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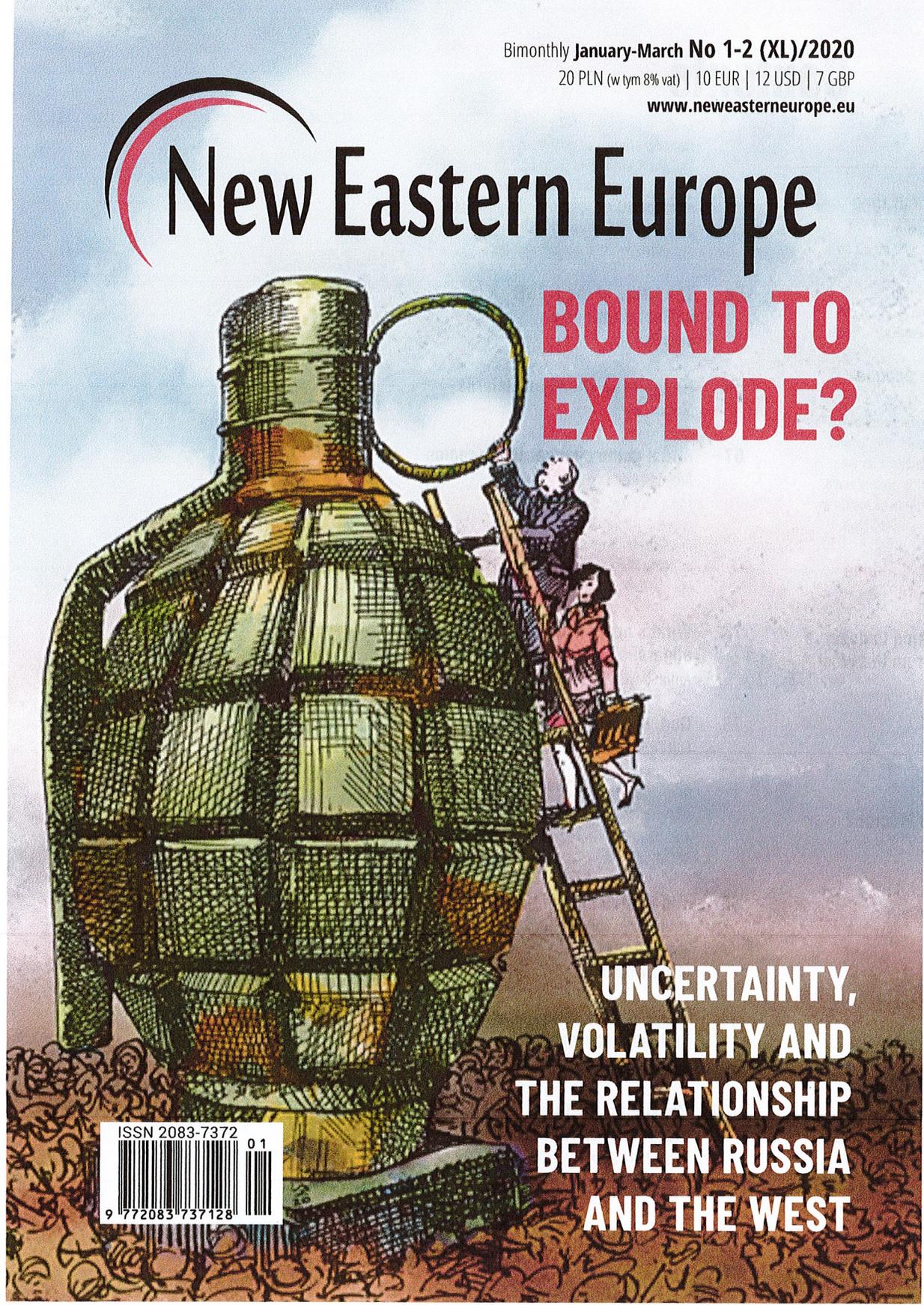
BOUND TO EXPLODE?

UNCERTAINTY, VOLATILITY AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE WEST

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Contents

Opinion and Analysis

7 The West Berlins of our time

An interview with Brian Whitmore

“What would be helpful would be a serious recognition on the part of the West that Ukraine and Moldova are the front lines in a war of governance that is going on right now between Russia and the West.”

14 The end of the belle époque

Paweł Kowal

It seems that the latest belle époque in western history is nearing its end, which could mean the end of the West as we know it. If the current trends continue we can only await the melancholy of the fin de siècle before another massive change.

A renewed strategic dialogue with Russia? A debate

23 Putin has done nothing to deserve an extended hand from the West

David J. Kramer

28 France-Russia, a love-hate history

Cyrille Bret

31 To Macron or not to Macron?

Liana Fix

34 How not to be a useful idiot in relations with Russia

Agnieszka Legucka

38 A “Grand Bargain”. What would Russia want?

Igor Gretskiy

40 A clash of narratives

Wojciech Michnik

In the clash of narratives between Russia and NATO states, Moscow has clearly gained an upper hand. Russian

success stems not only from the fact that the Kremlin has been able to send a much clearer and more coherent message than the Alliance, but also because NATO states do not have one narrative, or counter-narrative.

