



Implications of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine*

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Abstract

We are at a turning point in history and are faced with a choice: should we go back to the past or embrace and accept the present, wherein lies the answer to our present problems. Russia has always had an aggressive attitude towards countries that lie in its geographical periphery. It has always demanded compliance from these nations and since Ukraine stood up for her rights and was defiant, Russia attacked her. The article strongly calls for Goodwill and Trust in resolving the conflicts humanity faces today, especially the Russia-Ukraine war.

Since 24 February 2022, the world has been witnessing the unprovoked, brutal aggression of one country against its neighbor for no apparent, logically explainable reason, other than the imperialistic fantasy of celebrating the 350th anniversary of Tsar Peter I by duplicating the territorial conquests which led to Peter I taking on the title of Emperor in 1721.

It will be recalled that Tsar Peter I acquired his title as “the Great” because of the reforms he introduced and his modernization and Westernization of a backward and unstable Russia, as well as by cutting “a window to Europe” on the shores of the Baltic sea. He did this by conquering territories until then under the rule of kings of Sweden and of Poland, including what are now Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, and Ukraine, as well as the fortress of Azov on the sea of the same name. Those events, set in motion by a ruler born 350 years ago, are now publicly declared by President Putin as a point of reference for creating a new world order, in flagrant contravention of the Charter of the UN and international law.

Peter I did not want just more power and more territory. He also wanted his country to become more advanced and more progressive, even if some of the changes he introduced, such as cutting the long beards of his boyars, were more superficial than deeply substantial. Sadly, the current president of Russia, who sees himself as an uncrowned Peter the Second in his own delusions of grandeur, is achieving the very contrary of his historical idol. He is isolating Russia and reducing it to a pariah state, shunned by all those who aspire to a rules-based international order. While the barbaric depredations of his army in Ukraine and the scorched earth policy of destroying everything in their path are a direct echo of what Peter the Great did to that country during his war with King Charles XII of Sweden, the repression of all freedom of thought and speech in his own country represent a frightening rebirth of the totalitarian terror of the Soviet Union, especially during its Stalinist times.

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The events now happening in Ukraine are not just devastating that country, but we are seeing waves of negative consequences that are spreading out and rippling across the whole world, including far-away continents. Madame Rosalia Serrano, former president of Ecuador, mentioned that the banana growers in her country, for instance, are also negatively affected by what is now happening on the European continent. The same destructive domino effect applies to many other problems currently facing the world. We have just heard an outline of the plans for approaching them from the president of our host country, which set the tone for a solutions-oriented approach in responding to the multiple crises that we are facing. We are always facing some kind of crisis but the current crisis concerning the world order lies at the center of this year's program for the Baku Forum. We are at a turning point in history and are faced with a choice: Whether to accept the present and work with the given of the present in order to move into a better future, or whether we look behind us and take on this retrograde direction by deciding to single out some period in history that seems to us more pleasing, or at least more pleasing to the vanity and imagined grandeur of some leaders. Such revisionism, which refuses to accept the existing situation and yearns for a return to injustices and wrongs of long ago rather than rectifying them in the present and future, represents an attitude that truly bodes ill for all concerned, whether directly or indirectly.

We are at a point where we need solutions, to paths that we might follow in a world situation where we see regress rather than progress, where we see gross injustice rule, rather than international law and international order. We see the threat of increased poverty, and indeed famine, in many parts of the world, just because of the grandiosity and claims to exceptionalism of Russia, its leader and its people. What amounts to a collective paranoia, a nation-wide mania of grandeur of one single country, is producing real threats to world stability. Meanwhile, in Ukraine itself, death and destruction continue, soldiers and civilians die or are mutilated, crimes against humanity are being committed.

The outlandish accusations that Russia has addressed to Ukraine as excuses for the invasion of 24 February 2022 are but the latest and most extreme expression of President Putin's unwillingness to accept the verdict of history and the overdue and well merited collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Instead of seizing the opportunity to convert Russia itself to a free and democratic state, President Putin has devoted his energies to revanchist attacks on all the former parts of the Soviet Union that have recovered their independence and become prosperous and modern states. We have recently heard open threats against neighboring countries expressed by deputies of the Russian Duma. Admittedly, as President Putin himself told me years ago in direct conversation: "whoever listens or pays attention to what the deputies of the Duma are saying!" Nevertheless, whatever these deputies may be saying must necessarily be in tune with views developed in the Kremlin. That is why it is alarming to hear a deputy of the Duma propose to declare null and void, for instance, the agreement whereby the Russian Federation accepts the declaration of the renewed independence of Lithuania after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some journalists have already interpreted this as implying that the next country Russia is going to invade will be Lithuania, unlikely as it is to happen. Nonetheless, I am sure that Lithuanians, just like Estonians and Latvians, are

very much comforted to know themselves to be under the collective security protection of NATO, because dire threats can never be taken lightly.

