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Peace in our time¹

The 'Minsk II' agreement, signed in the Belarusian capital, Minsk, on 12 February 2015 was welcomed in Western media as a promising step towards a more stable peace in eastern Ukraine. But the optimism seems misplaced: the fine print of the ceasefire deal has some disturbing elements, and there has been at best patchy observance of the ceasefire by Russia's proxy forces. The agreement was signed not only by the representatives of Russia, Ukraine and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, but also by the leaders of the Donetsk and Luhansk 'people's republics'. Thus Minsk II does much to legitimate the credentials of the proxy leaderships installed and propped up by Moscow. Strangely, too, the ceasefire was only scheduled to take effect three days after the agreement was signed, which gave the proxy forces time to further their assault on the Debaltseve salient, with its strategic railway hub connecting Donetsk and Luhansk cities. That assault was continued beyond the ceasefire till Kyiv was compelled to order its forces to withdraw from Debaltseve with severe losses of life and materiel.

Having achieved that key objective, the proxies did indeed become more compliant and some diminution of the fighting ensued. But, on 6 March, the Ukrainian envoy told the United Nations that Ukraine had registered 750 attacks² by the 'separatists' since 12 February, killing 64 Ukrainian soldiers and wounding 341 people. The West

1 First published in *Inside Story*, 23 Mar. 2015, insidestory.org.au/peace-in-our-time.

2 See *Gorshenin Weekly*, 9 Mar. 2015, p. 6, gorshenin.eu/programs/weekly?offset=50.

has now largely accepted the Debaltseve fait accompli despite the serious and blatant violation of Minsk II that was involved. Nor does it seem over-concerned by other violations – near the large and strategic southern city of Mariupol, for example – or the continuing terrorist bombings in Kharkov and Odessa. And, while Minsk II was supposedly intended to confirm and reinforce the ceasefire provisions of the armistice agreements of 5 and 19 September last year (Minsk I), the German and French leaders accepted the territorial gains the Russian side had made by serial violations of that ceasefire in the intervening months, and presumably then persuaded the Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko, that this was the best deal they could get for him.

The Minsk II agreement uses lots of soothing words like Ukrainian sovereignty and ‘in accordance with Ukrainian law’. But, tucked away in the text and an accompanying declaration are some significant concessions to both the proxies and their Russian sponsors. To mention a few:

- A blanket amnesty has been extended to all the pro-Russian forces and, by implication, to the often thuggish local regimes they’ve set up in Donetsk and Luhansk. The amnesty seems on the face of it to extend even to those who shot down MH17.
- Ukraine is required to reach agreement with the ‘representatives’ of Russia’s proxies in eastern Ukraine (legitimizing them as negotiating partners for Kyiv’s elected government) on constitutional changes that would decentralise government. This is thus a condition of Kyiv’s regaining access to that part of its eastern border that is now controlled, in tandem, by the proxy forces and the Russian army.
- The proxies are given the freedom to form cross-border cooperative arrangements with Russian authorities.
- The proxy ‘authorities’ will be involved in all policing, judicial and other legal appointments within their ‘people’s republics’, an apparent legitimization of their clear intention to consolidate the abusive police state regimes they already have in place.
- Kyiv is required to undertake ‘full resumption of socioeconomic ties, including social transfers such as pension payments’ and ‘timely payments of all utility bills ... within the legal framework of Ukraine’. The point at issue here is that Russia’s actions have resulted in huge damage, for which Ukraine is now expected to

pay, while Moscow pockets the geopolitical advantages. Kyiv had suspended a range of transfer payments, basically because it was broke. But it also took the not unreasonable position that as Russia had at that point already introduced 16 ‘humanitarian convoys’, of whose contents no one but Moscow and its proxies have any knowledge, it should accept responsibility for supporting the living expenses of the local residents whose lives and livelihoods it had severely disrupted.

Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande – who initiated the negotiations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, apparently on Ukraine’s behalf, as ‘the last chance to end the fighting in Ukraine’ – also persuaded Poroshenko to sign an accompanying political declaration that seems to call on Ukraine to make additional concessions to Russia. This document aligns Poroshenko with the Merkelist doctrine that ‘there is no alternative to an exclusively peaceful settlement’ to the Ukraine situation, despite the fact that, for a year, Moscow has been imposing military solutions on a daily basis. The declaration also states that ‘the Normandy format’ of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine should be responsible for oversight of this latest ‘ceasefire’, thus providing for the continued non-participation of the United States, Britain and Poland (neighbour to both Russia and Ukraine and prominent earlier in EU deliberations on Ukraine).

Trade war morphs to hybrid war

Perhaps most worryingly from Kyiv’s point of view, the accompanying declaration says that the group endorses trilateral EU–Ukraine–Russia talks to achieve ‘practical solutions to concerns raised by Russia’ in relation to the free-trade agreement that Ukraine signed with the European Union in June 2014. The Maidan protests were sparked by Yanukovich’s retreat, after years of laborious negotiations, from signing essentially the same agreement. The post-Maidan government was hoping that its signature on the package (comprising an Association Agreement (AA) and a Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Agreement (DCFTA)) would at last launch it on a process of EU-supported reform and integration with Europe.

In response to further Russian pressure and threats, the European Union had already postponed implementation of the agreement for 12 months. Now, it seems, Russia can use that period to seek to veto any parts of the DCFTA that it doesn't like – and Moscow has made clear it would like to rewrite large slabs. Independent observers have analysed the Russian objections and find them largely specious.³ What Russia really doesn't like about the AA, and the free-trade deal embedded in it, is that Ukraine signed it at all, rather than joining Putin's Eurasian Customs Union.

Why would Kyiv have agreed to such an unbalanced pair of documents? The answer, basically, is because it had no choice. It could see that it would not receive much military support from its Western friends, despite again having been defeated on the battlefield by a further injection of high-tech weaponry and skilled manpower from Moscow. And its economy, blighted by decades of mismanagement, especially in the Yanukovych years, was and continues to be on the brink of collapse. It is also acutely conscious that fighting 'separatists' entrenched in residential areas in the Donbas can only deepen the alienation of Ukrainian citizens literally caught in the crossfire. But for the Ukrainians not to return fire, even with their inaccurate and obsolescent weapons, would concede the terrain to Russia. This has been one of Kyiv's worst dilemmas from the outset.

Even without Russian trade wars and military aggression, the new government had much to do to repair and reform the economy. But the disruption and destruction in eastern Ukraine – a rust belt area but, also, the location of much of Ukraine's industrial and export capacity – have all but tipped the economy over the edge. Ukraine's economy has normally relied heavily on its foreign trade for much of its GDP, and that trade collapsed abruptly in the second half of the 2014 – by 32 per cent in December alone. This was almost entirely due to the war in the Donbas and Russia's punitive trade restrictions.⁴ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has assessed that Ukraine's GDP declined by 6.9 per cent in 2014, and it expected a further decline

3 See Nicu Popescu, 'Eurasian Union: The real, the imaginary and the likely', *European Union Institute for Security Studies Chaillot Papers*, No. 132, 9 Sep. 2014, www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/eurasian-union-the-real-the-imaginary-and-the-likely/.

4 See Tadeusz Iwański, 'The collapse of Ukraine's foreign trade', *Centre for Eastern Studies/Ośrodek studiów wschodnich*, 18 Mar. 2015, www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-03-18/collapse-ukraines-foreign-trade.

of 5.5 per cent in 2015. But the Kyiv Government's own prognosis for 2015 had worsened from -5.5 per cent (as assessed at the end of 2014) to -11.9 per cent by March of this year, with inflation expected to be somewhere between 27 per cent and 43 per cent. And those trends could worsen further.

