

Remarks of Ukrainian World Congress President Eugene Czolij
before the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy
of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)
on 7 December 2015 in Brussels, Belgium

Honourable Chair:

Distinguished Members of the Committee:

I first wish to thank the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and its Chair for the invitation to address your Committee today.

I noted with particular interest the following words in your invitation: “the Committee will hold an exchange of views, in the context of the preparation of a report [...] on the *Political consequences of the crisis in Ukraine*”.

In my opinion, the current title of your report necessarily refers to the “*crisis in Ukraine*” that was resolved in February 2014 with the victory of the EuroMaidan when Ukrainians unequivocally decided to move forward toward Europe and not backward to a reconstituted Soviet Union. This prompted Russia to respond with its hybrid warfare against Ukraine.

You will recall that a decade ago, President Vladimir Putin declared that “*the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century*”. He then predicted that by 2015 the Soviet Union would be recreated under a new name, the *Eurasian Economic Union*, composed of former Soviet republics, including Ukraine. A crucial step in that direction was to ensure that the *EU-Ukraine Association Agreement* be frustrated and Ukraine integrated as a member of the Russia-dominated *Customs Union*.

As soon as President Putin realized that his imperialist world vision was shattered by Ukraine’s EuroMaidan, he sent his “*little green men*” into Crimea in February 2014. The failure of the international community to immediately respond in a meaningful way to this invasion emboldened Russia to conquer more territory, this time in Eastern Ukraine starting in April 2014.

In August 2014, Ukraine was on the verge of taking back its entire Eastern region when Russia sent in its regular troops. The Kremlin then persistently violated the Minsk Agreements, conquering over 700 additional square kilometers of territory. Even during the current period of pseudo-calm, about 30 to 40 firing incidents occur daily from the Russian side, and Ukrainians continue to be killed.

This is not surprising since the aim of President Putin is still to destabilize Ukraine, render it a failed state, and then re-conquer it.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs provided the following figures to summarize the dramatic consequences of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine as at 31 October 2015: 7,883 people killed, 17,610 people wounded, 1.5 million internally displaced persons, including 194,000 children, 5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, and 30,000 hectares contaminated by landmines.

According to Ukrainian government authorities, Ukraine spends more than US \$4.7 million daily to protect itself in its Anti-Terrorist Operation against Russian forces.

In addition, a joint mission of the UN, the EU and the World Bank estimated that the cost of recovery for the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Eastern Ukraine as a result of Russian aggression was US \$1.5 billion.

Therefore, this Committee needs to assess the current situation in Ukraine based on the premise that Ukraine is a victim of foreign aggression and not merely “*in crisis*”.

I also wish to stress that Russian aggression in Ukraine is not an isolated event. It is part of a broader pattern that threatens international stability in Europe and beyond.

Russia’s first overt violation of the territorial integrity of a sovereign country after the Second World War occurred when it sent its army to seize Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia in August 2008.

Another violation with a significant international impact occurred in Ukraine’s Donetsk region in July 2014 with the downing of flight MH-17 by Russia-backed terrorists, killing all 298 passengers and crew members from 10 different countries.

A month later, in August 2014, President Putin declared that there had never been a country called Kazakhstan. Those words take on an even more menacing meaning when one recalls that in April 2008, during the Bucharest NATO Summit, Prime Minister Putin told U.S. President George Bush: “*You have to understand, George. Ukraine is not even a country.*”

Moreover, in the first 6 months of 2015, NATO intercepted 250 Russian planes violating European, Canadian and U.S. airspace, which constitutes the greatest number of such violations since the end of the Cold War.

These violations are not coincidental as they are consistent with President Putin's mission based on his repeated assertions that he has both a right and a duty to “*protect ethnic Russians and Russian speakers*”, wherever they may be. This dangerous statement threatens not only Ukraine, but also Bulgaria, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, among others.

Russia is also waging an information war in order to destabilize Ukraine and undermine the unity of the Western world. In 2014 alone, Russia dedicated 643 million Euros from its state budget to support the promotion by Russian media of President Putin's “*Russkiy Mir*” or “*Russian World*”.

Furthermore, Russia has resorted to international kidnappings, illegal imprisonments, torture, show trials and scandalous court sentences against many Ukrainians, including, most notably, Nadiya Savchenko, a member of both the Ukrainian Parliament and the Ukrainian delegation to the PACE Parliamentary Assembly, Oleh Sentsov, a known filmmaker, as well as Oleksandr Kolchenko, Gennady Afanasyev, Oleksy Chirniy and others.

Russia has also launched a new wave of persecution and intimidation against Ukrainian activists in Russia, including home searches, property seizures, detentions and bans on entry to the country. For instance, Russian forces raided the Library of Ukrainian Literature in Moscow in search of alleged “*anti-Russian propaganda*”. In addition, Russian authorities created a so-called “*patriotic stop list*” aimed at curbing the activities of “*unwelcome*” foreign NGOs in Russia.

In light of all of the above, in July 2015, during his confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Joseph Dunford, the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated that Moscow’s conduct in Ukraine and in Eastern Europe was “*nothing short of alarming*,” adding that

“Russia presents the greatest threat to our national security” and “could pose an existential threat to the United States.”

Since the end of the Cold War, European and U.S. policy toward Russia has been grounded in a fundamental respect for independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of states. With his hybrid warfare, President Putin has changed these rules of global order and created an international crisis. Clearly, the Kremlin has aggressive revisionist geopolitical objectives in Europe and Eurasia and wishes to regain Russia’s past sphere of influence over the post-Soviet space.

I therefore recommend that your Committee rename its report to read: *“Geopolitical consequences of the international crisis caused by Russian aggression against Ukraine”*.

I also encourage this Committee to show principled leadership by advocating that the international community should be resolute and unwavering in its determination to eradicate all forms of terrorism and prevent senseless violence and terrible human suffering.

Such determination needs to be even stronger and totally uncompromising in the face of state-sponsored terrorism, including the terrorists in Eastern Ukraine, who are fully backed, trained, equipped and financed by Russia.

If the international community compromises on these principles and adopts a policy of appeasement toward President Putin with respect to Russia’s illegal occupation of Crimea and military aggression in Eastern Ukraine in a misguided attempt to strengthen its fight against ISIS, we could face the same tragic consequences of similar policies of appeasement followed by Europe that led to the Second World War.

Indeed, if the international community does not help Ukraine protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity by forcing President Putin to remove his military forces from Eastern Ukraine and return Crimea to Ukraine, Russia will be further emboldened to continue threatening peace and security in other regions of Europe and elsewhere.

For example, in light of the recent Russo-Turkish confrontation, it is quite conceivable that President Putin could challenge Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, leading to several possible consequences, such as the triggering of a Third World War or the disintegration of NATO if it should fail to come to the assistance of a NATO member country – one of President Putin’s primary objectives.

I therefore call upon this Committee to clearly state in its report that the international community must remain united in imposing further and decisive economic sanctions against Russia that would make it prohibitive for Russia to pursue its imperialistic plans, and compel it to withdraw its military forces from Ukraine and fully respect Ukraine’s independence and territorial integrity.

Finally, in view of the devastation that Russia’s aggression has inflicted on Ukraine, I encourage this Committee to recommend in its report that the international community should initiate the equivalent of a Marshall Plan for Ukraine to help it to overcome its current economic crisis and implement the necessary reforms that would enable it to become a successful and fully-integrated European country.