

“This has the hallmarks of Afghanistan in 1979 or Iraq in 2003”

Article by Jens Siegert

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By launching a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has left the world in no doubt about the lengths to which he is willing to go in pursuit of his aims and left Western policy-makers scrambling to agree on a proportionate response. What happens next will determine not just Ukraine’s future but also that of the current global geopolitical order. We spoke to Russia expert and former long-standing Director of the Heinrich-Böll Foundation in Moscow, Jens Siegert.

Green European Journal: What we have long feared, an invasion of Ukraine by Russia, has now happened. What does Vladimir Putin want?

The past few weeks were similar to the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was a game of chicken: tensions were constantly building, and everybody wanted to see who would blink first. But Putin apparently had a different game in mind. He has announced an invasion. The result is a disaster for everyone. Especially for Ukraine, of course, but also for Russia. And also, for the West.

Almost all experts assumed that Putin is a rationally calculating power politician. Someone who soberly assesses opportunities and risks and pursues political goals. The cultural and historical ties to Ukraine that he emphasised in his history essays, for example, were considered by many to be ideological distractions or perhaps simple pretexts. This has now been proven wrong. It seems, he actually believes what he is saying.

Many assumed that the pressure Putin was building was a means to obtain concessions from the West. But after the attack, it’s clear: This was not the case. We have left this phase behind us. After the attack, the West cannot make any concessions, at least not for the time being. That must also be clear to Putin.

Most people I talk to in Moscow are shocked. Among them are many who, in principle, share Putin’s complaints about the West and NATO’s eastward expansion. However, nobody expected this, and nobody understands what the goal should be.

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What next steps can we expect in his campaign? Putin has said there will be no

military occupation. Does that mean he foresees a quick invasion to overthrow the government and then leave again?

There are many contradictions. Putin says he wants Ukraine's "demilitarization and denazification," but not occupation. I don't see how this is supposed to work. This has the hallmarks of Afghanistan in 1979 or Iraq in 2003. Once the Soviet Union and the USA and their allies got in and overthrew the regime, they couldn't get out. The new regime that Putin seems to be aiming for in Ukraine will hardly be able to survive without the Russian military.

Putin actually believes what he is saying.

How is Russian civil society reacting?

There is basically no such thing as a Russian civil society today. There are only isolated people and groups. Putin has made a clean slate in recent years. After the invasion, the screws in the country are likely to be tightened even further. The regime is likely to become even more repressive than it already is. Not a good prospect for dissidents.

Putin is the *de facto* sole ruler. The televised session of the National Security Council speaks volumes. All the ministers there had to stand before him, show loyalty, and say that they support the recognition of the separate Luhansk and Donetsk regions. Half of them stood trembling in front of Putin. Obviously, they knew what steps Putin was ready to take – and that scared them.

Can we expect a return to Cold War-style bloc confrontation?

No. You would need blocs for that. Russia has no bloc. With the exception of Nicaragua, Venezuela, Cuba, Syria, and Belarus – and Lukashenko can't help it – no one supports Russia. Even the Iranian foreign minister has spoken out against the Russian invasion. The question is whether Russia will now be isolated over the years as an international pariah. That depends very much on the Chinese, who have so far kept a low profile.

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Were Europe and Germany too naive towards Russia?

Yes, they have been all along. It's very simple: too few have understood what it means that Russia is willing to go to war in order to control countries like Georgia and Ukraine, but we aren't.

How should the West respond?

There is little choice but to adopt tough sanctions. The question is also, how will things continue with Ukraine? Will Russia manage to overthrow the regime so quickly that the

West no longer has time to support the current Ukrainian government, for example with arms deliveries? That's what Putin's covert threat of a nuclear strike is aimed at.

Is non-military deterrence effective against Putin? In view of the situation, do we have to focus more on military deterrence?

This is what you would call in Russian a "complex matter". It's about both: military deterrence and economic pressure. Let's just look at the Cold War and Ostpolitik: The German military budget has never grown more than under the chancellorship of Willy Brandt and his *Ostpolitik*.

What does this mean for the Greens in the German government?

Ukraine could be another Kosovo moment for the current Green leadership in the government. They have to prove themselves now. And they are doing that. They have done almost everything right so far. But they also have to make sure that the Green grassroots party base follows them in their course



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