Russia's economy has also been sliding badly, in response to the fall in the oil price, the consequential slump in the rouble, and Western sanctions.⁵ Estimates of Russia's likely GDP decline in 2015 usually range between -3 and -5 per cent. Its sovereign wealth funds, the Reserve Fund and National Wealth Fund, are being raided to fill budgetary holes. But, despite Putin's irresponsible stewardship, Russia's international currency reserves are – though under pressure – still among the highest in the world, at US\$356 billion, whereas, before Ukraine received the first tranche of its recent US\$17.5 billion IMF bailout, its reserves had slumped to some US\$6 billion, not enough to cover two months of imports. And in February Ukraine's economic freefall had become markedly more precipitate and damaging than Russia's.

Whatever financial respite Kyiv had been hoping for, Minsk II didn't provide it. Russia's stock market went up at the news of the agreement; Ukraine's fell further. Despite the announcement of the IMF package having been timed to coincide with (and to be seemingly conditional on Kyiv's acceptance of) Minsk II, the Ukrainian hryvnia collapsed spectacularly, causing panic in the population. Desperate measures by the National Bank of Ukraine, a flurry of economic reform legislation and the arrival of the first IMF tranche recouped the position somewhat in early March, but the hryvnia has only been shakily stabilised at 23 to the US dollar, roughly one third of its value a year earlier. The extreme fragility of the Ukrainian economy was exposed and, with it, its vulnerability to further Russian geopolitical blackmail.

Kyiv's prospects for financial stabilisation, foreign investment and continued disbursement of IMF funds depend on whether Russia chooses to refrain from further military or economic attacks on

5 See Ian Bond, Christian Odendahl & Jennifer Rankin, 'The politics and economics of sanctions against Russia', *Centre for European Reform*, Mar. 2015, www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2015/frozen_sanctions-10787.pdf.

Ukraine. A gas war, a wider ranging trade boycott, or major further military offensives against eastern Ukraine would possibly be enough to push the national economy over the cliff, despite what has been achieved. Even with the IMF bailout secured and without any further Russian coercion, there would be serious doubts as to whether Kyiv will be able to secure enough financial support to stave off default and disaster. Western support outside the IMF framework has been modest, and the Ukrainian Government has been required by the IMF to try plugging an imminent US\$15 billion funding gap by restructuring its debt to private investors via agreed 'haircuts' and extensions. That includes US\$3 billion owed to Russia and due for repayment in December 2015. Under the terms of that agreement, Russia has the right to call the loan in early and has repeatedly threatened to do so. It may choose its moment to good effect.

Back to Yalta

Moscow clearly has further plans for strengthening its position in Ukraine. With Minsk II's legitimisation of its pseudo-statelets of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, it has already achieved its minimal objective of establishing a frozen conflict in East Ukraine. Its ultimate objective is a compliant government in Kyiv, and probably further territorial acquisitions, in which the Donetsk and Luhansk statelets could play a useful role. But just for the moment, itself troubled by serious economic decline, the Kremlin may be content to leave the statelets in eastern Ukraine as they are. This it can use to veto any European integration by Kyiv while it continues working to undermine the very fragile EU consensus on sanctions.

It was reported earlier this month that, despite the successful proxy advances in Debaltseve and Donetsk airport, the European Union would not impose any further sanctions at this point because they might upset the delicate Minsk II ceasefire.⁶ Though the EU Summit on 18 March was a little more robust on Russia than expected, that

6 See 'No new EU sanctions against Russia as ceasefire holds', *EurActiv*, 13 Mar. 2015, www.euractiv.com/sections/global-europe/no-new-eu-sanctions-against-russia-ceasefire-holds-312895.

prediction was confirmed. For his part, to strengthen the chances of Minsk II succeeding, Obama has cancelled an innocuous US training program for the Ukrainian military.

