

# THE WEIMAR RUSSIA: HOW EASTERN AND WESTERN EUROPE SEE THE POST-WAR MOSCOW

Differences between Eastern and Western Europe about how to deal with Russia during the Ukraine war and after are numerous. It would not be of any use to enumerate them or plunge into a discussion about the exact classification of all tactical disparities between the two groups of states. One criterion is crucial to determine the difference in the attitude of both groups towards Russia: the historical one, that is, the experience of Russian/Soviet direct influence in the past.

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The ongoing war in Ukraine started a year ago as a regional conflict with the future of Ukraine at stake. Yet, after a year, it became a continental one with the future of Russia being at the center. Europe, by the simple fact of geographical proximity, is affected by what happens in Ukraine and influences the situation on the ground. The expected outcome of the war already raises dissonances between Western Europe and Eastern Europe which have incompatible visions as to the future geopolitical shape of Russia and its role in the European system after the war and how to achieve this goal. The great discussion about the newly arisen 'Russian question' goes on and thus it seems intellectually (if not politically) useful to reveal its main discrepancies.

Differences between Eastern and Western Europe about how to deal with Russia during the Ukraine war and after are numerous. It would not be of any use to enumerate them or plunge into a discussion about the exact classification of all tactical disparities between the two groups of states. One criterion is crucial to determine the difference in the attitude of both groups towards Russia: the historical one, that is, the experience of Russian/Soviet direct influence in the past. This conflict once again recalled the fact that thirty years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Europe is still politically and mentally divided by the river Elbe and that physical proximity to Russia is still a key factor in thinking and making of international politics in Europe. Geography takes its revenge indeed, as Robert Kaplan would say.<sup>1</sup>

Since the beginning of the war, the net division between Eastern and Western Europe is visible<sup>2</sup>: while the East condemns Russia<sup>3</sup>, calls to sanction<sup>4</sup>, contain and punish it, encourages full support for Ukraine and its fastest possible integration into EU<sup>5</sup> and NATO<sup>6</sup>, the West seems nostalgic about the good old times before the 24th of February<sup>7</sup> and evidently afraid about the new order which may appear as a result of the war.<sup>8</sup> What makes people as distinct as Chancellor Scholz<sup>9</sup> and Pope Francis<sup>10</sup> so unanimous in calling to understand the reasons of both sides and not to humiliate Russia? What makes countries as different as Estonia and Bulgaria speak with one voice and unconditionally support Ukraine? Apparently, the driving force of both processes is a vision of isolated, weak, poor, and chaotic post-War Russia. This vision seems more realistic with every month of the war. It will find its formalization in a to-be ceasefire conditions and later on in a future peace treaty. The problem for the West is that the whole process and its possible outcome seem to be a deeply disturbing problem, while for the East, it is an optimistic vision that comes true easier and faster than any analyst expected in the pre-war prognoses.

## **A Hungarian Disclaimer – An Exception that Proves the Rule**

One may say that there is a weak point in this classification which is the attitude of Hungary. Historically, it was invaded and occupied by both Tsarist Russia and

