

How did we get here and what do we do now?

Lecture by Radek Sikorski at the DGAP, October 11, 2022 [Check against delivery]

We are meeting the day after Putin launched a barrage of missiles at Ukrainian cities, hitting parks, playgrounds, university buildings, a philharmonic, power stations and other random targets. Ukraine has previously carried out a successful offensive and some remarkable special operations. The recovery of Ukrainian territory has revealed the ugly truth of the Russian occupation for the previous several months: torture chambers, charred apartment blocks and mass graves among pine trees, which makes every Pole immediately think of the mass murder of our officer corps in Katyn in 1940.

After two world wars such things were not supposed to happen. We were supposed to have learnt, as Europeans, that you don't start wars on the pretext of protecting your compatriots on the territory of a foreign country. We have the Council of Europe and its convention on the protection of national minorities to deal with such issues. And yet, here we are, an old fashioned invasion by a bigger European nation-state of a smaller neighbor. I'll try to answer the question of **how did we get here and what do we do now?**

I'm delighted to speak before the German Council on Foreign Relations again. Last time I spoke to you, at the height of the Euro crisis, now we are allegedly on the brink of nuclear war. Last time I was subjected to a non-confidence vote by the then nationalist opposition on my return to Poland. But we defeated it with an overwhelming majority. I wasn't silenced then and I'm not going to be silenced now. After all, Foreign Policy magazine named me one of the world's 100 top public intellectuals 'For speaking the truth even when it's undiplomatic' and wear this badge with pride.

Our populist propagandists even coined a phrase for that speech, 'the Berlin homage' whereas I remember the audience thinking it quite provocative. I'll do that again - for how do you change minds otherwise - and please forgive me for quoting the key passage with which I allegedly subjugated Poland to Germany:

"What, as Poland's foreign minister, do I regard as the biggest threat to the security and prosperity of Poland in the last week of November 2011? It is not terrorism, and it is certainly not German tanks. It is not even Russian missiles, which President Dmitry Medvedev has just threatened to deploy on the EU's border. The biggest threat to the security of Poland would be the collapse of the eurozone. I demand of Germany that, for its own sake and for ours, it help the eurozone survive and prosper. Nobody else can do it. I will probably be the first Polish foreign minister in history to say this, but here it is: I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear its inactivity. You have become Europe's indispensable nation. You may not fail to lead: not dominate, but to lead in reform."

Lead in reform.

We will get back to the Russian missiles and the German tanks later on but I could repeat those words today in reference to the war Ukraine. Instead of leading from the front, Germany is being criticised again for lagging behind others. On a per capita basis you are providing less assistance to Ukraine than smaller countries with weaker economies. Hopefully, with his attacks on Ukrainian cities Putin has clarified in everyone's head what this war is about but let's delve into a bit of history.

What does Putin want?

Putin did not become today's Putin immediately although the potential for violence was always there. He started as prime minister with a programme of Russia's modernization which we could live with and support. For some years he was on a convergence course with the West and was willing to spend political capital for the sake of economic integration with the European Union. After Chancellor Merkel told him that Poland had a veto power over Russia's association agreement with the EU, he tried to fix our relationship. He came to Gdansk in 2009 for the anniversary of the breakout of the second world war and was the first Russian leader, on 7th April 2010, to visit Katyn. But then, in 2011, when his return to the Kremlin was greeted with mass protests in Moscow and St Petersburg, he concluded that the West was trying to do to him what we had done to Kadafi. He decided to create an alternative and rival pole of integration, the Euro-Asiatic Union, and he correctly concluded that it would not be a serious organization without Ukraine.