Moscow has learnt from such reactions that ceasefires can be abused without further penalties. Different views are evident within the broader Russian leadership elite about how far and how fast Russia can and should go in Ukraine, and some of those views are radical. So any sudden opening of another front in Ukraine – for example an all-out attack on Mariupol – should not surprise us. Putin thinks that, with current Western leaderships in place, he need not fear pushback that would cost Russian lives. He does worry that Russian military losses would affect his popularity and, partly for that reason, has gone to absurd lengths to pretend that Russia is not involved militarily in East Ukraine. But he probably calculates that if the divided Obama administration again seemed to be tilting towards arming Ukraine, an emphatic warning of marked further escalation, followed by the offer of talks on a Minsk III, would be enough to see off the threat.

Putin is certainly seeking to restore a sphere of influence over most of the territory of the former Soviet Union. But he seems to want to go beyond that, if he can, to restore a sphere of influence within Europe as well, including in NATO and EU member states. What he probably wants most after some more Minsk Is and IIs would be the creation of a new European security architecture modelled on the Yalta settlement of February 1945, where Roosevelt and Churchill conceded to Stalin control over much of Central and Eastern Europe. Russian media and some senior officials have been warmly praising Yalta recently.

By February 1945, Stalin had a dominant military grip on most of what he was claiming in Central-Eastern Europe, and there was not very much that the Anglo allies, despite their formidable military, could do to wrest it from him or prevent him from communising it. Despite his huge military buildup in progress this decade, Putin is unlikely ever to cast the shadow that Stalin's conventional forces once did over the Eurasian continent. But the Western alliance he is facing is also relatively much less formidable. Though boasting a larger number of members than the Western alliance of the Cold War era, the Europeans are disunited, lack adequate security leadership, and are disinclined to pay much for their own defence. In many cases, they would be

very happy to return to business as usual with Moscow, as long as it restricts itself to bullying and grabbing land from other countries and not from them.

Chancellor Merkel, Europe's most energetic and capable leader, works the EU system very well, and has achievements also in the security domain. She has succeeded in keeping sanctions in place, despite the objections of the more pro-Russian EU members and the Russophile sentiments prevalent among influential elites within her own country, including two of her predecessor chancellors, Gerhard Schroeder and latterly, after a valedictory visit to the Kremlin at the age of 94, Helmut Schmidt.⁷ Even though Germans generally are starting to lose their enthusiasm for the Putin regime, the foreign country they often seem most worried about is the United States. *Der Spiegel* recently ran a major article about the extreme anxiety and hostility evoked in the German foreign and defence policy elite by NATO's European Commander, General Philip Breedlove, for his supposedly provocative bellicosity towards Russia.⁸ The article seems to suggest that official Germany sees Breedlove as a bigger threat to peace than Putin.

While Merkel has spent many difficult hours trying to persuade Putin to modify his behaviour, she's had little success so far. She tirelessly repeats her favourite verity about Ukraine – that there can be no military solutions to this crisis – while her principal interlocutor, Putin, continues to freely deploy them, including, right under her nose, last month before the ink on Minsk II was dry.

Merkel's second-in-command in the Minsk negotiations, President Hollande, appeared not to be playing a major role. And perhaps that was just as well. Hollande has occasionally been forceful on African and Middle Eastern issues and commands one of the two strongest armed forces in Europe. But on Ukraine, to put it charitably, he has been wobbly. He was, for example, the first Western leader to visit Putin in the Kremlin after the annexation of Crimea. France often seems hopeful that sanctions can be rolled back, and that it can at

7 See 'Meeting with Helmut Schmidt', *President of Russia*, 11 December 2013, en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19822; see also 'Russia's actions in Crimea "completely understandable" – German ex-chancellor', RT, 28 March 2014.