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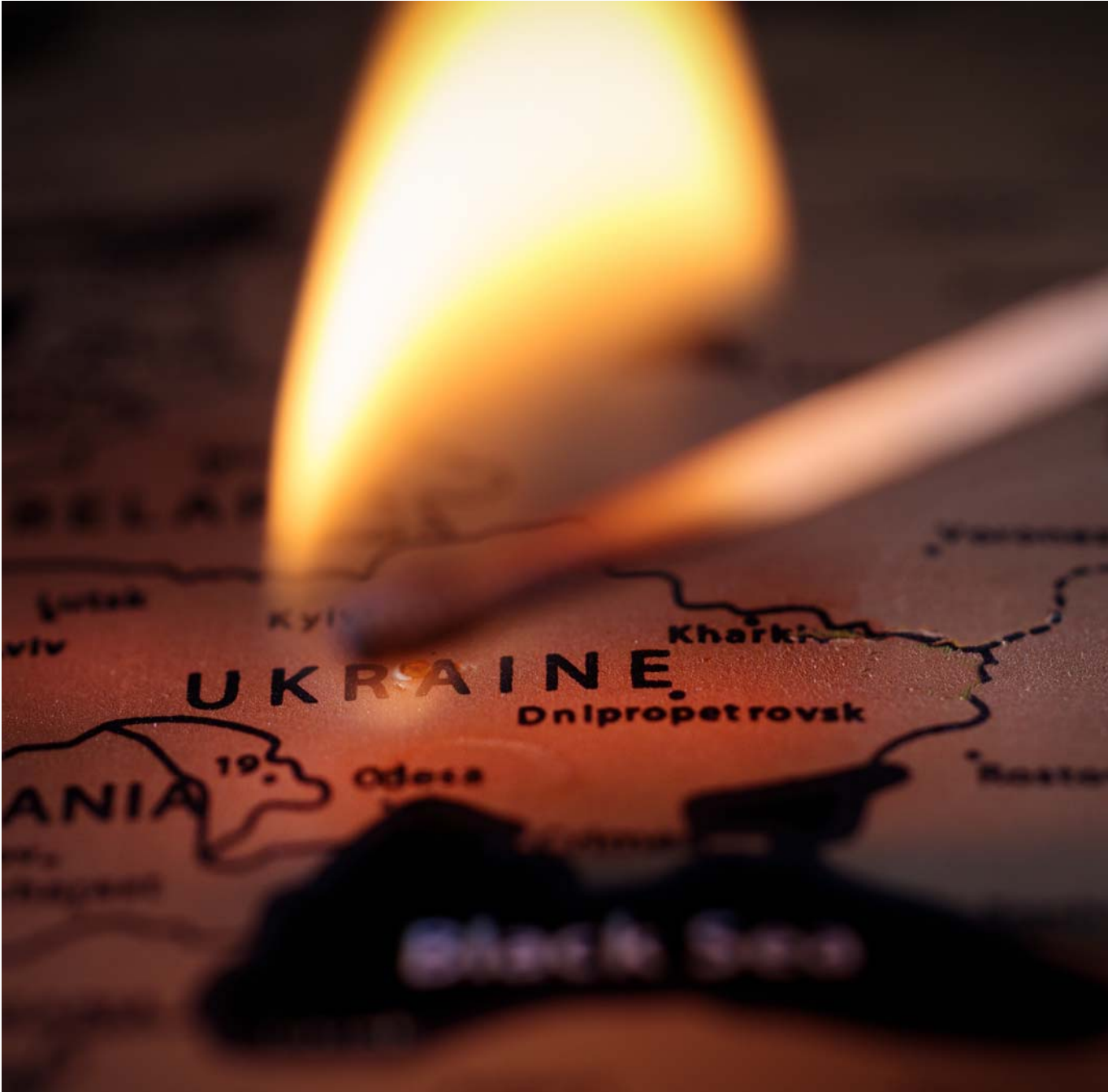
the Soviet Union, yet nowadays, it consistently remains more pro-Russian than any of the supposed *Putinversteher*s in the West. The explanation of the Hungarian stance towards the war results from a confluence of internal and external factors. Budapest's choice comes at a time when the personalistic illiberal regime reaches its climax. In this kind of political structure, it is possible to pursue a foreign policy that contradicts the opinion of approximately half of the population and a major part of the intellectual and political elite starting with the one of President Katalin Novák. Hungary is ruled according to the tactical reflexes of its personalist leadership, with very few institutional, moral, or intellectual inhibitors. At the same time, the regime runs out of instruments of popular mobilization other than loutish nationalism and xenophobic revisionism. Combined with a very special personal relationship with Vladimir Putin, it results exactly in a kind of diplomacy that is actually performed by Viktor Orbán.