For a long time

My friend and mentor, the former U.S. National Security Advisor after whom this lecture is named, used to say that Russia had a choice: to be an ally of the West, or a vassal of China. Putin has made his choice and it's already obvious that it's a catastrophic error. Instead of becoming a small China, Russia is fast becoming a large Iran, a rogue state with nukes. The reason he did so is perhaps because the interests of Russia and the interests of her president don't actually align. It would be in Russia's interest to be on a convergence course with the West, to modernize its economy and society as we all hoped Russia would. And to secure its Far East. The first interest of Putin, however, is to stay in power come what may and from this point of view an alliance of autocracies proved more attractive.

I knew that Putin was going to invade from July 2021 when I read his essay, a rare rant comparable to the Fuhrer's table-talk, which described Ukraine as an artificial creation not long for this world. It was consistent with what he had said at the 2007 Munich Security Conference and the 2008 Bucharest NATO summit. Except that this time, he ordered that the text be read by all his professional military. Now, why would you do that? In Central Europe we felt he was up to no good when Russian school curricula and media were changed to mouth imperialist propaganda. In the beginning is the word.

It was never about Ukraine's NATO aspirations. We now know that there were negotiations between Ukraine and Russia which resulted in a deal for Ukraine to remain neutral. Besides, Chancellor Scholtz assured Putin that Ukraine would not be admitted into NATO under his watch, an effective moratorium of perhaps several years. Also, if a country's NATO aspiration forced Russia to invade, Russia should now be invading Finland and Sweden. Not only is it not doing so, it is moving troops and equipment away from the Finnish border to reinforce the fight in Ukraine.

No, Putin did not invade Ukraine because she aspired to NATO but because he wants Ukraine. His original war aims were most clearly stated in a proclamation on the conquest of Kyiv, which Russia's official Ria-Novosti agency prematurely released when they thought the Ukrainian capital was about to fall. Read it, it's a chilling document. His war aim was no less than the **final solution** of the Ukraine problem:

Did someone in the old European capitals, in Paris and Berlin, seriously believe that Moscow would give up Kiev? (...) Vladimir Putin has assumed, without a drop of exaggeration, a historic responsibility by deciding not to leave the solution of the Ukrainian question to future generations. (...) Russia is restoring its unity - the tragedy of 1991, this terrible

catastrophe in our history, its unnatural dislocation, has been overcome. Yes, at a great cost, yes, through the tragic events of an actual civil war, because now brothers, divided by belonging to the Russian and Ukrainian armies, are still shooting at each other, but there will be no more Ukraine as anti-Russia.

The plan was to do again what Russia had repeatedly done to Ukraine in the past: extermination of its elites, russification of its culture and population and the subjugation of its resources to its own imperial needs. Ukraine could be permitted as peasant folklore but not as a free and democratic nation choosing its own destiny and allies.

So, when Putin now talks about Ukraine disarming, recognizing the Anschluss of Crimea and making Russian a second official language it is, from his point of view, only a stage toward achieving his ultimate goal.

What does Ukraine want?

As clearly stated by President Zelensky, Ukraine no longer insists on joining NATO but it is now a candidate to join the European Union. It wants to join it in its internationally recognized borders while Russia pays for the destruction it has wrought and those Russian officials and soldiers who ordered or carried out war crimes should face the consequences.

It's clear that both countries' red lines don't yet meet at any point and each still thinks they can win. Ukraine thinks that it can win because its cause is just and its people are fighting like lions for their very existence as a nation. They also think that Russian morale may one day snap, like it did on the eve of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 when Russian soldiers shot their own officers rather than continue to fight.

Putin thinks he can win because he still has the capacity to wreck Ukraine's economy and he thinks we in the West are so degenerate that we will choose surrender rather than energy economies in the winter. Notwithstanding his nuclear threats he may also hope that bringing Belarus into the war might tip the balance.

What Karl Clausewitz famously said about war, that it is the continuation of politics by other means works in reverse too. Russia and Ukraine are already negotiating, on the battlefield. After failing to capture Kyiv and Charkiv, Putin started to talk about a 'special military operation *in Donbas*.' On the other hand, he has announced the annexation of territories which he doesn't control, presumably to legalize the use of Russian conscripts in those territories. However, when he threatens a nuclear response to attacking Russian territory, and then he himself attacks Zaporozhye, which he has supposedly annexed, shouldn't he nuke himself for attacking Russia?

