
DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

THERE
IS NO
LIBERAL
WORLD
ORDER

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defend themselves,
the forces of autocracy
will destroy them.*

BY ANNE
APPLEBAUM

In February 1994, in the grand ballroom of the town hall in Hamburg, Germany, the president of Estonia gave a remarkable speech. Standing before an audience in evening dress, Lennart Meri praised the values of the democratic world that Estonia then aspired to join. "The freedom of every individual, the freedom of the economy and trade, as well as the freedom of the mind, of culture and science, are inseparably interconnected," he told the

burghers of Hamburg. “They form the prerequisite of a viable democracy.” His country, having regained its independence from the Soviet Union three years earlier, believed in these values: “The Estonian people never abandoned their faith in this freedom during the decades of totalitarian oppression.”

But Meri had also come to deliver a warning: Freedom in Estonia, and in Europe, could soon be under threat. Russian President Boris Yeltsin and the circles around him were returning to the language of imperialism, speaking of Russia as *primus inter pares*—the first among equals—in the former Soviet empire. In 1994, Moscow was already seething with the language of resentment, aggression, and imperial nostalgia; the Russian state was developing an illiberal vision of the world, and even then was preparing to enforce it. Meri called on the democratic world to push back: The West should “make it emphatically clear to the Russian leadership that another imperialist expansion will not stand a chance.”

At that, the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, Vladimir Putin, got up and walked out of the hall.

Meri’s fears were at that time shared in all of the formerly captive nations of Central and Eastern Europe, and they were strong enough to persuade governments in Estonia, Poland, and elsewhere to campaign for admission to NATO. They succeeded because nobody in Washington, London, or Berlin believed that the new members mattered. The Soviet Union was gone, the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg was not an important person, and Estonia would never need to be defended. That was why neither

Bill Clinton nor George W. Bush made much attempt to arm or reinforce the new NATO members. Only in 2014 did the Obama administration finally place a small number of American troops in the region, largely in an effort to reassure allies after the first Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Nobody else anywhere in the Western world felt any threat at all. For 30 years, Western oil and gas companies piled into Russia, partnering with Russian oligarchs who had openly stolen the assets they controlled. Western financial institutions did lucrative business in Russia too, setting up systems to allow those same Russian kleptocrats to export their stolen money and keep it parked, anonymously, in Western property and banks. We convinced ourselves that there was no harm in enriching dictators and their cronies. Trade, we imagined, would transform our trading partners. Wealth would bring liberalism. Capitalism would bring democracy—and democracy would bring peace.

After all, it had happened before. Following the cataclysm of 1939–45, Europeans had indeed collectively abandoned wars of imperial, territorial conquest. They stopped dreaming of eliminating one another. Instead, the continent that had been the source of the two worst wars the world had ever known created the European Union, an organization designed to find negotiated solutions to conflicts and promote cooperation, commerce, and trade. Because of Europe’s metamorphosis—and especially because of the extraordinary transformation of Germany from a Nazi dictatorship into the engine

of the continent’s integration and prosperity—Europeans and Americans alike believed that they had created a set of rules that would preserve peace not only on their own continents, but eventually in the whole world.

This liberal world order relied on the mantra of “Never again.” Never again would there be genocide. Never again would large nations erase smaller nations from the map. Never again would we be taken in by dictators who used the language of mass murder. At least in Europe, we would know how to react when we heard it.