53 The battle of the USSR in Georgia rages on

Beka Chedia

59 Rough road ahead for Belarus

Maxim Rust

67 A real game changer in the region

Adam Balcer

The economic diversification and growing relations with actors other than Russia presents both great opportunities and challenges to the Eastern Partnership states.

73 What’s next for Ukraine’s oligarchs?

Anton Naychuk

79 God, luck and Viktor Orbán

Edit Zgut

Over the last ten years, Hungary has become a textbook example of systemic corruption and clientelism in the heart of the European Union.

85 The intervention in Kosovo revisited. Twelve lessons for the future

Visar Xhambazi

94 Illegitimate election observation and conflict resolution

Daria Paprocka

102 Russia and its Tatar diaspora in Europe

Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik

A renewed strategic dialogue with Russia?

A debate

Putin has done nothing to deserve an extended hand from the West

DAVID J. KRAMER

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov visited Washington, DC last December for a meeting with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and a visit to the Oval Office with President Donald Trump. This was Lavrov's second such visit during the Trump administration; his first visit occurred in May 2017, when pictures emerged of him, Trump, and then-Russian Ambassador to the US, Sergei Kislyak, yucking it up in the White House the day after Trump fired the head of the FBI, James Comey. On this latest visit, Lavrov was seen smiling once again with Trump in a photo the American president tweeted out after the meeting. "Just had a very



Photo courtesy of David J. Kramer

good meeting with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and representatives of Russia. Discussed many items including Trade, Iran, North Korea, INF Treaty, Nuclear Arms Control, and Election Meddling. Look forward to continuing our dialogue in the near future!" Trump wrote.

The lack of any mention of Ukraine in Trump's tweet is striking, especially since Lavrov arrived in Washington the day after the meeting in Paris among Russian President Vladimir Putin, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and French President Emmanuel Macron. That meeting fell short of producing

any major breakthroughs toward ending Russia's war against Ukraine, though it did produce an exchange of prisoners on each side. The United States was not represented at that meeting.

Lavrov's meeting in the Oval Office is his second in three years. Zelenskyy, whom Trump promised to host in the Oval Office after the Ukrainian leader won the election with 73 per cent of the vote in April, still has not set foot in the White House. This became an issue, along with Trump's withholding of military aid to Ukraine, at the centre of Trump's impeachment before the US House of Representatives. Zelenskyy and Trump did meet in New York in September on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly meeting, for what proved to be an awkward encounter. The former Ukrainian foreign minister, Pavlo Klimkin, met with Trump in the Oval Office the day after Trump's first meeting with Lavrov in 2017. There are no known plans for the current Ukrainian foreign minister, Vadym Prystaiko, to visit DC and meet with Trump or Pompeo on the heels of Lavrov's latest visit. And Pompeo cancelled a plan visit to Ukraine in early January to focus on the crisis in the Middle East, his second such postponement of a trip to Kyiv in less than three months.

Why, one might ask, is the Russian foreign minister granted such an audience with the American president? What has Russia done to deserve such royal treatment? The short answer is absolutely nothing. That did not stop Pompeo from

making the following puzzling statement during a press conference following his meeting with Lavrov: "We should have a better relationship – the United States and Russia – than we have had in the last few years and we have been working on that." How can we have a better relationship when Russian forces still illegally occupy Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine? Russian forces also occupy 20 per cent of Georgian territory, a country it invaded in 2008. Russian security services attempted an assassination on British soil of a former Russian spy, Sergei Skripal, in 2018 and carried out the execution in Berlin last August of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, who fought with Chechen rebels and the Georgian military against Russian troops. Russia's readiness to carry out murders on western soil is matched by its brutal muscle-flexing in Syria. It props up Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro and supports the regimes in North Korea and Iran. It violates arms control agreements and engages in reckless military manoeuvres against Western territory, aircraft and vessels. The Kremlin's disinformation campaign and interference in western elections and efforts to sow discord in western societies have not slowed in the least. Finally, the human rights situation inside Russia has deteriorated significantly. If anything, Putin's brazen behaviour has only worsened. That is why, Secretary Pompeo, relations are not better.

Despite these glaring facts, Trump has been talking for years of how it would be "great" if Russia and the United States

got along. As long as Putin is in power, at least, however, US-Russian relations will not get better unless the United States sacrifices its values, interests, and countries along Russia's borders. Trump's desire for better relations with Putin has been matched more recently by Emmanuel Macron, who hosted Putin for a visit to southern France in August right before the G7 meeting. Both Macron and Trump have called for the return of the G8, which would mean bringing Russia back into the fold. Macron has insisted that Russia is "not NATO's enemy" and described the current strained relations with Moscow as "a profound strategic mistake". In an interview with *The Economist* in late November, Macron said, "If we want to build peace in Europe, to rebuild European strategic autonomy, we need to reconsider our position with Russia."