Remember, the simplest way to prevent a nuclear war is for Russia not to start it. Nobody else is threatening it and nobody else will do it. Likewise, the simplest way to end this war is for Russia to leave Ukraine. The war will stop the moment it does so. It is the rapist who is guilty of rape, not his victim. The best way to help a rape victim is to come to the victim's assistance, not to call on her to negotiate with the attacker. When the victim cries for help, you call for the police, or give her pepper spray or whack him on the back of the head. If and when he is ready to negotiate, there'll be no shortage of mediators. But there's also never a shortage of pocket Chamberlains willing to trade other people's freedom for their own peace of mind.

I don't think this war will end the way of the Second World War, with the unconditional capitulation of either side. It's more likely to end the traditional way, hopefully the way the Crimean War ended in the 19th century or the Russo-Japanese war ended in the 20th. It would be conceptually simplest if Ukraine recovered its internationally-recognized territories and stopped there. Or the war will end as Russia's participation in World War One ended, when Russian soldiers refuse to slaughter and be slaughtered. Either way, the shortest route to peace is to speed up weapons deliveries and economic assistance to Ukraine to persuade Vladimir Putin that the conquest of Ukraine can't succeed.

Where did you go wrong?

I hope I no longer have to convince you that you in Germany did get it wrong about Putin and Russia. That is not to say that anybody was wrong to try to entice Russia our way. No, that is not the charge. We should always, even now, offer countries to choose a better path. Perhaps you drew the wrong lesson from the West's success in the Cold War. Some of your public intellectuals seem to think that it was one by Ostpolitik: recognition of the DDR, the Helsinki process, intra-German people-to-people exchanges and dialogue. But they don't care to remember that the Soviet Union would not have been so amenable without 300,000 NATO troops defending Germany, without firmness in responding to the deployment of Soviet intermediate missiles in the 1980s, and Star Wars. Willy Brandt and Helmut Kohl would not have succeeded without Ronald Reagan, Lech Walesa and John Paul II. The recently-departed Mikhail Gorbachov did not allow the unification of Germany and the withdrawal of Soviet troops out of Central Europe out of the goodness of his heart but because his totalitarian empire collapsed beneath him under the weight of its own internal contradictions.

Or perhaps you have been mistaught the history of World War 2. You understand your fault for the Holocaust and you understand you got licked in Stalingrad but you only dimly perceive that the majority of the killing was not done in Russia but on the territories of today's Poland, Belarus and Ukraine. You know that the Soviet Union lost 20 million citizens during the war but not that the majority of them weren't Russians. Therefore, if you still feel the need to atone for the crimes of your grandfathers you should direct your solidarity to the biggest victims. And you should be extra vigilant when the leader of a major nation state justifies conquest on the pretext of protecting its compatriots across an international border.

This is something we can do together, to make the part of the continent between Germany and Russia secure for democracy and rule of law. Hopefully, under a different leadership, Russia may join it one day too.

So, you forgot that opening to Russia should be accompanied with firmness. You built the Siberian gas pipeline from the Soviet Union in the 1980s but at that time it was the U.S. that was providing the firmness. This time, it was all carrots and zero sticks. You developed a nice theory of transformation through trade which belied the reality of getting hooked on cheap Russian gas. You agreed to build first Nordstream 1 and then - even after the Anschluss of Crimea - Nordstream 2. We told you that it was a purely geopolitical project. I did so publicly as Poland's defence minister in 2006 in the strongest possible terms. Take a look at what was the German government's response at the time. I did it again at the Munich Security Conference addressing Angela Merkel publicly and direct. Successive Polish, Ukrainian, Baltic and American governments told you that even before the construction of Nordstream, that Russia had more pipeline capacity to reach Western gas markets than gas to export. Ergo, the only purpose of building Nordstream was to change

the route of delivery, to be able to supply you while depriving Central Europe of the transit fees, or perhaps cutting it off altogether. Your governments' consistent, insincere response was that it was a purely business proposition. Yet, it was backed up with government guarantees, coincidentally decided upon just a few months before Mr Gerhard Schröder took up his lucrative position at Gazprom. Nobody likes to be taken for a fool, you know.

