

*Note: Sergei decided to write this general letter in response to my request for a comment. He was one of the group who came to Oxford in November 2014. He is no longer at PSU but works freelance (as a political analyst I presume). He specifically asked me to publicise the letter and to use his name.*

Perm, Russia, 26/02/2022

My dear international friends.

All those I have met and worked with in Switzerland, UK, USA, Germany, France, Poland, Latvia, Bulgaria, as well as my friends from Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia and other countries. 48 hours ago the world changed. Russia has started a war with Ukraine. There is no justification for it and there can be no justification for it! This is a humanitarian disaster! I and the vast majority of my friends, colleagues and acquaintances do not support this war. The bloodshed must stop! We need peace!

I have lost several friends and acquaintances over the past few months because of COVID-19, now I have the feeling that I am losing my country and its future. This war is a cruel, senseless and criminal gamble. And I am well aware that Russia has already lost it and that the consequences will be dire and last for years. I, my family, my fellow citizens, will pay a heavy price.

All these two days, I can't think of anything else, trying to make any sense out of what is happening. Yes, the political and international situation has been difficult. Since 2014, when the DNR and LNR emerged with Russia's active help, it has been a constant point of tension. The second factor is Ukraine's increasing orientation towards Europe and the US, which has proved unacceptable to President Putin, who continues to perceive it as a breakaway piece of the Soviet Union, whose collapse he considers the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. Ukraine's withdrawal from Russia's sphere of political influence is unpleasant in itself, but it poses even greater strategic threats on the level of Russia-NATO relations on the European continent. The whole conflict resembles a Russian Matryoshka doll, which has several sprawling levels: LNR and DNR - Ukraine and Russia - Russia and NATO. All these issues have different agendas and must be resolved at different negotiating tables. Putin has decided to eliminate them with one blow. This is often the case in Russia, the more complex and confusing the problem, the more primitive the solution. Recognize the LNR and DNR, bring Ukraine back under Russian control and have the European security architecture revised. European politicians, it seems to me, have failed to appreciate this scale, and have focused on the problems at the Russian-Ukrainian border, whereas the battlefield for Putin has long stretched much further.

Does he want to take over Europe? I think not. But he is willing to wage such a fight for the Russian world that no stone will be left unturned. As strange as it may seem to write under the circumstances, Putin genuinely loves Russia. In his perceptions, he is protecting it from a future imminent threat from the West. The problem is that these perceptions are built on Cold War stereotypes, his own understanding of history, his service to the Soviet KGB, his detachment from the country's internal problems, his phobias and fears.

Because of this preoccupation with the future, real people on both sides are dying today. The worst thing is that the data on the deaths of Russian soldiers are classified. We do not know how many young guys will die these days for the sake of another "bright future". The lightning offensive did not work; the operation to demilitarise military facilities turned into protracted fighting in the cities, which inevitably increases the number of casualties, with the prospect of becoming a second Afghanistan for Russia. According to reports on social media (I understand that they cannot be fully trusted), we may already be talking about thousands of dead Russian soldiers. For Russia, which has just lost over a million people to COVID-19, this is a new national tragedy.

Anyone who survives will be impoverished. On the first day, the war caused the rouble to plummet, the Moscow Stock Exchange cancelled trading, and the capitalization of major

Russian companies collapsed by 6.6 trillion roubles. This is the record collapse since 2008. A number of Western countries, including the UK and the US, have announced serious new sanctions against Russia. Inflation in 2022 is forecast at 10-15%. Yes, Russia has accumulated large reserves in the Sovereign Wealth Fund, but even these will not last long in the face of international isolation and a ban on equipment and technology supplies. Many industries will shut down and hundreds of thousands of people will lose their jobs. In the international arena, Russia is becoming a pariah. The question of expelling Russian athletes from world sport has already been raised. Musicians' concerts are being cancelled. Humanitarian, cultural and educational ties are being severed. Even air links with Europe are already in question. All relations that have been built up over many years are being suspended and severed. The main task of any politician is to increase the number of friends. In this case we have a complete failure of international politics. Not a single country supported Putin's operation. Even President Lukashenko, who is totally dependent on Moscow, distanced himself. In this isolation, all social institutions, which were already not in the best shape, will start to degrade quickly, and the number of local conflicts and problems will increase.

Most importantly, the political regime's main backbone - "Russia, the country that defeated fascism" - would be destroyed. Pride of victory in 1945, the annual parades on May 9, all this will collapse and we will experience an unprecedented humiliation both before the memory of our ancestors and before the future of our children.

This madness must be stopped as soon as possible. No more war!

I just want you to know that most Russians don't want this war. We love our children and want a peaceful sky for them so that they live in friendship with all people around the world! Peace!

With respect, Sergei Ponomarev