**Isolation – In or Out to Better Keep Down**

Leaving the Hungarian exception aside, the isolation of Russia from the political, economic, and cultural life of Europe changes the parameters not only of regional but continental and most probably global order. An order that was created by great powers to serve their interests and thus the one in which every one of them shared a part of the responsibility – horizontally (to keep the basic principles working on which all of them agreed) and vertically (to keep order in respective regions that were assigned to the supposed zones of influence). From the point of view of France and Germany, Russian presence in Europe was a pivotal element and guarantee of order and stability. The peaceful coexistence of German (or Franco-German) and Russian zones of influence in Europe was conditioned by the existence of a buffer zone of which Ukraine was a key element. And this regional order existed until 2014 when the popular rise against the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich moved Ukraine closer to the West. What Kyiv is doing since then is not only an attempt to avoid the Russian protectorate but to get rid of its 'buffer' status and to join the West as its legitimate member, in other words, to jump on the brighter, richer and happier side of the new Iron Curtain (as Poland did thirty years ago resulting in a contrast between Warsaw and Kyiv that is so demoralizing from Moscow's point of view). If it turns possible that a key element of what Russia perceives as its

informal empire refuses to obey the metropolis and simply exits today, the same may theoretically happen to Paris or Berlin (or Washington if we see above the horizon of this text) tomorrow. It is important to acknowledge that by calling to maintain dialogue with Moscow, the West does not protect President Putin or even Russia as such, but an element of an order of which they are stakeholders altogether. If post-war Russia is too weak, it will be in no condition to guarantee peace and stability eastwards, the actual EU and NATO borders. In that case, France and Germany will have no choice but to take responsibility for all the post-Soviet states in Europe, possibly including parts of Russia itself. This will require engaging great forces and means and thus deeply and durably weaken Western Europe's potential in respect to other actual or aspiring great powers. For Paris or Berlin, it is evident, that if Russia is defeated and downgraded to a regional force incapable of stabilizing Europe together with them, the new, truly multipolar order will emerge. This will put them in front of a necessity to deal with numerous problematic partners instead of one, that was far from ideal, but ideologically familiar (internationally, not internally) and institutionally understandable (everyone in the West knew who will answer the phone in Moscow in a difficult moment and that he will do).

What is more is the divergence between Eastern and Western Europe with Russia becoming a non-factor in Europe contains an interesting cumulative effect. Benjamin Franklin famously said, "money makes money and the money that money makes, makes more money." The same principle applies to political capital: if the Russian part of the European order is dismantled and the Russian threat is no more actual for Eastern Europe, it is only a question of time when countries of the region will change their optics. They will realize that remaining in the West's periphery makes little sense. As a result, they will sooner or later exit the legal and institutional framework of Western hegemony and start to integrate themselves creating a reality - firstly economic, then political, military, and institutional - that will act as a competitor to the Western structures. As an example, Warsaw imprudently proclaimed achieving this objective as an official strategy of the country's foreign strategy called The Three Seas Initiative overtly recalling the times when Moscow and Berlin were not dominant powers between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas and expects the Ukrainian victory over Russia as a starting point of the process. The instruments applied by great powers to deal with states perceived as junior partners remain traditional. They are rarely sophisticated or innovative and repeat historically tested patterns adapted to the local specificity. From the point of view of the West, Russian imperialism is one of those instruments. It is very useful to influence the policy of Eastern Europe according to Western interests. And to be able to use it, the West needs Russia to exist.