Merkel had been the glue holding EU sanctions together, but as her term winds down, her effectiveness and power are also in decline. Germany is moving ahead toward the final stages of the Nord Stream II pipeline, a project that would do serious harm to Ukraine and other countries by making them unnecessary for transiting Russian gas to Europe. The US Congress imposed sanctions on companies involved in that pipeline at the end of last year. But there have been no new significant sanctions imposed on the Putin regime for its ongoing aggression against Ukraine; instead, there are growing calls to lift those sanctions already in place. "The time has come for

the German government to pressure the EU for a partial lifting of the sanctions [on Russia]," long-time Christian Social Union politician, Peter Ramsauer, told Reuters. Last spring, Germany and France led the push to allow Russia back into the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) despite Putin's continued occupation of Ukrainian and Georgian territory, as well as his atrocious human rights record in Russia.

Instead of **pressuring Putin** ahead of the recent Normandy meeting, western leaders were leaning on Zelenskyy to resolve the crisis with Russia.

We see western advocates of "Let Russia be Russia" push for a return to business as usual with Putin, urging, for example, that NATO close the door on countries aspiring to join the Alliance, like Ukraine and Georgia, to remove a major irritant in Russia's relations with the West. Talk of closer Russian-Chinese ties, often exaggerated, is frequently cited as an additional reason to kiss and make up with Russia. As a result, instead of pressuring Putin ahead of the recent Normandy meeting, western leaders were leaning on Zelenskyy to resolve the crisis with Russia so that they can

justify normalisation of relations. The political scandal in Washington has revealed how Trump – notwithstanding his providing military assistance to Ukraine in contrast to his predecessor, Barack Obama – does not have Zelenskyy’s back and distrusts Ukraine. Ahead of the Normandy gathering, western leaders should have threatened more sanctions on Putin’s regime if Russian forces did not withdraw from occupying Ukrainian territory. Instead, they gave Zelenskyy the impression that their patience with Ukraine is running short.

Putin senses that western leaders are eager to return to **business as usual** with Russia and all he needs to do is wait them out.

Making matters worse was the NATO meeting in London in early December where open disagreements among NATO allies were on display, starting with Macron’s description of the alliance suffering from “brain death”. Differences between Trump and Macron, along with the Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, suggested an alliance too busy fighting among itself than focused on the threat coming from Moscow. In the declaration issued at the end of the meeting, there was a noteworthy mention

that “Russia’s aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security” and a reference of Russia’s violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. But a paragraph later, the Allies stated, “We remain open for dialogue, and to a constructive relationship with Russia when Russia’s actions make that possible.” Aside from Macron, member states largely ignored Moscow’s wooing of Istanbul, which is posing a serious challenge to the Alliance’s cohesion. After the NATO meeting, Hungary’s foreign minister pledged that his government would block Ukraine’s membership in NATO until Kyiv restored the rights of the roughly 150,000 ethnic Hungarians over language issues. Putin must have been smiling.

The West has a much stronger hand to play vis-à-vis Russia but chooses not to play it; Putin, on the other hand, plays his weaker cards comparatively well, though one should not exaggerate Russia’s gains. The problem is more of western losses – of confidence, of unity, of sense of purpose, of values and principles. Putin senses that western leaders are eager to return to business as usual with Russia and all he needs to do is wait them out. In the process, however, the West risks sacrificing Ukraine and other countries along Russia’s borders. It looks the other way amid Russian war crimes and atrocities in Syria. It denounces Russian disinformation and interference campaigns but signals a total lack of resolve in dealing with the threat posed by Putin.

In late November 2019, Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov received the Sakharov Prize in Strasbourg, France, awarded to him last year by the European Parliament but which he was only able to receive recently because he had been held illegally in a Russian prison for more than five years until his release in September. His warning at that ceremony is worth bearing in mind as western leaders prostrate themselves in front of Putin: “Every time, when some of you think about stretching out a hand of friendship to Putin over our heads, you should remember each of the 13,000 killed in Ukraine, the hundreds of our boys kept in prisons, who may be tor-

tured as we speak, the Crimean Tatars, who may at this very moment be arrested.”

Putin deserves no praise for releasing Sentsov and other Ukrainians in September nor those released in December – they never should have been taken hostage in the first place. Putin has done nothing – repeat nothing – to deserve a return to normal relations with the West. His actions and behaviour have only gotten worse and more aggressive and threatening. This argues for an even tougher policy from the West – but the chances of that happening any time soon, sadly, with the current roster of western leaders are close to zero. 

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