Christopher Clark unpacks the trope of somnolent paths to catastrophe.¹ In a long-running debate, he takes the side of those who argue that in 1914 no prime villain, but rather a chain of negligence and unintended consequences, precipitated the slide into a disastrous twentieth century.

The sleepwalking accusation against twenty-first-century Europe is rather different, more in line with the trope of deluded appeasement in the interwar years. It goes roughly like this: while of course no one should be compared to Adolf Hitler, Putin *is* like Hitler; that truth should have been obvious; and the EU's – especially Germany's – complacency was inexcusable. The leading count in this indictment is that the EU's substantial dependence on Russian gas, with again Germany and then Italy leading the way, gave Moscow geo-economic leverage over Europe while allowing Putin to restore the Russian military and build up sufficient reserves to withstand Western sanctions.

Both iterations of the trope have something in common despite a century's separation. Europe in 2014 as well as 1914 was susceptible to grand illusions because life was rather good. Before the First World War,

David Fromkin recalls, to ‘the man or woman in the streets of the Western world – someone who was alive in the vibrant early years of the twentieth century – nothing would have seemed further away than war’. Economies were globalised and growing; travel was unhindered; exchange controls, capital and trade barriers were practically non-existent; science, technology and culture were flourishing. Fromkin quotes the Austrian-Jewish novelist Stefan Zweig remembering decades later: ‘When I attempt to find a simple formula for the period in which I grew up, prior to the First World War, I hope to convey its fullness by calling it the Golden Age of Security. Everything in our almost thousand-year-old Austrian monarchy seemed based on permanency.’²

When world war did come, followed by another, Zweig’s fate was a tragic measure of how illusory that *fin de siècle* Golden Age of Security really was. When the Nazis came to power he fled to London, Bath, New York and finally Petrópolis, Brazil, where he and his second wife, exiles haunted by Europe’s apparent demise, took their own lives by overdosing on barbiturates.

There is always a temptation to stay inside the dream to see where it leads. Sleep is inviting and difficult to resist. Europe in the first decades of the twenty-first century has been pulled back and forth between its founding vision of peace and prosperity through integration, on the one hand, and a succession of exhausting and distracting crises, on the other. These extended from 9/11 and the terrorist attacks in London, Madrid, Paris and Berlin through the global economic and financial shock in 2008–09 to the sovereign-debt turmoil in the eurozone and the COVID-19 pandemic. Life was ‘rather good’ in terms of the benefits of globalised trade and the very low risk of state-to-state conflict. But domestic political instability plagued Greece and Italy, political-party systems across much of northern Europe weakened, the influx of migrants across the Mediterranean strained national and supranational governance, and Britain traumatised the EU by deciding to leave it. Also buffeting Europe was its disappointment in Barack Obama’s administration, for which it had harboured arguably exaggerated expectations, and the shock of Donald Trump’s election.

Yet that founding vision of relative peace and prosperity has proven

surprisingly resilient.³ Zweig and his wife's suicide pact spared them the knowledge of the full magnitude of the Holocaust. But it also meant that the 60-year-old Zweig would never witness the near-miraculous rebirth, within a few post-war decades, of at least the western part of the Europe he loved.

The conservative British historian Paul Johnson called the economic renaissance 'The European Lazarus', referring to three decades of dizzying economic recovery and expansion after 1945, manifested in France's *Trente Glorieuses* and West Germany's *Wirtschaftswunder*. Italy's boom *economico* was arguably the most impressive for several reasons, including rural Italy's extreme backwardness until the Second World War. At a 1963 dinner in Rome, US president John F. Kennedy marvelled: 'A nation once literally in ruins, beset by heavy unemployment and inflation, has expanded its output and assets, stabilized its costs and currency, and created new jobs and new industries at a rate unmatched in the Western world.'⁴ Great Britain also did well, albeit not in relative terms. Harold Macmillan could claim the British 'never had it so good' and still apply to join the European Economic Community (EEC) hoping to catch up with Britain's neighbours on the Continent.

