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Introduction

Good morning. I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation to participate in this meeting and for the opportunity to discuss the situation in Ukraine and Russia with a focus on the role of the EU. I welcome the Committee's interest in this topic and am very pleased to engage with members on this vital issue. Having conducted research in all fifteen former Soviet republics over a period exceeding two decades I am open to discussing the Kremlin's relationship with other countries in the region as well.

I will briefly review the role of the EU in its Eastern Neighbourhood from the prism of Russia and Ukraine, outlining their perspectives, motives, and interests. Understanding these perspectives is crucial to appreciating the past and potential role of the European Union in the region.

Kremlin view of Ukraine

The Kremlin considers Ukraine and other post-Soviet states to be part of its sphere of influence and official thinking in Moscow suggests that these former colonies cannot be treated as equals, or, indeed, as fully sovereign states with divergent interests.

Amongst the political elite in Russia there is a pervasive belief that Ukraine is not a fully independent country but, at best, a historical part of Russia and at worst, a political Frankenstein, artificially stitched together during Soviet times and now sustained by Russia's adversaries. From this perspective if there is no separate Ukrainian people, how can they enjoy a right to self-determination?

When at the Bucharest NATO summit in 2008 it seemed possible that Ukraine, along with Georgia, might obtain a Membership Action Plan, an animated Vladimir Putin claimed that Ukraine was an artificial state and it was reported publicly that he had threatened to intervene in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in retaliation.

Six years later, in his 2014 speech announcing the annexation of Crimea, Putin proclaimed that "it pains our hearts to see what is happening in Ukraine at the moment." He repeated that Russians and Ukrainians were "one people" and "we cannot live without each other." Coming when it did, as Russian military forces invaded Ukraine, this did not seem like an expression of affection. Like an abusive former spouse, the Kremlin maintained that it could not imagine being separated from Ukraine and that any violence meted out was only for the betterment of its errant partner.

By invading Ukraine in 2014 the Kremlin flagrantly breached international agreements such as the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, part of which involved Ukraine giving up its Soviet-era nuclear weapons in return for a guarantee from Russia, the US, and the UK to protect Ukraine's security and territorial integrity.

Kremlin view of NATO

The Kremlin argues that it is responding to provocations from NATO and the EU. According to this narrative of "defence-motivated expansionism" Russia has seen NATO and the EU extend to its doorstep, undermining its "traditional sphere of influence". But this is to invert the sequence of events. When the Cold War ended there were many – not least within NATO itself – who questioned whether the organisation had a future. After all, it had been established to confront the Soviet Union, and with the collapse of that adversary, it seemed NATO had lost its raison d'être.

What injected the organisation with renewed vigour was the queue of former Soviet states and satellites requesting, nay demanding, entry into the protective umbrella. They feared – and recent events have certainly vindicated those fears – that the Kremlin's weakness was temporary and thus they sought to escape the abusive cycle of history while they could. Far from NATO or the EU aggressively seeking new members, they acquiesced to a concerted drive from ex-communist states to join. A small state like Estonia, with a population of just 1.3 million, of which at least a quarter are ethnic Russians, can rely on the EU and NATO to fend off the Kremlin's covetous glances. The substantially larger Ukraine, however, is very much on its own.

The NATO–Russia Founding Act signed in 1997 committed both Russia and NATO to respect the "sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all states and their inherent right to choose the means to ensure their own security". Despite this the Kremlin has fostered a narrative of betrayal, that the West has renegued on promises and taken advantage of Russia when it was weak. The natural offshoot of this is that only firm leadership – as provided by Vladimir Putin – can reverse this trend.

The Kremlin is demanding now that NATO guarantee in perpetuity that it will never accept new members in Eastern Europe. This would include in the first instance Ukraine and Georgia but would also extend to countries such as EU member states Finland and Sweden. This would in effect allow Moscow to have a veto on who can join NATO. It is difficult to see how any international organisation or club would allow a third-party to exercise such powers at the expense of aspirant states.