8 See Matthias Gebauer et al., 'Breedlove's bellicosity: Berlin alarmed by aggressive NATO stance on Ukraine', *Spiegel Online*, 6 Mar. 2015, www.spiegel.de/international/world/germany-concerned-about-aggressive-NATO-stance-on-ukraine-a-1022193.html.

last sell its Mistral-class amphibious attack vessels to the Russians, despite the fears of Russia's neighbours bordering the Baltic and Black Seas. On 13 February, immediately after signing Minsk II, Hollande told journalists that while it was not yet time to do so, he hoped that France would be able to deliver the Mistrals to Russia.⁹

Perhaps as significant as who was involved on the Western side at Minsk are the absentees ensured by the Normandy format, a constraint that Putin clearly relishes.¹⁰ With Obama having apparently outsourced the management of Western security interests in Ukraine to Merkel and the European Union, the United States has been consistently missing from Ukrainian negotiations over the last year.¹¹

A second noteworthy absentee has been Britain, the other major military power in Europe. The British Government under David Cameron began by seeking its own reset with Russia, and has sharply lowered Britain's defence budget. But, latterly, it has become more forceful in response to Russia's aggressive policies, instigating a public enquiry into the Alexander Litvinenko case, identifying Russia as its key security threat, and talking of providing defensive weapons and training to Ukraine. Britain might have been able to strengthen the EU response to Russia's growing belligerence but, with domestic euroscepticism growing in strength and Cameron not doing a great deal to contain it, along with the distraction of the Scottish independence movement, London's influence in EU counsels has greatly diminished.

Likewise, Poland and former prime minister Donald Tusk have played a less prominent role in the EU response to Russia's activities in Ukraine than used to be the case, despite Poland's close knowledge of the Russian target, its size and common borders with Russia and Ukraine, and Tusk's having recently ascended to the role of president of the European Council.

9 See Ian Bond, 'Russia's war in Ukraine: Is Minsk the end, or just the start?', *Centre for European Reform*, 13 Feb. 2015, www.cer.org.uk/insights/russias-war-ukraine-minsk-end-or-just-start. President Hollande was finally, in July 2015, forced to accept that he would have to pay compensation to Russia for non-delivery of the Mistrals and seek instead to find another buyer for them.

10 Later in 2015, Putin found it might be better to draw Obama and the US State Department into the task of pushing Kyiv into carrying out the unfavourable Minsk provisions that the Normandy format imposed on Ukraine.

11 See Anne Applebaum, 'The risks of putting Germany front and center in Europe's crises', *Washington Post*, 20 Feb. 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/germanys-central-role/2015/02/20/d1119cd4-b8f8-11e4-aa05-1ce812b3fdd2_story.html.

Since the fading of his reset policy, Obama has been publicly contemptuous of Putin on occasion. But he seems to wish to cling to whatever remains of the policy to pursue supposedly shared multilateral objectives, like curbing Iran, North Korea and Islamic State as well as chasing after the *fata morgana* of nuclear disarmament. Whether Russia has a strong and disinterested commitment to all or any of these objectives, especially nuclear disarmament, may be questionable but, for Obama, they appear to have precedence over Ukraine, the Budapest Memorandum or the security of the European side of the Transatlantic alliance. To its credit, the Obama administration has taken a strong and leading role on sanctions, seeking to keep pressure on the European Union to match it step for step. But it should be remembered that, for the United States, a single country with a single decision-making process (however complex) and limited trade with Russia, sanctions are a much easier option than for the Europeans.

Though he recently approved a US\$75 million package of non-lethal aid for Ukraine, Obama has not shown much appetite for supporting Kyiv's armed forces, and has repeatedly ruled out providing defensive arms. Recently, many senior figures in the Obama administration have publicly mooted supplying lethal aid to Ukraine, and there is strong and growing support for such a step in Congress. Nonetheless, Obama remains emphatically opposed. One reason for Obama's hesitation is a perceived need to keep in step with the EU leadership's doveish policy in this respect. Merkel's sense of urgency about again engaging Putin in the Minsk II negotiations was widely understood to stem from her concern that Washington might provide defensive weapons to Ukraine, with what Berlin is convinced would be disastrous consequences.