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The inimical and aggressive attitude of Russia towards territories that at some historical time or another have been under its occupation or annexation is a real threat to every country on its geographical periphery. God knows Russia is already huge in terms of the expanse of its territory, yet evidently it is still not big enough to satisfy its ambitions of greatness. In this, there has been an uninterrupted continuity between tsarist Russia, Soviet Russia, and contemporary Russia. In addition to outright incorporation of neighboring lands, there has also been a continual concern about the spheres of influence extending beyond the borders of Russia proper. As President Putin has stated again and again over the years, Russia allegedly feels so threatened by potential aggression coming from other great powers, especially the Western ones, that it absolutely must be surrounded by a ring of compliant and subservient colonies, countries that would not dare take any important step without direction or approval from the Kremlin. Ukraine is now being attacked because it defiantly broke out of that mold, without having the protective cover of either NATO or European Union membership to fall back upon. Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia broke out of the mold and did manage to become NATO and EU members. All countries that are part of what Russia considers its lifebuoy ring of vassal states, however, have what I call cuckoo’s eggs laid by Russia well in advance of their hatching into agents of internal friction or better still—areas of frozen conflict meant never to be peacefully solved.

When Stalin came to power in the Soviet Union, the ruling slogan of the day was “socialist in content but national in form”. The Great Dictator soon realized how dangerous this was, what with Ukrainian writers starting to publish in the Ukrainian language and those of other republics doing the same within their national cultures. The totalitarian vertical of power that was Communism in the USSR needed a strong cadre of supporters to reinforce the direct power of the Communist leadership and its organs of repression. Stalin soon saw that “all nations being equal under socialism” may have sounded good, but that one nation—the Russian people—being declared as superior to all others sounded even better. In addition, extensive plans were drawn up and realized for keeping all parts of the USSR interdependent economically to such an extent that any thoughts of disentanglement would appear hopeless. Ethnic cleansing was achieved through brutal mass deportations to Siberia and beyond the Arctic Circle, russification was achieved by mass immigration of either ethnic Russians themselves or simply any other nationality form near or far who would weaken the role of

any “native” languages in the public sphere. The long-term strategy of the Soviet Union was to occupy as many territories as possible surrounding the central core, which was Russia itself, and to make sure to implant in each peripheral region some time bomb or booby-trap that would explode at a conveniently chosen time in the future, or that could be encouraged to explode by creating animosity or conflicts both within and between neighboring states. The implementation and continuation of this strategy by the Russian Federation is largely responsible for the ring of zones of frozen conflicts surrounding Russia that remains in place up to this day. One example of this is the previously agricultural Republic of Moldova, which theoretically inherited the heavily industrialized and russified region of Transdnistria after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For all practical purposes, this region was quickly turned into an exclave governed by Russia. Since 2008, the invasion of Georgia by Russian troops has left that country shorn of nearly a fifth of its territory, the secessionist regions again coming under the control of Russia. Crimea was invaded and annexed in 2014, Donetsk and Luhansk as good as taken over by camouflaged Russian troops and recognized as independent republics soon to be begging for annexation in February 2022. And it is only since the open conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020 that our host country has been able to recover most of its legitimate territory, which had been occupied by Russian-supported Armenia for the preceding decades.

It should be emphasized that frozen conflicts need not remain frozen forever and must be resolved at some point in one way or another. In the case of the relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the international community has looked with renewed hope upon the recent negotiations under the aegis of Mr. Charles Michel as a mediator representing the European Union. A lowering of the tensions between neighboring countries is always desirable and one can only hope for a continuation of the very positive steps recently achieved toward a normalization of the territorial and political situation.

Mediation as a means of solving conflicts, however, cannot be done over the heads of those who are most directly concerned. A solution to the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine must not be achieved by leaders from other parts of the world “cutting a deal” with the president of Russia without the Ukrainian people being a party to the discussions and without the will of the Ukrainian people being respected. Only the people of Ukraine have the right to decide what kind of future that they want for themselves, whom they elect as their political leaders and what kind of partnerships they wish to form or alliances that they wish to engage in. In addition, mediation can never succeed without goodwill on both sides of a conflict and goodwill remains the *sine qua non* of any successful conflict resolution.

Goodwill is the basis of civil cohabitation between regions, between countries, as well as between individuals. I remember two letters I received shortly after being elected President of Latvia from a sister and a brother who had inherited a house from their parents after the restitution of private property in our country. They simply could not agree on how to divide their inheritance. Each said they could not live together under the same roof. Exasperated, the brother threatened to saw the wooden house in half and the sister wailed about the house about to be destroyed! When you have, within the same family, the inability to live together

and reach any agreement, you can imagine how inevitable it is that the world will continue to have conflicts. It will continue to have crises and it will continue to have challenges.

The questions concerning each nation's security, the questions about a new post-pandemic world order, of the ability of humankind to stop the dangerous acceleration of climate change and counter the threats of widespread hunger, the questions about good governance and social justice for all, these all are subjects that are on the agenda of the ninth Baku Forum, as they have been on the agenda of humanity as well.

I therefore thank you all for being here with us. I particularly wish to thank His excellence the President of Azerbaijan for his support to the Nizami Ganjavi International Center, without ever in any way influencing or guiding its content, giving us full freedom of choice with respect to topics addressed or persons invited. We truly are grateful for this freedom of expression and freedom of thought that the Baku Forum has always been known for. And I engage you as participants to feel part of this family of people of goodwill who are ready to address the problems that need addressing with whatever tools and resources that you have at your command.

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