

MATYAS EÖRSI<sup>1</sup>:  
The True Cause of the War in Ukraine

Now, after this devastating war has begun, left and right wing intellectuals have been steeping their handkerchiefs and spreading the word all over the web that the "West" is to blame (and some say the West is the main culprit) for (1) breaking their word to Gorbachev, that Ukraine and the other former Soviet member states would never become members of NATO, and (2) if such a promise was not made, why not, i.e. why not give Putin a guarantee that Ukraine would not become a member of NATO, because then this horror could have been avoided. It has to be said that the war in the sky clearly has nothing to do with Ukraine's supposed membership of NATO, and hence with Russia's military encirclement.

Above all, let us be clear that the legend of such a promise has never been verified, and although much has been said, whether in the negotiations or during their breaks, in the corridors or in the cafeteria, no one has ever been able to produce a single commitment signed by the parties involved, and therefore accepted. Consequently, this commitment was not made by NATO or its members and, let us be clear, if it had been made, it would have been no different from Yalta's pact that brought peace to the West, and was devastating for Central-Eastern Europe. At the same time, the leaders of the US and the EU (then the EC) were aware of this and did not give Moscow a concession tantamount to betraying the newly free countries. Very right that they did so!

Let us then also look at the argument that Putin feels threatened by NATO enlargement, that he is delirious in the domestic media about the death of the nation, and - so the argument goes - that we must understand the Russians' concern about NATO enlargement and make constructive decisions, which obviously means not admitting more countries that want to join and are to the east of us into NATO. Because then Putin and Russia will calm down. And that's the goal, isn't it?

Contrary to the arguments, Putin, who runs one of the largest and most effective intelligence services in the world, is aware of NATO's workings, intentions and assets. He is also fully aware that none of the former Soviet republics, apart from the Baltic states that have already joined NATO, has any serious membership agenda. Putin is also perfectly aware, contrary to the arguments of some, that only and only a country that has full sovereignty within its internationally agreed borders can be a member of NATO. Because Putin is well aware of this rule, he has ensured that no candidate for membership has sovereignty within its internationally recognised borders. Think of Transnistria, think of Nagorno-Karabakh, or think of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or even the Crimean peninsula, which was annexed a few years ago. These 'frozen conflicts' have either been used by Russian foreign policy for its own purposes or have been created by Russia itself. Russia is present with its troops as 'peacekeepers' and has no intention of withdrawing, even though no weapons have been fired for years. Why? Because, as long as Russia is present militarily on the territory of other states in the international legal sense, these states are not sovereign and therefore not eligible for NATO membership.

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We can see, therefore, that Russian policy, led by Putin, has ensured all this well in advance. The question of how long Russia will continue to play its role as a 'peacekeeper' is a matter for Moscow alone, and until it decides otherwise, it will not have to concern itself with the NATO membership of the countries concerned. Last but not least, Ukraine did not want to be a member of NATO in the first place. In Ukraine, there was a visible majority in favour of EU membership, but support for NATO membership did not even reach 30%, so it was considered indecent to talk about NATO membership in Kiev. Ukrainians' attitudes towards NATO membership changed radically after the annexation of Crimea, so it is easy to see that the desire for NATO membership was not the result of nasty Western propaganda, but of Putin himself.

Returning now to the current conflict, there is not and never has been a scenario in which Ukraine becomes a member of NATO. Putin's fears of this are not real, he himself cannot believe in them, but, it must be admitted, he is performing them with an efficiency and conviction that puts the giants of the theatre to shame on the stage of world politics.

Putin is also aware that NATO has never attacked a single country since its inception. The only exception - well, this is important - was the bombing of Serbia over Kosovo, but even Putin could not claim that this attack had a territorial motive. The reason for that attack - as many of you will remember - was ethnic cleansing against the Albanian population in Kosovo, in which 11 000 people died, the vast majority of whom, 10 000 dead, were Kosovo Albanians. NATO saved many lives by bombing Serbian installations and overthrowing the regime of President Milosevic.

Russia vetoed the UN Security Council's mandate to protect the Kosovar Albanians, so NATO carried out this humanitarian operation without a UN mandate, i.e. without Russia's consent. This failure must have burned deep into Putin's ego, as we can infer from the fact that he invokes ethnic cleansing both in 2008 in the case of South Ossetia and today in relation to Ukraine. Neither of these is true, but Putin may think, as in Kosovo, that if the term worked then, it must work now, and military intervention is now legitimate. This is a somewhat childish idea, but apart from that, we can only think of simple revenge when we see Putin invoking genocide without any basis.

The Kosovo affair may have angered Putin, but even for a vengeful superpower, destroying another country does not seem reasonable, especially when the initiation of military action could amount to self-destruction. Moreover, Putin must not have the slightest doubt that, by taking military action, he is violating at least three international commitments to which Russia is a signatory. So a more serious reason than Kosovo is worth looking for, and indeed it can be found.

I invite my readers - if they have reached this stage of the reasoning - to take another trip back in time to 2013. It was a time when the President of Ukraine, Viktor Fedorovich Yanukovich, was preparing to sign the Association Treaty between Ukraine and the European Union on a grey November day, but the day before the signing ceremony he cancelled the event. He gave no reason, but it was an open secret in diplomatic circles that he had spoken to President Putin on the phone before the cancellation, who either made what appeared to

be a more favourable offer or blackmailed him. We do not know the whole truth, but a combination of the two seems the most likely. But that is irrelevant to our story. What is factual and important was that President Yanukovich turned his back on European integration in a spectacular gesture. The news of the refusal to sign was followed by a demonstration in Kiev, which would not have been fateful if President Yanukovich had not tried to break it up with brutal force. But he did, and it brought unprecedented crowds to Kiev to demonstrate, and this became Majdan.