Even without any such 'provocation', Putin escalated again. After more than a year of Russia's serial aggressions, it remains unclear whether the Obama administration will ever do anything to equip Ukraine to resist Moscow's superior weaponry, but it seems unlikely. As mentioned, Washington recently cancelled a modest training program for the Ukrainian military in order not to provoke Putin or give Moscow a chance for propaganda about American interference.

The training, far from the front line, involved such provocative activities as battlefield first aid, combating enemy radio-jamming and surviving heavy artillery fire from the ‘separatists’.¹²

The question of whether defensive weapons should be provided to Ukraine has been discussed heatedly and at length in Western countries since early in the Russian intervention.¹³ It is not an easy issue, and one of the key arguments adduced against doing so is that it would lead supposedly to immediate Russian escalation and more death and destruction in Ukraine. But, at present, one side is being handsomely supported – with repeatedly decisive and escalatory effects – by its generous Russian backers. This has taken the form of high-tech weaponry, substantial numbers of ‘volunteers’ and highly skilled special forces, intelligence, massive propaganda and diplomatic threats and persuasion. Meanwhile, the other side is receiving some economic and diplomatic support, though not enough to safeguard it or its economy, but only modest material support for its armed forces – blankets rather than anti-tank weapons.

As the strategic analyst Phillip Karber of Georgetown University has commented in a study of Russia’s so-called hybrid warfare in Ukraine:

While Russia has introduced thousands of weapons into the conflict, European and American political hesitation in helping Ukraine acquire replacements for its losses (and the political message it sends to others who would like to help) serves as a virtual military embargo on Ukraine. Ironically the most successful Western sanction has been in preventing a friendly country from defending itself.¹⁴

Despite the undertakings given in the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 to ensure that Ukraine would be free from military or economic coercion in exchange for relinquishing its nuclear weapons, the signatories have failed to deliver. Signatory Russia has attacked Ukraine for attempting

12 See Philip Shishkin, ‘US delays Ukraine military training, general says’, *Wall Street Journal*, 17 Mar. 2015, www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-delaying-ukraine-military-training-general-says-1426631033.

13 See Kirk Bennett, ‘The realist case for arming Ukraine’, *The American Interest*, 20 Feb. 2015, www.the-american-interest.com/2015/02/20/the-realist-case-for-arming-ukraine/.

14 See Phillip Karber, ‘Russia’s hybrid war campaign’, *Center for Strategic International Studies Russia and Eurasia Program*, 10 Mar. 2015, willzuzak.ca/cl/videolinks/karber20150310CSIS.html.

to reach a non-military bilateral agreement with the European Union, while the leaders of the Western world – the United States, Britain and France (also signatories) – have failed to protect it.

So, while Putin is less powerful than Stalin was at Yalta, he must nonetheless feel increasingly confident that a little determination and guile on his part will be enough to brush aside Western opposition to his plans for perestroika of the post-1990 European security architecture. It is apparent that he has a certain amused contempt for Europe, its complicated decision-making structures, its unreadiness to pay for its own defence, and its 'decadent' social fashions. He sees it as increasingly divided and lacking authoritative leadership, and is very conscious that several EU members are either sympathetic to his strategic objectives or at least afraid to contest them for fear of reprisals.

While Russia's own economy was on a steady downward slide well before the imposition of sanctions, Putin also takes great heart from the sustained malaise in many EU economies, and the social distress and political volatility that malaise has engendered. Sanctions and the sharp drop in oil prices and the rouble are a constraint on his freedom of manoeuvre for the moment, but he feels confident that the increasingly compliant Russian population will endure the necessary belt-tightening until such time as Ukraine is put in its proper place. As soon as the economy starts to recover, if not before, he will probably feel ready to pursue further strategic gains.