Again, let me stress, nobody is blaming you for wishing to improve relations with Russia. We did so ourselves and it was pretty successful for a time. We established visa-free border traffic between the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad and the adjacent areas of Poland. Our historians, consciously following in the footsteps of Polish-German reconciliation, tried to establish the facts of common history. Our churches signed conciliatory appeals and the Patriarch of Moscow (the same one who now says that the purpose of the invasion is to protect the people of Donbas from gay parades) visited Warsaw. Least spectacular but most hopeful were the visits of Russian mayors and local councilors to see the miracle of the Polish de-centralization and self government. Russia was helpful with the transit of our equipment to and from Afghanistan; NATO was planning joint exercises.

But while we did all that we passed a super law which guaranteed the Polish armed forces 2% of a growing GDP year in, year out. We insisted that NATO write contingency plans for the defence of Poland and the Baltic States. We bought F-16s and modernized the Leopards that you gave us. We signed the agreement with the United States on building a missile defence site in Poland, so as to give them a bigger stake in Poland's security.

I cannot tell you how frustrating it was to talk to most Germans about security throughout those years. I will never forget my joint press conference at the conclusion of a successful meeting of the Weimar Triangle with Frank Walter Steinmeier and Laurent Fabius in Weimar in 2014. An unhelpful German journalist directed the last question to me asking whether Poland still demanded the permanent presence of U.S. troops on its territory. 'Yes, I answered, two heavy brigades would be within the framework of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which has been our policy for years.' You should have seen the shocked faces of most of the assembled press corps. I was exposed as a warmonger. And this was after Crimea, in the former DDR, in the country which used to have 15 times as many when you were a frontline state.

The trouble was, of course, that you didn't consider Poland to be a frontline state because you didn't consider Russia to be a threat. That's why there was not even a squeak of concern either among your politicians or in the press when Russia deployed nuclear-capable Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad with the range to reach Berlin. I don't want to rub it in but let's recall the spirit of those times: according to Pew opinion polls in those years, up to 1/3 of Germans wanted to be in an alliance with Russia against the U.S.!

So, you didn't listen to our warnings and you got it wrong. On Russia, we've been proved right. I don't expect you to apologize for 30 years of your patronizing tones, I just expect you to listen to what we say now. And what we say is that this is hopefully Russia's last colonial war. Think France in Vietnam and Algeria, Britain in Malaya and Cyprus or Portugal in Angola. Think of Donbas as Russia's Ulster. Except that Donbas and Crimea voted for Ukrainian independence at the time of the breakup of the USSR. As a late colonial wars go, it's going through all the predictable stages. First, denying the separateness of the colony. (But Algeria is as much a part of France as Provence!) Then astonishment: our peasants, our funny-speaking provincials wanting a state? But they'll never manage it on their own. Then, anger. How dare they, we'll teach them a lesson. Then finally, when enough people have died on both sides: all right, you're not worth the trouble, go your own way. We

all know at which stage Russia is in Ukraine. The war party still thinks that with one last push they can prevail and bring back control. But Russian dissidents have already understood that the empire has been a millstone around their country's neck. Another year or two and Russia might realize that, being the largest state on earth, it has no shortage of land on which to develop.

I have already spoken of a war against a weaker adversary that Russia had fought and lost, Imperial Japan in 1904. It was also partly about a naval base, Port Arthur. Russia lost and what happened? First riots and strikes and then? Reform. Tsar Nicholas II conceded but internationally and domestically. A constitution was passed, a parliament was formed, a relatively free press was allowed for the first time. If it hadn't been for World War One Russia might have evolved into a more open and more democratic society.

