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Czechoslovakia 1938 - Georgia 2008?

By Marko Attila Hoare, 14th August 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. For the first time since World War II, democratic Europe is threatened by a hostile power that not only resembles Nazi Germany in terms of its authoritarianism, brutality and expansionism, but in terms of its military power as well.

2. While it is undeniably difficult for us to respond effectively to the Russian aggression against Georgia, given our existing military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan and our concerns with Iran, North Korea and other rogue states, the danger of inaction vis-a-vis Russian expansionism greatly outweighs this difficulty.

3. We must take immediately take action to bolster Georgia militarily and economically, and accelerate its accession to the EU and NATO, while insisting on Moscow's recognition of Georgia's territorial integrity as a precondition for negotiations over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Meanwhile, Russia should be punished through the suspension or veto of its membership in international organisations.

4. There will unfortunately be no quick end to our conflict with Russia, and the West European publics must be prepared psychologically for the consequences of this conflict, which may carry a considerable economic price.

5. However unpalatable this conflict may be for us, it is better to take a tough but non-violent stance against Moscow today, than to pursue a policy of appeasement that will pave the way to a more dangerous - and potentially violent - conflict with Russia tomorrow.

This autumn will mark the seventieth anniversary of the Munich Agreement, when the democratic powers of Western Europe, Britain and France, weakened as they were by the self-hating, 'anti-war' defeatism of wide sections of the Western chattering classes - on the left as well as of the right - allowed a fascist, expansionist imperial power to carve up a much smaller and weaker multinational state, using the excuse that it wanted to protect the rights of its co-nationals. Of course, Hitler analogies are very tired, and 'anti-war' activists are fond of complaining that all our enemies are 'Hitler' - from Nasser through Galtieri to Saddam and Milosevic. But in the case of Vladimir Putin of Russia, their best legitimate counter-argument no longer applies: that however brutal these despots may have been, the states that they ruled were not nearly as powerful as Nazi Germany.

Now, for the first time since World War II, the democratic West is faced by a brutal, neo-fascist, expansionist regime in command of an imperial state whose military might is comparable to that of Hitler's Third Reich. Putin is an aggressive despot who came to power determined to reverse the defeat and perceived humiliation of Russia in the Cold War, much as Hitler aimed

to reverse Germany's humiliation in World War I (Putin even employed a stunt to cement his power that was highly reminiscent of the 1933 [Reichstag fire](#) - the [stage-managed](#) 'terrorist' bombing of Russian cities by his security services, that could be conveniently blamed on the Chechens). He then used weapons of mass destruction against his own Chechen civilians, destroying the European city of Grozny. He has waged campaigns of persecution against [Jewish magnates](#) ('oligarchs') and [Caucasian ethnic minorities](#). He has established a fascist-style youth movement ('[Nashi](#)'). He has suppressed the free Russian media, murdered independent journalists and effectively abolished Russian democracy. He has threatened and bullied his neighbours - even NATO-member [Estonia](#). His state assassins are the likely culprits in the murder of his critic, the British citizen Alexander Litvinenko. And now he has invaded a sovereign state in an attempt both to overthrow its democratically elected government and to annex part of its territory. His own supporters view this act of military aggression as a strike against the US; *The Independent*'s Matt Siegel [quotes](#) one Russian volunteer: 'This war is absolutely a war between Russia and America. The biggest mistake was in underestimating us. Now you'll see what happens.'

At this moment of danger, democratic Europe is paralysed by the same kind of political, intellectual and moral malaise that brought our continent to ruin in the 1930s. Today, fashionable left-liberal hatred of the liberal-democratic order expresses itself not merely in opposition to military intervention abroad and to our own governments, but frequently in a readiness to solidarise with anyone with whom our governments come into conflict - be they Iraqi and Afghan Islamist rebels, Sudanese genocidal murderers, Iranian and Venezuelan demagogues, Chinese Communist apparatchiks, Serb nationalists, Lebanese Shia fundamentalists, and so on. All this is filtered through a self-indulgent anti-Americanism of unparalleled virulence - naturally, the concerns about invading a sovereign state without UN Security Council authorisation that have so fired our left-liberal intelligentsia over Iraq are not being manifested quite so strongly over Russia and Georgia. Meanwhile, our armies are stretched in Iraq and Afghanistan and our publics are war-weary.

This already toxic brew contains another dangerous ingredient - the most likely candidate for a twenty-first century Neville Chamberlain in the form of France's Nicolas Sarkozy. With France holding the EU presidency, Sarkozy travelled to Moscow to [reassure](#) the Russians: 'It's perfectly normal that Russia would want to defend the interests both of Russians in Russia and Russophones outside Russia.' No doubt the French president would have been equally tactful if Putin had invaded France to protect 'Russophones' in Marseilles or Nice, but this kind of language highlights the EU's unreadiness to oppose Russian aggression. This is particularly so given Sarkozy's [disgraceful record](#) of pursuing narrow French national interests at South East Europe's expense, which involved, among other things, denying Georgia a NATO Membership Action Plan in order to appease Moscow. Sarkozy has joined with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to impose a six-point plan on Georgia, that requires Tbilisi to 'agree to the start of international talks on the future status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia', as the [Moscow Times](#) puts it, but which makes no reference to Georgian territorial integrity. With Medvedev [openly advocating](#) the dismemberment of Georgia, Sarkozy may be preparing the ground for a new Munich Agreement.

