

The concept of limit

By the time of the publication of this opinion piece, the State of the Union speech would have been delivered by the President of the European Commission.

Undoubtedly, I am tempted to guess what the subject of the speech would entail. However, I will limit myself to briefly outline what happened since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the ensuing political and economic effects of the sanctions imposed on Russia.



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This week Ukraine made some important advancement and managed to recapture occupied territory in the Kharkiv region. Media reports explained that Ukraine used a disinformation campaign to derail Russian forces from the real target. Undoubtedly, it is a smart move to disrupt the invader and recapture additional occupied territory. Also, it was reported that in retaliation, Russian forces targeted civilian infrastructure including power stations, leaving many civilians deprived of basic utilities.

In the run up of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, I explicitly stated that the context was different relative to 2014 and that this occurrence would certainly lead to a protracted war. Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, President Putin was calling for legal security guarantees, with one of the conditions being that Ukraine does not join NATO. Under international law every sovereign country has the right to choose its own security path not least Ukraine. And if Ukraine felt under threat following the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the fragile security situation in its eastern parts, then it was quite le-

gitimate to pursue a path that would help her strengthen its own security.

On the other hand, Russia was interpreting the content of the Istanbul document differently. Russia's topmost diplomat Sergey Lavrov explained that the wording in the document is quite clear; a country cannot strengthen its security at the detriment of another. Sergey Lavrov reiterated that if Ukraine joins NATO with the aim of strengthening its security, that is only being done at the detriment of Russia's security. He further stated that the indivisibility concept applies to the transatlantic, as well, not just to the Europeans and that is obviously a reference to NATO. The ambiguity in the interpretation of the document certainly does not justify the invasion of the territorial integrity of a sovereign country.

On my social media page, avid followers of international affairs, are leaving messages that Ukraine needs more weapons to deter Russia and to counter its arms aggression. Yes, Ukraine needs to defend itself. However, more weaponry is not going to solve the war and it is only a temporary measure. We need a permanent solution and that is only possible through diplomacy. We need the right interlocutor that can position herself, as an honest broker to negotiate and seal a peace agreement. Europe lacks leadership. Certainly, I have a name in mind that could step

in as a reliable interlocutor, but it would not go down well with some characters in and within the perimeter of the Berlaymont building.

On Monday I bumped into someone who is quite into the topic, and he mentioned to me the word limit. Notwithstanding that I agreed with him, mockingly I replied that we are not in the mathematical economics classes listening about the concept of a derivative, defined as the limit of a difference quotient. However, he is completely right. There is a limit to everything in life. A limit to accept Russia's bullying. A limit to being submissive. A limit to intolerance. A limit to an escalatory narrative. And a limit to avoid economic and financial bankruptcy.

We argued that if the EU is not going to seriously step in to financially help its own people, and balance the funds channelled for military assistance – at least in the short to medium term – the surge of far-right politics in Europe is disturbingly inevitable. And this will further exacerbate the problem because the ones that will be affected most are the minorities and vulnerable people. Let's not go that far and see what is happening on our doorstep in Italy with Meloni and Salvini. And if we want to go a little far away from Malta, the far-right party in Sweden seems to have registered significant gains in a tightly contested election. Also, few days ago, tens of thousands of protestors from



across the political spectrum demonstrated in the Czech Republic against the government to bring energy prices under control, while voicing their opposition to the EU and NATO. Meanwhile, another movement to not pay the energy bills grew in its attractiveness and it is spreading across the European continent including Belgium.

Clearly, Russia is cognisant of its strong positioning to influence gas prices and therefore they are disrupting the prices to further cripple the European economy. However, Russia's weaponization of gas supplies is puerile, and it is obviously a reprisal in response to the EU sanctions. To respond to Russia's closure of gas flows through Nord Stream 1, the EU decided to issue stricter visa processing for Russian nationals, applying a rigid assessment citing security risks for this decision. This could lead to visa refusal, as well as to the revocation of existing valid visas. Likewise, the EU said that Russian applicants travelling for non-essential reasons will also face a longer and more thorough process for lodging applications.

In addition, during the last Gymnich (informal foreign affairs meeting), as well as the informal defence meeting, the High Representative touted the idea of a training mission

in Ukraine, to primarily train the Ukrainian armed forces. Also, Mr. Borrell hinted about the replenishment of the current EU's stock of equipment given that several military provisions were supplied to Ukraine. Frankly, there are no two ways about it. The idea is to propose the replenishment of the European Peace Facility's budget. The EPF is an instrument outside the EU budget given that lethal weapons cannot be financed through the latter. Before I left my post, the amount in the EPF stood at around five billion euro. Today, only those involved would be privy to the exact balance left in the EPF's accounts. Hence, EU member states are expected to receive a proposal to replenish the budget of the EPF either with the same amount, or somewhere close to it.

And this brings me once again to the word limit. What is the limit that the EU decided to set in terms of committed appropriations for the spending of security needs, relative to the EU citizens' basic economic and financial needs? Genuinely, I hope that this is a calculated brinkmanship. If not, the EU's safety limits are about to be exceeded, and the decisions taken might rebound to a point of dragging the European continent closer to a political and economic danger zone.