

Article by Vladimir Putin "Being Open, Despite the Past"

An article by the President of Russia has been published in the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit and is timed to coincide with the 80th anniversary of the beginning of the Great Patriotic war.

June 22, 2021 10:30

Being Open, Despite the Past

On June 22, 1941, exactly 80 years ago, the Nazis, having conquered practically the whole of Europe, attacked the USSR. For the Soviet people the Great Patriotic War – the bloodiest one in the history of our country – began. Tens of millions of people lost their lives, the economic potential of the country and its cultural property were severely damaged.

We are proud of the courage and steadfastness of the heroes of the Red Army and home front workers who not only defended the independence and dignity of our homeland, but also saved Europe and the world from enslavement. Despite attempts to rewrite the pages of the past that are being made today, the truth is that Soviet soldiers came to Germany not to take revenge on the Germans, but with a noble and great mission of liberation. We hold sacred the memory of the heroes who fought against Nazism. We remember with gratitude our allies in the anti-Hitler coalition, participants in the Resistance movement, and German anti-fascists who brought our common victory closer.

Having lived through the horrors of the world war, the peoples of Europe were nevertheless able to overcome alienation and restore mutual trust and respect. They set a course for integration in order to draw a final line under the European tragedies of the first half of the last century. And I would like to emphasize that the historical reconciliation of our people with the Germans living both in the east and the west of modern united Germany played a huge role in the formation of such Europe.

I would also like to remind that it was German entrepreneurs who became "pioneers" of cooperation with our country in the post-war years. In 1970, the USSR and the Federal Republic of Germany concluded a "deal of the century" on long-term natural gas supplies to Europe that laid the foundation for constructive interdependence and initiated many future grand projects, including the construction of the Nord Stream gas pipeline.

We hoped that the end of the Cold War would be a common victory for Europe. It seemed that just a little more effort was needed to make Charles de Gaulle's dream of a single continent – not even geographically "from the Atlantic to the Urals", but culturally and civilizationally "from Lisbon to Vladivostok" – become a reality.

It is exactly with this logic in mind – the logic of building a Greater Europe united by common values and interests – that Russia has sought to develop its relations with the Europeans. Both Russia and the EU have done a lot on this path.

But a different approach has prevailed. It was based on the expansion of the North Atlantic Alliance which was itself a relic of the Cold War. After all, it was specifically created for the confrontation of that era.

It was the bloc's movement eastwards – which, by the way, began when the Soviet leadership was actually persuaded to accept the united Germany's accession to NATO – that turned into the main reason for the rapid increase in mutual mistrust in Europe. Verbal promises made in that time such as "this is not directed against you" or "the bloc's borders will not get closer to you" were quickly forgotten. But a precedent was set.

And since 1999, five more “waves” of NATO expansion have followed. Fourteen new countries, including the former Soviet Union republics, joined the organization, effectively dashing hopes for a continent without dividing lines. Interestingly, this was warned about in the mid-1980s by Egon Bahr, one of the SPD leaders, who proposed a radical restructuring of the entire European security system after German unification, involving both the USSR and the United States. But no one in the USSR, the USA or Europe was willing to listen to him at the time.

Moreover, many countries were put before the artificial choice of being either with the collective West or with Russia. In fact, it was an ultimatum. The Ukrainian tragedy of 2014 is an example of the consequences that this aggressive policy has led to. Europe actively supported the unconstitutional armed coup in Ukraine. This was where it all started. Why was it necessary to do this? Then incumbent president Yanukovich had already accepted all the demands of the opposition. Why did the USA organize the coup and the European countries weak-heartedly support it, provoking a split within Ukraine and the withdrawal of Crimea?

The whole system of European security has now degraded significantly. Tensions are rising and the risks of a new arms race are becoming real. We are missing out on the tremendous opportunities that cooperation offers – all the more important now that we are all facing common challenges, such as the pandemic and its dire social and economic consequences.

Why does this happen? And most importantly, what conclusions should we draw together? What lessons of history should we recall? I think, first and foremost, that the entire post-war history of Greater Europe confirms that prosperity and security of our common continent is only possible through the joint efforts of all countries, including Russia. Because Russia is one of the largest countries in Europe. And we are aware of our inseparable cultural and historical connection to Europe.

We are open to honest and constructive interaction. This is confirmed by our idea of creating a common space of cooperation and security from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean which would comprise various integration formats, including the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union.

I reiterate that Russia is in favour of restoring a comprehensive partnership with Europe. We have many topics of mutual interest. These include security and strategic stability, healthcare and education, digitalization, energy, culture, science and technology, resolution of climate and environmental issues.

The world is a dynamic place, facing new challenges and threats. We simply cannot afford to carry the burden of past misunderstandings, hard feelings, conflicts, and mistakes. It is a burden that will prevent us from concentrating on the challenges at hand. We are convinced that we all should recognize these mistakes and correct them. Our common and indisputable goal is to ensure security on the continent without dividing lines, a common space for equitable cooperation and inclusive development for the prosperity of Europe and the world as a whole.

Publication status

Published in sections: News, Transcripts

Publication date: June 22, 2021, 10:30

Direct link: en.kremlin.ru/d/65899