### **Weakness – Regionally Profitable and Globally Malicious**

Russian weakness is also something that is perceived differently in the East and the West of Europe. Until it lately demonstrated its real logistic and combat capabilities in Ukraine, the Russian army was perceived as the only real force between Europe and Asia, ready for protecting it from both state, i.e., China and non-state dangers produced by the chaotic Asian neighborhood, as well

as from Russia itself in case its internal situation degenerates into risks such as terrorism and illegal migration. Seeing Russia as an external protective power that keeps Europe safe by the simple fact of protecting its national interests and always ready for a pragmatic trade-off enabled European states to keep military budgets low and was seen in terms of useful security outsourcing. If the Russian army is defeated in Ukraine and durably downgraded in terms of quantity and quality, European states will find themselves in front of a need to completely re-

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model the structure of their state budgets. More guns and less butter will surely, at least for some time, hamper the European social model. In a long term, this will most probably shatter the civil contract that constitutes the fundament of European stability, and the civilizational attractiveness of Europe and makes the integration possible and workable. Western European citizens, especially those who do not feel (and in many cases, objectively are not) endangered by the Russian imperial Reconquista will hardly vote for politicians ready to cut funds for schools, hospitals, and roads in favor of tanks, missiles, and fighters designed for defending abstractive countries located on a far periphery of Europe. On the other hand, those same voters fear global threats such as terrorism and migration, which were up to now kept under control by the simple fact that Russia was strong enough to deal with them alone. Here again, the partner is far from being an ideal example of a Fukuyamian democracy-in-the-making, but still better than nothing, that is to say, a power vacuum from Brest-Litovsk to the Pacific Ocean.

Eastern European countries for their part see the collapse of the Russian military in Ukraine with the hope that it will be total and ultimate. Russian forces have always been seen as a direct threat to their sovereignty, territorial integrity, economic progress, and cultural autonomy. Those fears were indeed periodically confirmed by Russia. As a result, from their point of view, the less numerous and worse equipped the Russian military is, the more optimistically they see their own prospects. Both in terms of investment attractiveness and the parameters of military expenditure. The calculation is based on the following reasons: Firstly, in a short perspective –the states located at Europe’s periphery need a relatively high military expenditure to convince the inter-

national capital to invest in a place located at the firing distance of a canon standing in Belarus or Kaliningrad. Secondly, from a mid-term perspective - if Russia loses the war - there is at least a theoretical chance that Ukraine and Belarus will join the Western structures and the actual Eastern Flank of the EU and NATO will lose its ‘frontal’ nature and thus be able to spend less on defense. And thirdly, in the long term, all the Eastern European countries do not feel endangered by the global threats that affect the West. None of the countries in Eastern Europe was ever affected by any terrorist attacks. None of them was as well affected by the migration crises *sensu stricto*. Even if illegal migrants physically appeared on their borders, the Eastern European states were perceived as a transit territory on their way to the West. Ironically enough, from the point of view of Eastern Europeans, the threat was coming not from the Middle Eastern and Central Asian citizens heading to Western Europe but from the European Commission which reacted to the situation in a classically bureaucratic manner by trying to settle them down in the countries in which they did not want to live according to the obligatory quotas. What is more, in the case of Poland and the Baltic States, those crises were widely perceived as organized and managed by Russia and its Belorussian ally as a prelude to the war in Ukraine. They were conceived as a part of Russia’s hybrid war, a stress test of Europe’s unity and solidarity. If the migration issue was commented on in terms of a long-term problem (which indeed happened in Hungary and Poland), it was evidently instrumentalized by the governments trying to mobilize the public opinion around the flag.

### **Poverty – Between Mercy and Justice**

The economic aspect of dealing with post-war Russia has a few aspects of which financial, moral, cultural, and political ones may be synthetically enumerated. The general difference in approach to the sanctions between the two parts of Europe has a conceptual nature. The West perceives the actual sanctions regime as exceptional and temporary. A sort of maximum harm that can be done to a major partner who suddenly and irrationally turned into an opponent. The East on its part, sees it as a regular and durable basis of European relations with Moscow who is perceived as an enemy; a minimum is required to effectively contain Russia.