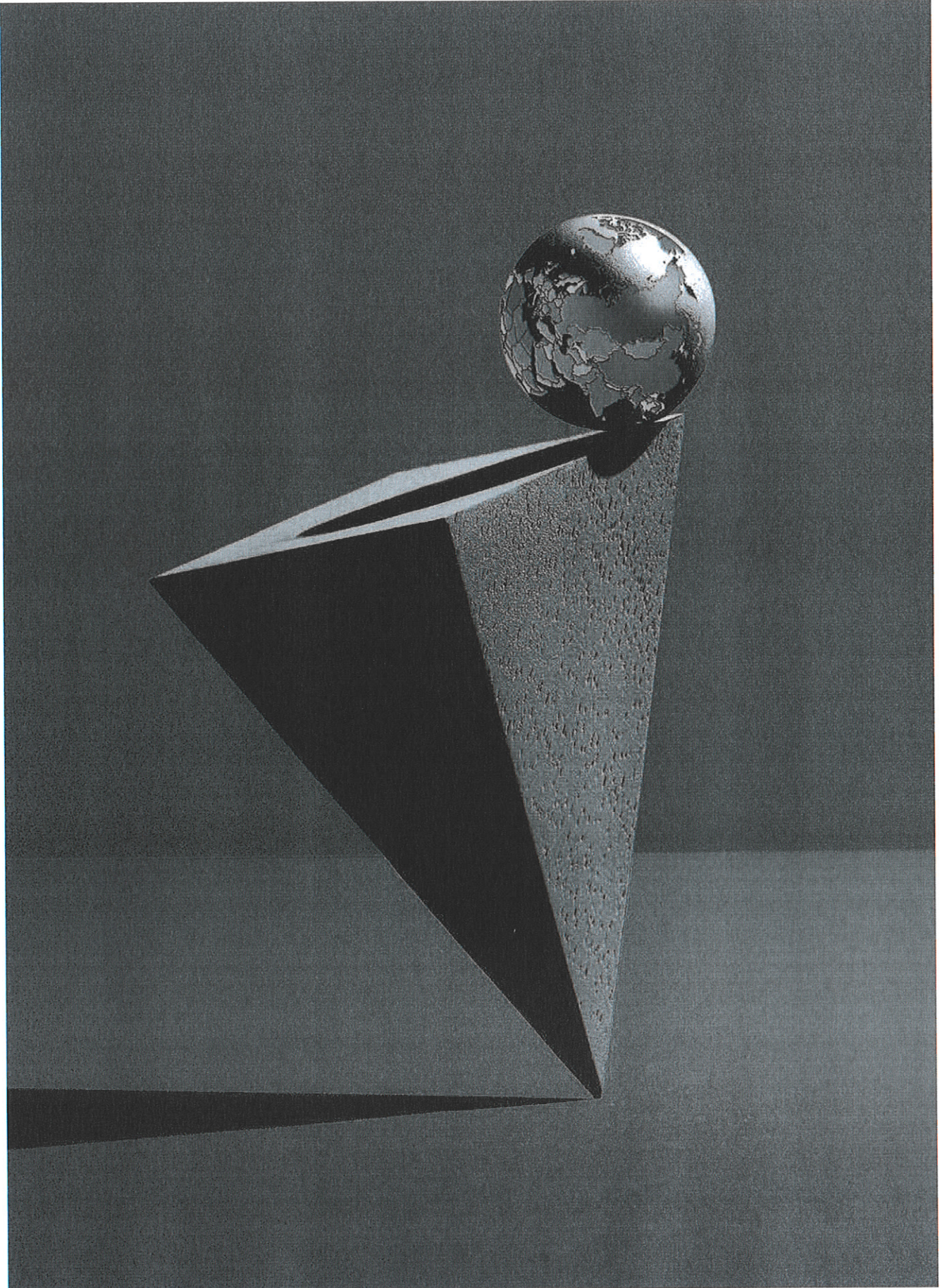
But while we were happily living under the illusion that “Never again” meant something real, the leaders of Russia, owners of the world’s largest nuclear arsenal, were reconstructing an army and a propaganda machine designed to facilitate mass murder, as well as a mafia state controlled by a tiny number of men and bearing no resemblance to Western capitalism. For a long time—too long—the custodians of the liberal world order refused to understand these changes. They looked away when Russia “pacified” Chechnya by murdering tens of thousands of people. When Russia bombed schools and hospitals in Syria, Western leaders decided that that wasn’t their problem. When Russia invaded Ukraine the first time, they found reasons not to worry. Surely Putin would be satisfied by the annexation of Crimea. When Russia invaded Ukraine the second time, occupying part of the Donbas, they were sure he would be sensible enough to stop.

Even when the Russians, having grown rich on the kleptocracy we facilitated, bought Western politicians, funded

far-right extremist movements, and ran disinformation campaigns during American and European democratic elections, the leaders of America and Europe still refused to take them seriously. It was just some posts on Facebook; so what? We didn’t believe that we were at war with Russia. We believed, instead, that we were safe and free, protected by treaties, by border guarantees, and by the norms and rules of the liberal world order.

WITH THE THIRD, more brutal invasion of Ukraine, the vacuity of those beliefs was revealed. The Russian president openly denied the existence of a legitimate Ukrainian state: “Russians and Ukrainians,” he said, “were one people—a single whole.” His army targeted civilians, hospitals, and schools. His policies aimed to create refugees so as to destabilize Western Europe. “Never again” was exposed as an empty slogan while a genocidal plan took shape in front of our eyes, right along the European Union’s eastern border. Other autocracies watched to see what we would do about it, for Russia is not the only nation in the world that covets its neighbors’ territory, that seeks to destroy entire populations, that has no qualms about the use of mass violence. North Korea can attack South Korea at any time, and has nuclear weapons that can hit Japan. China seeks to eliminate the Uyghurs as a distinct ethnic group, and has imperial designs on Taiwan.