The boom years ended in the 1970s, with Europe's Western Bloc economies beset by oil shocks, stagflation and terrorism, but they weathered these crises with basic prosperity and, most importantly, cultural and democratic values – including generous welfare states – mainly intact. They remained, in almost every dimension, successful enough through the 1980s to vindicate George F. Kennan's 1948 prediction that 'if economic recovery could be brought about and public confidence restored in western Europe – if western Europe, in other words, could be made the home of a vigorous, prosperous and forward-looking civilization – the Communist regime in eastern Europe ... would never be able to stand the comparison, and the spectacle of a happier and more successful life just across the fence ... would be bound in the end to have a disintegrating and eroding effect on the Communist world'.⁵

This long view is useful for understanding the European political, economic and strategic assumptions over the three decades since the end

of the Cold War. The success of a European model, organised strategically in a close alliance with the United States as superpower guarantor, and economically in an EEC that had also enjoyed the impetus of American support through the Marshall Plan, was clearly not something to throw away. Rather, the EEC was enlarged and deepened into a bona fide union with a single market and a common currency. Soon thereafter – much sooner than anyone might have expected – the EU expanded to include countries ranging from the Baltics to Malta and Cyprus.⁶ The Western Balkans and Turkey remained outside, albeit with the promise of eventual membership, while Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine became part of this new Europe's neighbourhood.

The post-Cold War years started with expectations on both sides of the Atlantic for a good relationship with post-Soviet Russia. New EU and NATO members from the formerly communist east were more sceptical, of course, and this caused some tension between newer and older members. The main transatlantic disagreements were not about Russia, however, but the Middle East, and here the European critics of the George W. Bush administration's Iraq War could also feel vindicated and even believe that America was adopting a more European approach when the Obama administration concluded the Iran nuclear deal. This 'Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action', or JCPOA, significantly involved Britain, France, Germany and the EU as a foreign-policy actor, as well as Russia and China.

More fundamentally, the main disagreements on both sides of the Atlantic were domestic and not international. They were about the distribution of prosperity, the unintended consequences of globalisation, the risks associated with ever more complex financial institutions and the ability of traditional political parties to represent the people.⁷ The EU was not responsible for these problems, and the transatlantic relationship could not address them. On the contrary, when Trump came to power on a wave of popular discontent in the United States, he argued that the transatlantic relationship was more part of the problem than the solution. Such suggestions provoked deep concern among political leaders on the other side of the Atlantic; they also tended to resonate with Trump-like European politicians who had long been rooted in the politics of most European countries.

When Putin invaded Ukraine, he foreclosed complacent introspection. That did not end populism on either side of the Atlantic, but it did discredit the belief that domestic political conflict was a sufficient excuse for ignoring international relations. In its place, as one of us argued in the last issue of *Survival*, Europeans experienced a visceral recognition of a grave threat to the values and institutions of Western civilisation.⁸ In response, European governments swung behind American leadership of NATO; the EU launched an unprecedented campaign of ratcheting sanctions; Europeans expressed new solidarity towards millions of refugees displaced by the conflict; and European political leaders committed to investing heavily in collective security by rebuilding their armies and re-engineering their economies.

In precipitating this surge of activity across the Atlantic and within Europe, Putin created the very problem he putatively sought to prevent. Now European politicians talk openly about considering Ukraine for EU membership while tightening their embrace of the Western Balkans. Formerly neutral countries Finland and Sweden have declared their intention to join NATO. And Russia is more isolated than it has been since the 1920s.

III

Emmanuel Macron's re-election as president of France in April 2022 was an important – and far from inevitable – validation of European solidarity. He was helped by a two-round voting system that has worked, so far, as a barrier against the populist right. The Putin-friendly Marine Le Pen nevertheless won a remarkable 41.4% of the vote, concentrated among poorer and less-educated citizens. The spectre of right-wing populism has not vanished. Still, Macron was the first French president to win re-election since Jacques Chirac defeated Le Pen's father 20 years ago, and this victory indicated that a 'Republican Front', spanning voters of the centre-left and centre-right, endured.

Macron's re-election, the strength of Mario Draghi in Italy and the dramatic changes in German attitudes towards energy and military security constitute important reassurance. Macron has a real chance to rebuild

the political centre in his country while reforming both France and the EU. Draghi offers the same prospect for Italy. Should these Mediterranean countries find a strong partner in Germany, there is much they could do to strengthen and deepen both the European project and the Atlantic Alliance.