Many important issues in post-Majdan Ukraine remain unresolved. Among a thousand other important issues, how Ukraine can dismantle its oligarchs, how it can get rid of the corruption that is eating up the economy, how it can decentralise its brain-damaged decision-making inherited from Soviet times in a sensible way, and the list of things that are still not decided goes on and on. But one thing has been decided, if certainly not once and for all, then certainly for a lifetime. That is that Ukraine does not want to be subordinated to Moscow because it envisages its future as a Westernised country. Young, energetic and excellent professionals have come home from the US and the European Union, taken up government, NGO or corporate positions, and although, understandably, not enough has been turned around in Ukraine in a relatively short space of time, and Ukraine is still a long way from the European Union, there can be no doubt that Ukraine has slowly, gradually and surely begun to shed the vestiges of its Soviet days and has moved ever closer to the 'West'.

And this development, however far-fetched Ukraine's EU membership may have seemed, has shattered Putin's ambitions to build an empire comparable to the Soviet Union, though far less deep. The project was called the Eurasian Economic Union, which President Putin strategically envisaged would later become a rival to the EU, the Eurasian Union. A side project is the Tashkent Treaty (CSTO), which was intended to be the successor to the Warsaw Pact and, like its predecessor, to provide a platform of legitimacy for putting down popular uprisings, as happened recently in Kazakhstan. The heart of the project, the Eurasian Union (EaGU), was set up in the Kazakh capital, Astana (aren't the Russians obliging? The Warsaw Pact and the Treaty of Tashkent were not founded in Moscow, mind you) on 29 May 2014. But this date was premature and also expressed Putin's exasperation. The EaGU was originally decided by Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, but Armenia and Kyrgyzstan also promptly indicated their intention to join.

Just take a look at the map! Which country is sorely missing (for Putin) from the list? Georgia? Moldova? Lukewarm, because of course they are. But the absence of Ukraine is a sore point for President Putin, because without Ukraine, the EaGU is a lame duck, a useless geopolitical torso that has lost most of its meaning. The fact that Putin created the EaGU after Majdan indicates that he waited a long time to see if Ukraine could still be obtained, but after Majdan he was forced to give up Ukraine. "Well then, let's try to do it without Ukraine!" - he might have sighed.

Yes, but as the years passed, Putin's worries were confirmed. The EaGU had become a worthless, insignificant nothing, not only no longer a competitor to the European Union, but also invisible. Ukraine's absence was a screaming pain, and Putin grew increasingly frustrated that this 'little brother', which 'was never a nation, never a state', had destroyed his ambition of a lifetime, of Russian supremacy, of reviving an 'almost' Soviet Union. Moreover, he

understood that each day lost only reduced his chances. As Ukraine becomes more westernised, it asks less and less of Moscow, and even has to reckon with the fact that a slowly but surely developing Ukraine is frustrating the Russians: 'If they can do it, why can't we Russians' - and the eruption of such a feeling in Russia could be fatal to its power. His anger kept growing..., looking for an opportunity.

The rest, one might say, we already know. But Putin is not a novice, he is a well-educated politician, raised on the breast of the KGB and now a highly intelligent one, with a wealth of experience. For a long time, he may have hoped to bring a pro-Russian political force to power in Ukraine, which would allow Ukraine to join the EaGU, but this hope seemed less realistic from election to election. He had to resort to other means. First, he tried Crimea, Donbass and Luhansk provinces, where the majority of the population is Russian-speaking, and Putin hoped that intervention in view of the dangers to the minority Russians would win at least a neutral stance from the international community. ) He then also hoped - because it worked perfectly well for Georgia - that Ukraine would respond with a military counter-attack to defend its territory, then he, as the defender of the Russian minority, would retaliate by moving into all or part of Ukraine, giving the Ukrainian leadership a long-term lesson that Russia cannot be trifled with. But he was disappointed, Ukraine, although never legally renouncing Crimea, did not take military action. It gave Putin no pretext for further military action.

Putin had to look for another reason and another opportunity. Let us start with the latter. When US credibility is in tatters in the wake of domestic political struggles of unprecedented depth and the tragically mismanaged withdrawal from Afghanistan, when the UK is immersed in internal power struggles in the aftermath of Brexit and Prime Minister Johnson's illegal partisanship, when Germany has a new government that is still looking for the door handle to the European institutions, and when France is about to hold elections, and when the whole of Europe has not yet recovered from the consequences of COVID-19, well, there is hardly a better opportunity for Putin in the future.

As for the causes, this is how the threat of NATO was put on the table, how the image of a fascist Ukrainian leadership was strengthened, and the consequent need for 'Nazification' (will Germany and Israel comment on Putin's suggestion that he is Nazifying Ukraine by removing the Jewish-born and Russian-speaking President Zelensky? ), finally, thus the vision of a threatened Russia is assembled and reinforced, and the gentle reader can repeat the Russian accusations endlessly from here.

As I write these lines, the outcome of the war is not yet in sight. While it is not known what inhuman casualties will be inflicted on both sides, it is likely that Ukraine will not be able to cope with the incomparably greater Russian superiority. If the government is swept away, it will be replaced by a pro-Russian government. Ukraine will not ask to join NATO, although it has not asked to do so. So many in America and Western Europe will think that it might have been better to have promised in advance that Ukraine would never become a member of NATO. But when this future Ukrainian government applies for Ukraine's membership of the Eurasian Economic Union, where it will be admitted in a spectacular show of bravado, please remember this: perhaps NATO membership was never the reason for the war.