Alternative scenario

Imagine for a moment what would have happened if Russia had not attacked Ukraine on 24 February 2022. In a year's time, Nord Stream 2 would have been certified and approved for use, while retired Chancellor Merkel or a similarly ranked French politician would have posted a selfie from a holiday in Crimea, thereby accepting its annexation. Maria Zakharova would scoff at Western propaganda threatening invasion. Germany would follow the path of the so-called energy transition, shutting down its last nuclear power plants and expanding its power generation based on gas imported from Russia. By skilfully balancing China and the US, Germany would undermine the cohesion of the democratic states. Central European countries would face off against the petrodollar-fuelled Russian Federation, while at press conferences journalists would quiz our region's politicians on Russophobia.

After another two years of capturing the elites of former Western countries and making their economies dependent, Russia could try again. For two years, strangle Ukraine by forcing it to keep its military on standby. Tire out public opinion in NATO countries, which would stop reacting to further provocations. After all, in the meantime, France would be building up Europe's 'strategic autonomy', which would lead to NATO splitting into two centres and the de facto brain death of the pact. The Kremlin would also influence public opinion in Ukraine, for example by fielding a strong candidate in the 2024 presidential election. In the event of a win, he would consummate the victory, or organise protests after a loss. President Putin could then concentrate the army by claiming he was carrying out manoeuvres again and strike.

A strong response from many European countries would then be made much more difficult, would convulse the political scene, would activate agents of influence, would cause a deeper political and economic crisis.

Russia would be in a much better position than it is today.

Reasons for the attack

Nevertheless, Vladimir Putin made the decision to attack. A risky one, as he knew that Ukraine had been rearmed with state-of-the-art weapons in the months leading up to the aggression and that his troops' movements were being tracked and transmitted in real time. This shows the man's appetite for risk and unrivalled

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ambition.

This is because the KGB did not accept that the Soviet Union had lost the Cold War. According to Putin, if it had not been for the inept Gorbachev, the collapse of the USSR would not have happened. According to the Kremlin, a strong party general secretary should carry out pro-efficiency economic reforms on the Chinese model, acquire new technologies, modernise industry, in a word, rebuild the foundations of an ambitious policy. Instead, he loosened political control, allowed debate, challenging party lines and political competition. This brought about the disintegration of the empire, the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century according to Putin himself. For them, communism was not the greatest misfortune that had befallen Russia, the annihilation of millions of lives and the squandering of almost a century of development, but a dream of greatness, a Gagarin flight to the stars.

Post-Soviet resentments are overlaid by the tradition of Tsarist Russia. For more than 300 years, i.e., the defeat of Sweden in the Great Northern War, which happened in Ukraine at the Battle of Poltava, Russia has had ambitions to play in the first division of the superpowers. It was during this war that Russian troops appeared for the first time in Central Europe on the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – not on its borders but in the heart of the state, and in the German states. Since the Peace of Nystad in 1721, the Kremlin has not been content with its position as a second-league state, a regional power.

In this context, it is worth considering the argument that Russia was deceived in the 1990s and threatened by NATO. The deception was to break a promise – not to expand NATO – made to Gorbachev by US Secretary of State Baker during the negotiation of the German reunification treaty. The only evidence of this promise is a recorded and publicly available statement by German Foreign Minister Genscher after one round of negotiations. So why did the USSR not seek to have this commitment written into the Treaty? Apparently, if indeed this offer was made, it was a negotiating proposal that Russia did not consider important enough to put in writing, or gave up for another concession, such as an extension of the period for the evacuation of the Red Army from East Germany. Who actually made such a proposal: Genscher, who sought the USSR’s agreement to German reunification, or Baker?

The argument of NATO’s threat to Russia is baloney, calculated to create embarrassment in European countries, a sense of guilt on which to play. It is

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difficult to imagine an attack on Russia from Estonia or Poland, there were never any such plans or military forces. Finally, the most important thing: nuclear states are by definition safe, an attack on them by another state is inconceivable and has never occurred. Russia, on the other hand, has a very flexible doctrine for the use of nuclear weapons and a full triad of means of delivery – it is an unconquerable state, it is secure within its borders.

Another reason for the march on Kyiv is the risk to the KGB's system of power over Russia that the Ukrainian example represented. Ukraine has not been a well-governed country for the past 30 years, while as a large country with an Orthodox culture it posed a similar threat to Moscow's despotism as Novgorod the Great, as it chose the liberators path of building its state. The figure of President Zelenskyy himself illustrates this thesis. How mentally desperate, tired of the war in Donbas, hungry for success and change must have been the people who elected a comedy actor as president when the challenger was the incumbent President Poroshenko, who had rebuilt the foundations of statehood after Maidan. However, Zelenskyy transformed himself from actor to statesman.

The above reasons are strategic in nature. Then there are the ongoing, tactical prejudices of the moment: the misrecognition of Ukraine's military strength, the visual weakness of the US after its evacuation from Afghanistan, doubts about the possible reaction of President Biden, who lifted his predecessor Donald Trump's sanctions against Nord Stream 2, Brussels' pressure on Poland poisoning the atmosphere in Europe and threatening the cohesiveness of the EU, the new left-wing chancellor in Germany.

All these reasons – let's call them rational – have been encased in an ideology: the unity of Ukrainians and Russians, but on the other hand there is the absurd argument of denazification, directed at the dumbest part of Putin's domestic political base. This argument deprives Russia of some of the moral capital resulting from its victory over Germany in the Second World War. Indeed, the perception of the role of the USSR was ambiguous – in Central Europe rather negative, in Western Europe, rather positive. By using the slogan 'A world without Nazism' today, PR specialists working for the Kremlin are retrospectively changing the image of 1939-45. This is an argument as ludicrous as the letter Z as a symbol for invasion – there is no such letter in the Russian alphabet.

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Consequences of the error

The Russian President's decision was wrong, and the country should be allowed to suffer the consequences. Indeed, with the risks mentioned above, the premium for winning would be high. Russia would gain over 40 million citizens, its economic resources and over 600,000 square kilometres of territory after annexing Ukraine. It would immediately force the absorption of Belarus. There would be a state with a population of 200 million people, with a reputation for not hesitating to use force and using it successfully. Its neighbours would have to take this into account in their policies.

"It's worse than a crime, it's a mistake", aphorism lovers repeat ad nauseam. Indeed, the very initiation of an aggressive war is an offence under Article 117 of the Polish Criminal Code, which is also prosecuted against foreigners. And the mistake is obvious: **Moscow wanted to play in the first division again, and in view of this it is likely to fall to the third division, to the level of Pakistan, a populous country with nuclear weapons. It should not be disturbed in this.**

Why? Because this is Russia's war, not just Putin's. When President Biden addressed the Russians in Warsaw stating: "this is not your war", it was an encouragement, a desire for them to do so, not a description of their actual beliefs. For every country has the kind of government it deserves. Putin was not imposed on Russia, he flows from Russia's history, its beliefs about what constitutes Russia's strength, its citizens' expectations of the government's tasks. This is because Russia has not 'processed' the trauma of a former colonial power that lost big. Even without using extreme examples, i.e., Japan and Germany after the Second World War, it is possible to show the enormity of the tasks it should go through – Spain after the loss of colonial territories in the 19th century reaching from California to Cape Horn, Turkey after the First World War, France after 1960 and the decolonisation of Africa. The constituent nations of these states had to accept defeat and reinvent themselves. They had to define new goals for their community, this time relying not on the ability to impose their will by military means, but on cultural attractiveness, economic strength, the ability to play the diplomatic game.

The Russian empire was established in Ukraine and should find its end in Ukraine.

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