The challenges they face are considerable. Europe's response to the pandemic remains incomplete. It has an ambitious recovery and resilience plan, called Next Generation EU, but much of it is still only on paper and unimplemented. In the meantime, money spent on weaning Europe away from Russian coal, oil and gas inevitably competes with both effective climate action and essential fiscal consolidation. Europe's countries also still need to complete their digital transition to restore their global competitiveness. The task of providing succour to millions of devastated Ukrainians is ongoing and will continue long after armed hostilities have ceased. Scarcely less daunting is calibrating the response to avoid further escalating the conflict.

Unfortunately, the window for constructive action may be closing. The war in Ukraine has fuelled the inflation sparked by the waning of the pandemic. Rapid price increases are chipping away at the purchasing power of households across the globe, turning voters in Europe and the United States against their political leadership and populations elsewhere against anyone who can be blamed for provoking Russia or prolonging the conflict. The currently favourable constellation of political leaders is unlikely to endure. The United States faces midterm elections in November 2022 and another presidential contest in 2024, and Italian voters must go to the polls between now and March 2023. The German coalition government may also prove unstable. Macron may have difficulty maintaining an effective majority in the National Assembly. And existing challenges such as the rule-of-law debate surrounding the governments of Hungary and Poland have resurfaced.

For all that, Europe's crucial test is a more basic one, grounded in geography. The mainstream assumption since the Cold War ended has been that Europe's future entailed partnership with Russia. Yet what seemed a truism now looks like an illusion. Putin has not only made it impossible for most Western leaders to trust him, but he has sold many Russians a

version of Russian history and destiny that enables him to draw political strength from the efforts of its adversaries. This parallel narrative will be hard to overcome, but reconciliation depends on Russians recognising its falsity. Here another parallel with Germany arises – again, with the usual proviso that the Nazis were *sui generis*.

Russia is greater than any political regime that beguiles it. That is what the Cold War teaches. And the ability of the Russian people to return to the international community one day should not be underestimated. Peace and reconciliation – between Ukraine and Russia, and between Russia and Ukraine’s supporters – may be a distant prospect. But diplomats and strategists on both sides of the Atlantic should be imagining ways, after Ukraine has repelled the invader, to bring Russia back into the fold. Russia’s permanent isolation is not a viable endgame for Europe or the United States.

The bad news is that Russia’s isolation may be unavoidable for a generation or more. Moreover, Russia under Putin looks more irrational and unpredictable than at any time since the death of Josef Stalin. And, despite its evident failures in Ukraine, it could also be more dangerous, especially if the nascent alignment with China comes to approach an alliance.

The good news is that Europeans have experience, in living memory, of making their continent, even when brutally divided, the ‘home of a vigorous, prosperous and forward-looking civilization’. The line of division is now much farther east. It is not a division to be welcomed and, in the fullness of time, the West may reflect on its own role in bringing it about. The weeks since 24 February 2022 and the long sweep of post-Second World War history, however, are strong evidence that Europe, whatever dreams it must abandon, can, in alliance with America, be master of its own fate.

Notes

- ¹ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014).
- ² David Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), p. 14.
- ³ See Erik Jones and Anand Menon, 'Europe: Between Dream and Reality?', *International Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 1, January 2019, pp. 161–80.
- ⁴ John F. Kennedy, 'Remarks at a Dinner Given in His Honor by President Segni', 1 July 1963, American Presidency Project, University of California at Santa Barbara, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-dinner-given-his-honor-president-segni>.
- ⁵ Quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 45.
- ⁶ See Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, 'Failing Forward in Eastern Enlargement: Problem Solving Through Problem Making', *Journal of European Public Policy*, May 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1927155>.
- ⁷ See, for example, Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013). See also Erik Jones, 'Populism in Europe: What Scholarship Tells Us', *Survival*, vol. 61, no. 4, August–September 2019, pp. 7–30.
- ⁸ Dana H. Allin, 'Ukraine: The Shock of Recognition', *Survival*, vol. 64, no. 2, April–May 2022, pp. 201–8.

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