From a purely economic perspective, the West seems to be willing to only sanction Russia for its exact actions with an intention to soften the restrictions as soon as the Kremlin abstains from doing this or that. In Western Europe, Russia is perceived as a major, attractive market as well as a source of relatively cheap, accessible, and virtually unlimited raw materials. A country that should be maximally open to European goods, services, and exploitation. From the point of view of Western producers, making money in Russia is neither less moral nor more

dangerous than doing it anywhere else and sanctioning it means a self-deprivation that should stop as soon as the war is over and the actions considered as formal reasons halt. The Eastern Europeans, on the other hand, perceive trade relations with Russia through securitized lenses. From their point of view, economic cooperation with the Kremlin sponsors the immanently expansionist regime and thus fuels aggression. From this perspective, any step towards lifting the actual sanctions regime should be linked not only to the fact of stopping its formal cause but to material guarantees, that in a foreseen future Russia would not be able to reach a potential to restart. Eastern Europeans also make money from trading with Russia, but the cost of making Russia stronger and letting it free to spread its influence inside Europe is perceived as unacceptable, in relation to profits.

Keeping Russia intentionally and permanently underdeveloped by the West would require to officially admit Moscow to be an exception from the rules of the global economy. This approach would deny the universal quality of Western capitalism. And treating Russia as an exception is one of Eastern Europe's strategic objectives. From this perspective, mutually profitable trade relations should be accessible only to those countries who respect the common rules and abstain from using the benefits to threaten not only the core of the West, but the weaker and poorer peripheric components of the international system as well. Since the beginning of the war, Eastern Europeans more than once expressed their sour disappointment at the fact that Germany and France treat Russia better than their junior and farther 'family members.' From the point of view of Eastern Europe, if Moscow intends not to respect the common rules of cohabitation, it should take responsibility and the West should consistently let it assume the implications of the choice made. Keeping trade relations normal would mean rewarding the misconduct. However, this would potentially lead not only to another postimperial conduct when Russia is in a state to rebuild its offensive potential but also to a demoralization and possible deterioration of relations inside the rest of Eastern Europe. Changing one of the borders by force would potentially put all other past and present border disputes on the agenda.

Economic cooperation with Russia also contains a cultural and psychological aspect. The West shares the idea that economic growth leads to strategic convergence.<sup>11</sup> The economic growth in Russia should theoretically enlarge the middle class, and as a result, weaken the authoritarian tendencies, ultimately making dictatorship a less preferred social choice. Eastern Europeans think exactly the opposite. Taking into consideration the structure of Russian society, the mechanics of wealth distribution and a mentality based on historical experience makes the capital accumulated by Russia work on the petrification of the regime. In Russia, wealth does not induce democratization, the development of civil society, the rule of law,

the accountability of government, and electoral representation.

Finally, the discussion on how deep and how long should the sanctions regime be maintained has a political aspect rooted in Europe's historical experience. By trying to maintain the balance of power, Western Europe intends to avoid a 'new Versailles dictate' and thus creating a radically revisionist state fuelled by national humiliation resembling the Weimar Germany after WWI. Sanctions will lead to poverty and poverty will lead to frustration, which will in time produce another 'führer,' possibly more aggressive and unconstructive than the one actually occupying the Kremlin. The West fears that too-hard peace conditions (for example the linkage between lifting the sanctions with reparations, nuclear disarmament or the reform of the UN Security Council) will give such a populist leader authentic arguments capable of mobilizing Russian society towards revisionism. In such a case, a new war will not only be possible but inevitable. Peace conditions will fuel the moral readiness for revenge and the moral force will fuel material preparations. Eastern Europe is persuaded that Russian revisionism will sooner or later happen anyway. That's why the constant need for preventive containment should stay at the Western agenda in the long term. And that is why the peace conditions should make Russian potential weaker. From their perspective, the task of the future regional order established by the peace treaty is to create a guarantee that Russia will be in no condition to pursue expansionist politics.