What do we do now?

What should Germany do?

Let's start by with what Germany shouldn't do.

First, Germany should not push for going over to majority voting in the European Foreign Affairs Council. Remember, you and France were the patrons of the Minsk process that was supposed to resolve the issue between Russia and Ukraine. In breach of the Lisbon treaty you pushed aside the High Representative for Foreign Policy and tried to act as EU's two most populous member states. Largely ignoring the views of the only country which, unlike you, is a neighbour of both Russia and Ukraine, namely Poland, let alone those who were even more alarmed by Putin's trajectory than us, the Baltic states. Ukraine did not recover control of its internationally-recognized borders and Putin was not deterred. But Lukashenka was a star of the European diplomatic scene for a while.

The problem is not personal, it is structural. France and Germany both, for the first time in their histories are surrounded exclusively by friends and allies. But not everybody is so lucky. Your joint policy towards Ukraine and Russia proved that you did not accommodate our concerns in your calculations. And since your joint policy failed we have no reason to trust your judgement in the future. On the contrary, trust needs to be rebuilt.

Remember, double majority voting as provided for in the current treaties would mean that France and Germany plus a couple of very small states, would have veto power whereas an alternative coalition either for or against something would be almost impossible to put together. So, what others are hearing is: we may have failed on Russia-Ukraine, but give up your veto power and give it to us and, we promise, we will be more communitaire and more successful than in the past. The chances that most member states accept this logic are low. I suggest you do it the other way around: first rebuild trust and allow EU institutions to carry out our agreed foreign policy, then let's discuss voting reform.

Second, don't re-arm on a purely national basis. I know, I know - we've been urging you to do this for years and now that you say that you'll do it, someone objects? Well, you can always count on the leader of our ruling party, Mr Jaroslaw Kaczyński, who has already said that he doesn't know whether Germany will re-arm against Russia or Poland. And while this may seem to you like an unreasonable hyperbole, I suggest taking it as a warning. Henry Kissinger once said of Germany 'Too big for Europe, too small for the world.' The father of our independence Joseph Piłsudski thought that Russia is a bigger geostrategic problem for

Poland than Germany because when Germany becomes too assertive we immediately have allies. Even though you have disarmed yourself, don't underestimate the fear you will generate when you address the problem in your typically systematic way. There's a solution to this conundrum which a will address in a minute.

Third, don't fight for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council. This may seem symbolic and in any case unlikely, but it's important. You previously thought that it should be the European Union which should one day acquire the permanent seat. This is a question of teleology. What is your ultimate objective: a European superpower, or Germany as a superpower? It can't be both. You need to choose and your role in Europe will be judged in the light of how you choose.

What should Poland do?

I hope you all appreciate what the people of Poland have done in this emergency. From day one, unprompted by anybody, hundreds of thousands of Polish families have accepted over a million Ukrainian refugees into their homes. The Polish government followed with public financial assistance and, above all, with arms deliveries. Poland has also announced plans to raise our defence budget to 3% of GDP, with planned purchases of tanks, planes, anti-aircraft batteries. Putin's capabilities have proven smaller than we - or he - had thought, but his intent has proven to be worse.

But Poland will be truly secure only when Ukraine is whole, free and European. Personally, I believe that after the reception of refugees and the delivery of arms the best thing that Poland could do for Ukraine would be to solve its own issues with the European Union, to return convincingly into compliance with the rule of law, to abide by the judgements of the European Court of Justice and thereby mend its relations with European institutions. Ukraine needs Poland as it was before, as an icon of a successful transformation, an example to follow on the road to Brussels and an influential member of all the EU councils. To restore Poland's bona fides as a member of the EU's G-5 I believe it would be useful for Poland to return to the path of convergence with the EU currency - the euro.

