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PUTIN IS AFRAID OF EUROPE

Klaas Wauters & Hendrik Vos

Ghent Institute for International and European Studies – Ghent University

It is still said here and there, even in academic circles: we must understand the Russian president. The poor guy worked for the KGB when the Soviet empire collapsed. His Slavic soul was wounded, so he had troublesome journalists killed or gave opponents tea with polonium to drink. What would you do instead? Poor Mr. Putin is already happy if he can give a sympathetic fascist some money or get compliments from Hungarian leader Viktor Orban and his clique. Interventions from extreme right-wing parties in the European Parliament, denouncing sanctions against Russia and praising the much maligned leader for his virile policy and generous election victories, have recently brought a glimmer of joy to the man's difficult existence.

The nostalgia remained however, and so Putin decided on historical grounds that he could invade Ukraine, destroy it and terrorise its people. Let's hope that he did not give the Italians, Turks or Spaniards the idea of teaching a history lesson as well. Next they too will want to return to their Roman or Ottoman Empire, or restore the Spanish sphere of influence of olden days. It would be quite something on our continent. It is hard to believe all the nonsense that is being sold under the cloak of geopolitics.

Thirty years ago, the Soviet Union broke up into a bunch of republics, each going its own way. Some stayed closer to Moscow than others. In many places, the Chinese influence

has grown in the meantime. This does not seem to bother Putin. It is only when the republics start looking westwards that he becomes nervous. The interest of some republics in Europe is understandable. Here we moan about the Union, complain about slow decision-making and whine about every decision. Those who look at it from a distance usually see it differently: this is a haven of peace, stability and prosperity that exists nowhere else on this scale. The European model is attractive and that scares the hell out of Putin. If Ukraine really adjusts its compass to the Union, adopts its way of governing and living together and benefits from it, this may inspire other countries in the region to do the same. Perhaps enthusiasm will grow among the Russian people too. To keep things under control then, the President will have to order a lot of novichok. So therefore Ukraine had to be smashed up. It looks as if this will be a kamikaze action, not least for Putin himself, but in the meantime shocking misery will be caused.

Europe is rightly concerned, because there is not much room for a diplomatic solution any more. That station has actually been passed. The next conversation with Putin should take place in front of a tribunal, not at that much too long table in the Kremlin. At the same time, an apocalyptic confrontation between nuclear powers must also preferably be avoided. Unanimously, sanctions are being imposed and weapons are being delivered to Ukraine in a semi-concealed manner. Almost

as unanimous is the view that we should invest more in our defence. Diplomacy is for spineless wimps. In some Member States, the debate on compulsory military service has been flaring up. Almost twenty years after Robert Kagan wrote that Europeans come from Venus and Americans from Mars, it is time for Europe to set sail for Mars as well. At least, that is how it sounds to some.

Would the situation really be different if we had invested more in military defence? The countries of the Union spent, albeit in scattered order, four times more than the Russians. How much did it have to be then to keep Putin out of Ukraine? Five times more? Ten times? The four largest NATO countries put over 900 billion dollars into their military in 2020. Russia spent 62 billion. So is the problem really a lack of resources? Of course, the Union is not very efficient because of its fragmentation. There are, so to speak, 27 separate land forces, naval forces, air forces and military bands. They each buy their own equipment, which is often incompatible with each other. It is a waste of resources, entirely due to the fact that Member States prefer to

control and decide on their defence themselves. Despite this, it is decided everywhere to spend more on the army.

Yet the European project is powerful and attractive, precisely because it does not adopt the language and tools of rogue states, because it does not engage in military bidding, because it does not install rigid hierarchical lines of command. Europe talks, consults, mediates, tolerates opposition, allows media freedom and, although it has its armies, it also keeps a budget for fighting inequality and investing in policies that benefit people every day. It happens far from consistently, but it happens more than elsewhere in the world. And blood is not shed here. That is why Ukraine is seeking a rapprochement with the Union. And that is why Putin is getting nervous. This time diplomacy has failed, and the armies are on standby. But there is no reason to throw away our model, imitate dictators and move to Mars altogether.