### Fragmentation – Blessing or Headache?

All these lead to one last point of contention, which divides the East and the West of Europe. There exists a risk that all measures adopted to stop the war shatter the Russian regime, trigger internal chaos and catalyze divisions that may result in a breakdown. That is, optimistically in a form of a Soviet-style implosion, pessimistically as an explosion of a continental dimension. In Warsaw, Kyiv or Vilnius, this is seen as a potentially profitable scenario. In Paris or Berlin – a strategic problem to be avoided at all costs, let it be Crimea, Donbas or any other

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territorial cession that Kyiv will be forced to accept in the name of peace, stability and profit of the continental order dominated by Western Europe.

This problem contains an internal and an external dimension. If as a result of military defeat, Russia splits up, it will produce a geopolitical mess of size and duration that will most probably require a deep and long-term involvement of the European Union, the close and most endangered neighbor. Subsequently, if all available political, military, and economic effort of Europe is directed to manage the post-Russian space, there will be no more

potential left to realize the process of federalization officially proclaimed by the German Chancellor as a strategic objective of Europe conceived as a structural basis for the years to come. If the EU has to deal with possible new members (as a result of war, Ukraine is already an official candidate giving example to all other post-Soviet states) with some amount of Kosovo-like quasi-state organisms dropping off the failing construction of Russian Federation, no consensus on strengthening the integration inside the actual institutional and legal framework may be imaginable.

Same thing with the relative strength of the EU on the international scene: if Russia fails to maintain its territorial integrity and its traditional balancing role, the geopolitical prize will go to USA and China making them too strong to let Brussels even dream of entering any competition on a global level. The bipolar order (in the exact shape that President Xi described in his program speech during the Party Congress last October) will effectively be established on the Russian cadaver, and this will durably exclude Europe as a pretender to an independent pole of power. And this global failure will be complicated

by the abovementioned accession to the scene of several regional players, which will surely try to move the margin of their autonomy by assembling regional blocs (directed by them, not by Brussels, Paris or Berlin).

### **Conclusion: Waiting for Russian Verdun, avoiding a Russian Compiègne**

All those conceptual differences between Eastern and Western Europe concerning Russia existed before. But, the war moved them from academic divagations to the most urgent points of political agenda. The West wants to save as much from the previous international order as possible of which Russia was a major and influential part, and thus wants to keep Moscow interested in maintaining this order in a renewed version. The East sees the future architecture formalized by the peace treaty between Russia and Ukraine not only as a chance to get rid of the Russian danger but as an opportunity for a general emancipation. The West wants to avoid turning Russia into a highly militarized but dysfunctional country. European discussions about sanctioning Russia as well as about a conception of future peace parameters illustrate deep divisions between the two parts of the continent that may be compared to how Britain and France disputed the treaty imposed on Germany after the Great War. The question 'what kind of Russia should this war produce' and 'what roles should the future peace agreement give to it' are the open ones and, paradoxically enough, the answer – in case it is elaborated – will for the most part condition the shape of the peace itself.

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So far Russia showed no ability to reach to any of the declared aims of the war and taking into consideration its internal situation combined with external pressure, it is hard to imagine the outcome of this conflict in terms of any acceptable 'victory' for Moscow. Although, I personally had a great opportunity to witness that Russian propaganda is in its full capacity to produce the most extravagant explanations of reality, it will be extremely challenging to call the white black in this instance, not even a symbolic sign is available to prove it. And the core of the discussion between Eastern and Western Europe is how much, if any of it, should be granted to avoid transforming Russia into a Weimar-style German revisionist troublemaker.

### Endnotes

- 1 Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*, Random House, Inc., 2012.
- 2 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/29/ukraine-russia-war-eastern-europe-european-leadership/>
- 3 <https://www.politico.eu/article/nine-nato-countries-condemn-russia-annexations-in-ukraine/>
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- 5 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/presidents-8-eu-states-call-immediate-talks-ukrainian-membership-2022-02-28/>
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- 7 <https://www.politico.eu/article/western-europe-listen-to-the-baltic-countries-that-know-russia-best-ukraine-poland/>
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