

5 lessons following one year of war

We must do everything to ensure that this greatest geopolitical nightmare of the 21st century is finally over.

Precisely one year ago, on 24 February 2022, Russia launched its military assault against Ukraine, shattering the order established after the Cold War. The security and prosperity achieved through the efforts of whole generations of Europeans were on the brink of crumbling down. Russia has embarked on its imperial conquest with a single goal in mind: reconstruct the former Soviet sphere of influence regardless of the related costs and victims. We must do everything in our power to put a stop to that most terrible geopolitical nightmare of the 21st century.

What is the state of play? We have seen twelve months of Russia's unheard-of cruelty. The months were measured out by regular bombings of schools, hospitals and civilian buildings. They were counted not by days, but by the number of victims. The Russians have spared no one, killing men, women, old people and children. The acts of genocide in Bucha, Irpin and other towns provide chilling evidence that Russia has committed the most horrendous crimes. Mass graves, torture chambers, rapes and abductions – this is the true face of Russian aggression.

But it has also been a year of the great heroism of the Ukrainian nation led by Volodymyr Zelensky, a nation that has stood up to Russia's evil empire. A year of faith, perseverance and determination. Ukraine is fighting not only for its own sovereignty, but also the security of the entire continent.

How do we stop this war? The last year has taught us many important lessons that the Western countries should take to heart if they really want to live in peace and security.

Lesson 1. The war concerns us all

We need to start by getting rid of a false image of the Russian invasion. This is not a local conflict. Russia tries to set Europe ablaze. Its aim is to destabilise the entire global economic order.

The aggression against Ukraine is part of a plan that was hatched a long time ago and has been implemented by Putin for at least a decade. As early as 2008, during Russia's invasion of Georgia, President Lech Kaczyński gave this warning: "We know perfectly well that, today, it is Georgia that is at stake, tomorrow it can be Ukraine, the day after the Baltic states and then maybe my own country, Poland". These words came true sooner than Europe had expected. Six years later, in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea. Today, we are all witnessing a full-scale military attack against Ukraine. What will the future hold if we do not stop the Russian war machine?

From a distance of hundreds of kilometres one cannot hear the sound of exploding shells, air-raid sirens or the crying of parents who have just lost their loved child in a bombing. But the distance from Kiev must not be used to appease our conscience. I am sometimes afraid that the West is indeed populated by many for whom having a lunch in a favourite cafe or watching a Netflix series is more important than the lives and deaths of thousands of Ukrainians. We can all see the war happening. No one will be able to claim that they did not know about the genocide in Bucha. We are all watching the atrocities being committed by the Russian army.

This is why we must not be indifferent. Russia's imperial plans go beyond Ukraine. This war concerns us all.

Lesson 2. Russia fuels the global economic crisis

The war in Ukraine is only one of the fronts on which the battle for the future of Europe is fought. Russia is also attacking our civilisation in the areas of cyberspace, information and the economy. Carl von Clausewitz once said that war is a continuation of politics by other means. Apparently, Vladimir Putin has understood that famous adage very well. Moscow adapts the techniques of aggression to the adversary it faces. Putin cannot conquer Europe militarily, before he destroys its economy.

The energy crisis and global inflation we are all grappling with have their origin in Russia's imperial aggression. The precursor to the invasion of Ukraine was the Kremlin's hawkish gas policy back in July and August 2021. At the time, Putin's gas blackmail led to hikes in gas prices on European markets. This was just the beginning.

Russia hoped that the paralysis of the energy sector would weaken European countries and convince them to stay well away from the war in Ukraine. Right from the outset, the strategy employed against the West was to escalate the crisis. Russian military activity is one of the main reasons for rising global prices. We are all paying dearly for the decisions taken in the Kremlin. It is time we understood that the global economic crisis is fuelled by Russia.

Lesson 3. De-Putinisation is a prerequisite for Europe's sovereignty

For several years now, the weakness of the West has been Russia's strength. Dependence on Russian hydrocarbons, dubious dealings with Russian oligarchs and the utterly incomprehensible concessions that Europe made, including those concerning the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline – all that paints a picture of pathological relations between the West and Russia. Many European governments believed they could conclude perfectly normal contracts with Moscow. In fact, the contracts turned out to be pacts with the Devil where Europe's soul was at stake.

This is why going back to "business as usual" is impossible. One cannot normalise relations with a criminal regime. It is high time Europe became independent of Russia, especially in the energy sector. Poland has long stressed the need to diversify the supplies of oil and gas. New sources of these products open up new opportunities. De-Putinisation, i.e. breaking off relations with the dictatorial machine of violence created by Putin, is a sine qua non for Europe's sovereignty.

Lesson 4. Solidarity is stronger than fear

The war has already changed Europe. Invading Ukraine, Russia hoped that the West would not wake up from the geopolitical slumber into which it fell years ago when it naïvely believed in the "end of history" myth. Russia has miscalculated. It wanted to divide us, but we became more united than ever before.

Like with any other totalitarian regime, the most powerful weapon of the Kremlin is fear. We must counter Russian threats and blackmail with solidarity. Help for Ukraine is already coming from all corners of the world in the form of food, supplies and weapons. What we are giving Ukraine is hope and a chance of victory.

Germany's approval to send the Leopard tanks to Ukraine – an approval Poland called for – is of great importance here. We know already that the German-produced vehicles will be accompanied by American Abrams tanks. In the end, cold calculations were put aside in favour of the Euro-Atlantic *raison d'état*. NATO has proved that besides being the most powerful military alliance in the world, it also stands truly united. Together we shall overcome evil. Solidary is stronger than fear.

Lesson 5. Rebuild Ukraine and strengthen Europe

The victory in the fight against Russia is closer not only thanks to the successes of the Ukrainian army, but also because the Russian bear has been weakened by sanctions. We owe this to the West, which has formed a strong alliance for freedom. However, defeating Russia in the present struggle is not enough. In order to win the war, we need to build an entirely new security structure both politically and economically.

What will be the building blocks of our common European home? Security is the fruit of unity grounded in shared values and interests and consolidated by strong economic and social ties. We will not come out of the economic crisis with the conflagration of war at Europe's doorstep.

We are facing two scenarios of Europe's future. Either Ukraine wins and there is peace in the continent, or the winner is Russia and Putin's imperialism is free to expand. If Ukraine is to come out victorious, we need to start thinking about a paradigm shift in European politics even today. The idea of a community of security and peace is now the only possible development model.

Exactly one year after the outbreak of the war, we have one common goal to be pursued in solidarity: rebuild Ukraine and strengthen Europe.

Mateusz Morawiecki

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