The Kremlin is also demanding that there be no NATO deployments in those member states that joined the organisation after 1997. This would include all those countries from the Baltic to the Black Sea and would create a two-tier NATO with first- and second-class members. The Kremlin also opposes Ukraine being afforded with the means to defend itself. Needless to say, the less Ukraine is able to protect itself the better able the Kremlin will be to impose its will.

Kremlin view of the EU

The Kremlin's vocal articulation of its ultimatums, amplified by the menacing military build-up along Russia's border with Ukraine, is designed to undermine the ambitions of its neighbours for greater integration with Euro-Atlantic structures. It also seeks to demonstrate Russian capabilities against NATO assets in the region and to test the unity and resolve of the EU. While the focus has been on NATO, Moscow is also opposed to its neighbours joining the European Union. Indeed, it was the prospect of a closer relationship with the EU that precipitated the crisis in 2013 that culminated with the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Donbas.

Roughly translated, the Kremlin's position is that its insecurities can only be assuaged when it is surrounded by weak dependencies that are not part of any supportive alliance such as the EU or NATO. However, the Kremlin in no way tries to mitigate the insecurities of the smaller states in the region that have traditionally been the victims of Kremlin-sponsored aggression.

Armed with nuclear weapons Russia is well-protected against military attack. What the Kremlin fears is not invasion but rather losing its influence in what it considers "the near abroad". Political elites in Russia see themselves as rivals to, rather than partners of, the European Union. Conversely, many in Ukraine see the European Union as a means to escape from the Kremlin's shadow.

View from Ukraine

During the last century or so, Ukraine's history has been punctuated by civil conflict, world wars, tyranny, gulags, and famine. And yet somehow, miraculously, it has come out at the other end. Little wonder that the national anthem proclaims defiantly that "Ukraine is not dead yet".

When we see the summitry between Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden, we can sometimes lose sight of the fact that there are 40 million people living in Ukraine and they are at the centre of this crisis. It is they who suffer as a result of this calamity and, if the situation deteriorates, it is their lives and livelihoods at stake, not those of political figures in Moscow, Brussels, or Washington DC. Indeed, it has been a source of frustration for many Ukrainians to see their fate discussed at international summits without any representative from their country. For as the old saying goes, "if you are not at the table, you are probably on the menu".

When I first went to live and work in the former Soviet Union over two decades ago, Ukraine was not petitioning for membership of NATO, or the European Union, and most people were content with its status of a militarily non-aligned state. Most Ukrainians were neither pro-Russia or pro-NATO but simply pro-Ukraine. How Ukrainians appraise what is best for their country has changed dramatically during the last decade. The vast majority now see the Kremlin as a determined adversary that has killed many of their compatriots, occupies a substantial part of their country and maintains a constant threat of further military aggression. At the same time, they feel their allies are comparatively indifferent and irresolute, and have been unable to demonstrate a level of support that might deter the Kremlin. Ukraine is therefore in a very difficult place right now. Although at the heart of Europe and bordering the EU, many in

Ukraine fear they are not viewed as a country worth defending with the same degree of solidarity and determination as other parts of Europe. It is as if we have somehow placed them psychologically outside of Europe and in the Kremlin's sphere of influence.

Conclusion

The European Union's greatest achievement is also the one we take most for granted. After Europe was repeatedly torn asunder by aggressive expansionist regimes, the EU played a vital role in healing the wounds and ensuring that common values and ever-increasing interdependency made war within its borders inconceivable.

Over the decades the EU has had a magnetic pull on its neighbours. Thirteen new members have joined since 2004, eleven of whom are, like Ukraine, former communist authoritarian regimes that had been subordinated to the Kremlin.

Today we speak about Ukraine but the issues at stake, while affecting Ukrainians acutely, are not confined to Ukraine, but are central to the future of Europe. Fundamentally, it is about freedom and the right of states and peoples to determine their own political destiny free from the threat of military aggression.

I look forward to engaging with Committee members on these issues.