We can’t turn the clock back to 1994, to see what would have happened had we heeded Lennart Meri’s warning. But we can face the future with honesty. We can name the challenges and prepare to meet them.



There is no natural liberal world order, and there are no rules without someone to enforce them. Unless democracies defend themselves together, the forces of autocracy will destroy them. I am using the word *forces*, in the plural, deliberately. Many American politicians would understandably prefer to focus on the long-term competition with China. But as long as Russia is ruled by Putin, then Russia is at war with us too. So are Belarus, North Korea, Venezuela, Iran, Nicaragua, Hungary, and potentially many others. We might not want to compete with them, or even care very much about them. But they care about us. They understand that the language of democracy, anti-corruption, and justice is dangerous to their form of autocratic power—and they know that that language originates in the democratic world, our world.

This fight is not theoretical. It requires armies, strategies, weapons, and long-term plans. It requires much closer allied cooperation, not only in Europe but in the Pacific, Africa, and Latin America. NATO can no longer operate as if it might someday be required to defend itself; it needs to start operating as it did during the Cold War, on the assumption that an invasion could happen at any time. Germany's decision to raise defense spending by 100 billion euros is a good start; so is Denmark's declaration that it too will boost defense spending. But deeper military and intelligence coordination might require new institutions—perhaps a voluntary European Legion, connected to the European Union, or a Baltic alliance that includes Sweden and Finland—and different thinking about where

and how we invest in European and Pacific defense.

If we don't have any means to deliver our messages to the autocratic world, then no one will hear them. Much as we assembled the Department of Homeland Security out of disparate agencies after 9/11, we now need to pull together the disparate parts of the U.S. government that think about communication, not to do propaganda but to reach more people around the world with better information and to stop autocracies from distorting that knowledge. Why haven't we built a Russian-language television station to compete with Putin's propaganda? Why can't we produce more programming in Mandarin—or Uyghur? Our foreign-language broadcasters—Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Radio Marti in Cuba—need not only money for programming but a major investment in research. We know very little about Russian audiences—what they read, what they might be eager to learn.

Funding for education and culture needs rethinking too. Shouldn't there be a Russian-language university, in Vilnius or Warsaw, to house all the intellectuals and thinkers who have just left Moscow? Don't we need to spend more on education in Arabic, Hindi, Persian? So much of what passes for cultural diplomacy runs on autopilot. Programs should be recast for a different era, one in which, though the world is more knowable than ever before, dictatorships seek to hide that knowledge from their citizens.

Trading with autocrats promotes autocracy, not democracy. Congress has made some progress in recent months in

the fight against global kleptocracy, and the Biden administration was right to put the fight against corruption at the heart of its political strategy. But we can go much further, because there is no reason for

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any company, property, or trust ever to be held anonymously. Every U.S. state, and every democratic country, should immediately make all ownership transparent. Tax havens should be illegal. The only people who need to keep their houses, businesses, and income secret are crooks and tax cheats.

We need a dramatic and profound shift in our energy consumption, and not only because of climate change. The billions of dollars we have sent to Russia, Iran, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia have promoted some of the worst and most corrupt dictators in the world. The transition from oil and gas to other energy sources needs to happen with far greater speed

and decisiveness. Every dollar spent on Russian oil helps fund the artillery that fires on Ukrainian civilians.

Take democracy seriously. Teach it, debate it, improve it, defend it. Maybe there is no natural liberal world order, but there *are* liberal societies, open and free countries that offer a better chance for people to live useful lives than closed dictatorships do. They are hardly perfect; our own has deep flaws, profound divisions, terrible historical scars. But that's all the more reason to defend and protect them. Few of them have existed across human history; many have existed for a time and then failed. They can be destroyed from the outside, but from the inside, too, by divisions and demagogues.

Perhaps, in the aftermath of this crisis, we can learn something from the Ukrainians. For decades now, we've been fighting a culture war between liberal values on the one hand and muscular forms of patriotism on the other. The Ukrainians are showing us a way to have both. As soon as the attacks began, they overcame their many political divisions, which are no less bitter than ours, and they picked up weapons to fight for their sovereignty and their democracy. They demonstrated that it is possible to be a patriot and a believer in an open society, that a democracy can be stronger and fiercer than its opponents. Precisely because there is no liberal world order, no norms and no rules, we must fight ferociously for the values and the hopes of liberalism if we want our open societies to continue to exist. *A*

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