If Ukraine, the largest country in continental Europe, is finally brought undone economically, politically or militarily by the battering it has suffered, that will also sound a potent message to any neighbouring country unwise enough to attempt to resist Russia's designs for it. Already Ukraine's economy is undermined, and not surprisingly, the Kyiv Government's high popularity is ebbing rapidly.

Appeasement springs eternal

Appeasement is a rhetorical rather than an analytical term. One man's appeasement is another's judicious pragmatism. Western countries are often reproached by critics for their alleged hypocrisy in criticising Russia where they would not criticise, say, Saudi Arabia for similar

offences. There is often some abstract justice in the criticism, although it seems to imply that Western countries have an absolute obligation to lead with their chins in policing the world without any regard to their own interests. Decisions whether to criticise, impose sanctions or intervene militarily are always the product of some combination of geopolitical interests, moral outrage, fear of retaliation, alliance or treaty obligations, domestic political pressures and other factors. But, usually, when the term is invoked in Western countries, it is because the invoker claims to see some point of comparison with the classic appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s.

Russian patriots and Western *Russlandversteher* become particularly enraged when any parallel between contemporary Russia and Nazi Germany is suggested. Nazi collaborators and alleged collaborators are denounced by Moscow as ‘fascists’, but so too are almost any other classes of humanity that the Kremlin wishes to discredit. To turn that longstanding weapon of hybrid warfare on its head against its inventors strikes Putinists and their sympathisers as particularly perfidious.

But the parallels are striking nonetheless: domestic xenophobia and revanchist irredentism; a charismatic autocrat whose constantly trumpeted superhuman qualities make him immensely popular among the masses; militarisation of society and the budget; relentless, mendacious propaganda; elephantiasis of the security organs; mass invigilation of the population and widespread repression of human rights; extensive regulation and uniformity of views in nearly all media outlets; a mobilised population that hates as it is told; a foreign policy that asserts the right to protect people of the same ethnicity, or even the same language, by interfering with force in their countries of residence; a seemingly expanding appetite for further territorial conquest even after irredentist claims are satisfied ... the list goes on.

Even Putin’s latest version of the Russian invasion of Crimea – to protect Russians supposedly in danger in Crimea and save the life of Yanukovych, all of which necessitated urgent military intervention and nuclear threats – starts to bear a resemblance to the 1939 Gleiwitz Incident, stage-managed by the high-ranking Nazi official Reinhard Heydrich to justify Germany’s attack on Poland.

To draw attention to such features is not to imply that Putin's Russia will necessarily commit crimes of even remotely comparable magnitude to those of Nazi Germany. In addition to using the parallels to critique Putinism, such critics usually have one overriding objective in mind, namely to suggest that if Putin is not stopped, he will attempt to subvert or even attack all neighbours who were ever part of Moscow's empire, and quite possibly other countries as well. Attempts to conciliate him at other people's expense are not only naïve or unworthy and in breach of the appeasers' international obligations; they are also self-destructive, in that an appeased autocrat will simply pocket whatever he is given, and pursue further conquests.

A quote from Churchill is usually called for at this point. In a joint appeal to Europe to not betray the ideals on which the European Union is based, a former Czech ambassador to Moscow and a senior Slovak Green politician quoted Churchill: 'You were given a choice between dishonour and war. You have chosen dishonour and will get war.'¹⁵ Cameron, Hollande, Merkel and Obama, they said, have chosen dishonour: 'But now it is Ukraine that is getting the war, while Europe stands aside, even as its security is undermined and its values mocked.'

The proportions here have to be measured carefully, and an EU advocate would be quick to argue, among other things, that Ukraine is not a member of the European Union or NATO and that therefore no duty is owed it. But Putin's behaviour to date is certainly not inconsistent with the above line of analysis, and much of the public patriotic rhetoric in Russia goes further. In the face of Russia's trashing of the post-1990 security architecture, its repeated brandishing of its nuclear weapons and its huge preponderance in tactical nuclear weapons over the Western alliance in the Eurasian theatre, Western Europe should at least be worrying about the risk of further whetting Putin's appetite.¹⁶

15 See Petr Kolář & Juraj Mesík, 'From Munich to Kyiv', *Project Syndicate*, 13 Mar. 2015, www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/west-dishonor-ukraine-by-petr-kolar-and-juraj-mesik-2015-03.