Some may ask whether we have any choice but to acquiesce in Russia's geostrategic *coup*, given our existing military entanglements in Iraq and Afghanistan, and our concerns with Iran, North Korea, Zimbabwe, etc. Some may ask why we should care about distant Georgia and its territorial integrity. The best way to respond is to turn this question around, and ask whether we can afford not to care, and not to respond to Russian aggression. If we cannot afford to defend Georgia because of our existing military commitments, we presumably cannot afford to defend Ukraine, or NATO-member Estonia, should Putin decide to build upon his success by moving against one of these countries - something which, given his past record, is not unlikely. At what point do we decide that, however costly it may be, we cannot afford to stand idly by as Russia rampages across Eurasia?

As was the case in the late 1930s, the longer democratic Europe waits before

responding to the aggressor, the more difficult and costly the eventual confrontation will be. Putin has successfully crushed and humiliated a staunch Western ally that contributed two thousand troops to Iraq. We cannot legitimately expect our allies to stand by us in Iraq, or in Afghanistan, if we do not stand by them when they are under attack. The states of Eastern and South Eastern Europe - both those inside NATO, and those wanting to join it - are closely watching the Russian operation against Georgia. They may decide that a NATO unable or unwilling to protect a country whose desired future membership it has itself loudly declared is a NATO it cannot rely on, and which is not worth joining or upholding. The Balkans are finally drifting toward stability, as the dominant elements of the Serbian political classes appear finally to have turned away from destructive nationalism - a turn spectacularly demonstrated by the arrest of Radovan Karadzic. Some of them may now feel, as they witness the West's weak response to the crushing of Georgia, that their turn has been premature, and that they can afford to be a bit more aggressive than they had thought until a week ago. In which case, we may be faced with another front opening up against us in the Balkans.

I write these words, not with any confidence that democratic Europe is likely to take an appropriately firm stance against Russian aggression in the immediate future, but with full confidence that the attack on Georgia is only the beginning, and that we will see further acts of Russian aggression in the months and years to come. Putin is an unreconstructed product of the Soviet intelligence services; a sworn enemy of the liberal-democratic order at home and abroad; an autocrat whose mission it is to reverse Moscow's defeat in the Cold War.

Let there be no mistake: we are in for the long haul. It is time to prepare a long-term strategy of resistance to the new Russian imperialism so that, if we were caught unprepared this time, we will not be unable to respond next time. Britain must join with the US in sending troops to Georgia, even if these troops at the present time have a purely symbolic deterrent value. We must massively increase our financial and military assistance to our beleaguered ally, and reassure it that it is not being abandoned. Georgia's

accession to NATO and the EU must be accelerated - as, indeed, must the EU accession of Turkey, which will be a crucial ally in the coming confrontation; one that we cannot afford not to have on our side. We must insist that the precondition for any negotiations over the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is an acceptance by Moscow of Georgia's territorial integrity. But this conflict is not just about Georgia, and it will not just be played out over Georgia.

Cold War II has begun. Western leaders must begin to prepare their publics for this reality, which means countering the defeatist and anti-Western currents of thought that are popular among wide sections of the chattering classes, and preparing the publics for the consequences of economic warfare with an enemy that supplies a large part of our energy. Full-scale sanctions against Russia may soon be necessary, and though this will hurt Moscow more than it will hurt us, it will hurt us too. Western leaders must state very loudly and clearly that any further military attack by Moscow against any other state in Eastern or South Eastern Europe will invite a military response from us.

There are several ways in which Moscow's aggression can be immediately punished. We should expel Russia from the G8 group of industrialised nations, veto its accession to the World Trade Organisation and the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, suspend the EU's Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Russia, abandon all negotiations for a new EU-Russia agreement, suspend the NATO-Russia Council and announce a boycott of the 2014 Winter Olympics at Sochi. Given Moscow's shameless promotion of the secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia, it is time to raise openly the question of Chechnya which, in terms of size, national homogeneity and viability as an entity, has a much stronger case for independence than either of Georgia's enclaves. Since Moscow is demanding 'self-determination' for South Ossetia, let us openly challenge it to recognise the same right for the much larger Ossetian population in North Ossetia. Finally, our strategy vis-a-vis Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and other trouble-spots must be modified to take account of the new geopolitical front-line; this does not mean we should

surrender the battle on any of these fronts, but we cannot continue to fight them as if the Russian threat did not exist.

Dangerous ? The real danger will come from burying our heads in the sand and hoping Putin will go away and leave us alone. It is better to adopt a tough but non-violent stance against Moscow now, than to encourage further Russian expansionism that will compel us to adopt more drastic measures in the future, measures that we may not be able to limit to the non-violent. Toughness in 1938 might have stopped Hitler without war; appeasement in 1938 led to war in 1939.

Marko Attila Hoare is European Neighbourhood Section Director for the Henry Jackson Society.

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