What could Poland and Germany do together?

First, if you now accept that Putin has broken post-war taboos and needs to be stopped then we need each other for common defence. Russian nuclear-capable Iskander missile deployed in the Kaliningrad exclave are an equal threat to Warsaw and Berlin. A system that would combine early warning and tracking radars with anti-missiles placed both near the launch site and around our population centres could be much more effective than a system developed by each country individually. If you now acknowledge that Russia is a threat, wouldn't you rather deter her 500 kilometres from Berlin rather than 70? It goes for other systems as well.

More than that, Poland and Germany should become leaders of the EU's Defence Union. We can't be sure that next time Russia attacks a neighbor the United States will rally round as decisively as this time. It might have a different president or it might be otherwise engaged, say in Asia. The defence of Europe's eastern flank is a burden that should not be borne only by countries poorer than you. Decades of free-riding on American protection should not be followed by free-riding on Central Europe. If Putin and his methods are a threat to all of Europe then all of Europe should bear the cost of countering him, fairly, in

proportion to GDP. We need units drawn not from member states but composed of volunteers from member states, paid for from the EU budget and under the authority of the Foreign Affairs Council. We would then be deterring Mr Putin and not scaring one another.

Second, we could work together to help Ukraine transform itself from a beleaguered candidate for EU membership to a desirable member state. Poland can share with Ukraine its experience of being a candidate country, of transforming its laws and institutions in the EU's image. Germany can help to overcome the reluctance of some net contributor countries to Ukraine's accession. Poland's entry proved to be mutually beneficial in the medium term, Ukraine's can be too. Remember, with Ukraine's accession the EU average GDP per capita will statistically fall and some of Poland's regions will sooner cease to qualify for cohesion funds. We have a joint interest in our money being spent purposefully and honestly.

Third, energy. We warned you that Nordstream would be an instrument of blackmail and also a source of corruption and so it has come to pass. I am glad that someone has removed most of this problem in our relations. Successive Polish governments had also proposed the strengthening of the Energy Union, including joint purchases of gas from our suppliers. We were answered by persistent attempts to exempt Gazprom and its pipelines from general European rules on access to pipeline capacity.

We all have a difficult winter ahead of us and I am disappointed that - unlike during the pandemic - we have not found a joint European solution. Nationalists, wherever they are, are wrong to think that policies of beggar-thy-neighbour will benefit them. We need true European solidarity, both to deal with the immediate problem and for the long term. We need to accelerate energy transformation not only to save our climate but also as a national security issue. We must never again allow a foreign tyrant to blackmail us with access to energy at an affordable price. We must build the pipelines to North Africa, we must build the interconnectors and storage facilities, we must revisit the issue of how to safely prospect for gas under our own territory and we must revisit our attitudes to nuclear power.

Let me end by saying that despite many prejudices on both sides we are actually more similar than many people think. It's not just that Poland is catching up in its development and most of our citizens are now middle class. We still believe in making things. There's no technological barrier between our young people. Our statehoods in their current form, though for very different reasons, are quite young. You were the aggressor we were the victim, you capitulated, and we were technically on the winning side, but we both lost the second world war. We both had limited sovereignty after it and both recovered it fully only with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. For both of us it was a liberation, not a geopolitical tragedy.

We are now faced with a much more dangerous environment in which the security of our nations is again at stake. There are siren voices that we should return to the simple, familiar certainties of our nation states. There are also those who, for the crudest reasons of electoral advantage, would like to revive the grievances, the prejudices and the enmity. I say to them: we have seen this movie before and we know how it ends. We don't need another (*wyciskacz łez*), we need a happy end. But for a happy end to happen, both countries need to renew their vows, not in words only but in perhaps painful deeds, to a common Europe. Contrary to what some say in Poland, Europe is not a threat; Contrary to what some say and do in Germany, Europe is not a tool. Europe is the solution.