16 See Rebecca Heinrichs, 'NATO's nuclear nightmare over Ukraine', *Real Clear Defense*, 27 Feb. 2015, www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2015/02/27/NATOs_nuclear_nightmare_over_ukraine_107670.html. See Matthew Kroenig, 'Statement', Hearing on 'Regional nuclear dynamics', United States Senate Armed Services Committee, 25 Feb. 2015, www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Kroenig_02-25-15.pdf.

If it is unprepared to supply defensive weapons to countries that are under Russian attack, it should be ready to deploy sanctions with vigour and determination, and escalate in response to any escalation. So far it is not obviously doing so. The sanctions have been deployed slowly and reluctantly. Without the downing of Flight MH17, EU sanctions that really bite may not have materialised. Having materialised, the European Union collectively, and many EU member states individually, are continually undermining them by broaching the issue of their early release, or even denouncing them as own goals. Any prospect of their early withdrawal should be removed from the table for the time being.

Putin will always be encouraged by the sight of EU seniors again deciding not to strengthen sanctions, as recently, or discussing intensely whether or not the most effective sanctions in place should be extended. As to the latter, they finally declared that they would be extended till the end of 2015 and, moreover, that their lifting would be made conditional on fulfilment by Russia of its obligations under Minsk II. Passing the necessary legal instruments for doing so, we are assured, will occur nearer the time. The Russian propaganda outlet, RT (formerly Russia Today), is claiming that extension of those sanctions that are due to expire in July to the end of the year is not yet a done deal. And a German Deutsche Welle commentator has suggested that a single pro-Russian member country could block the extension by a determined veto. While theoretically possible, this is unlikely, but there are a number of dissenting member states who are being eagerly courted by Moscow, so some doubt must remain.

Naturally, the Ukrainians find all these deliberations unsettling. Another to find them so is evidently Donald Tusk. After a visit to Washington, he declared to Western media, while the issue was still evidently moot, that Europe must maintain broad economic sanctions against Russia until Ukrainian control of its border with Russia is restored or risk a crisis with the White House.¹⁷ 'Putin's policy', he said, 'is much simpler than our sophisticated discussions. The only

17 See Ian Traynor, 'Donald Tusk: Putin's policy is to have enemies and to be in conflict', *Guardian*, 16 Mar. 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/15/donald-tusk-putins-policy-enemies-conflict-european-council-sanctions-russia.

effective answer to Putin's clear and simple policy is pressure.' Putin's policy, he said, is 'simply to have enemies, to be stronger than them, to destroy them and to be in conflict'.

According to Tusk, Obama was not expecting the Europeans to step up sanctions (that issue was evidently already decided), just to maintain those already in place. 'The comparison with appeasement applies ...', he said, 'about the approach of some politicians who say Ukraine is too far from us, not our business ... You know the melody.'

Whatever these comments may lack in subtlety in relation to the various categories of Russian sympathisers or appeasers in the European Union, whose views Tusk has the remit of endeavouring to bring into alignment with a broad EU consensus, they certainly lack nothing in clarity. In the event, at the EU Summit last week, Tusk and his close colleague Merkel seem to have carried the day. But more such deliberations will surely arise in response to Russia's studiedly ambiguous hybrid warfare against its largest Western neighbour. There will remain in the approaches of both the Obama administration and the European Union much that will continue to unsettle the Eastern Europeans.

This text is taken from *A Difficult Neighbourhood: Essays on Russia and East-Central Europe since World War II*, by John Besemeres, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.