

Krasno Analysis:
Weekly Spotlight, No.4/2022
(February 15, 2022)



Olaf Scholz is no Neville Chamberlain: Germany will not appease Putin

(960 words)

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Within weeks of succeeding Angela Merkel in early December 2021, new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is confronting one of the most serious crises of the last few decades. **War in eastern Europe has become a distinct possibility.**

Russia, or so it seems, is on a **determined path to war**. How else could one interpret the 130.000 Russian troops amassed at the Russian-Ukrainian border, the simultaneous massive Russian maneuvers in Belarus, the naval maneuvers and other unusual activities in the Black Sea and Mediterranean and the deployment of tanks, heavy weaponry and much else, often less than 30 miles from the Ukrainian border?

Chancellor Scholz's cautious and careful maneuvering in such a dangerous situation has been much condemned in many quarters, not least in the U.S., the UK, Germany itself and eastern Europe. **Instead it should be welcomed.** Scholz is not about to do a deal with Putin when he meets him in the Kremlin on February 15, 2022.

The German chancellor is a **strong supporter of maintaining western unity** in the crisis. Scholz will not return waving a sheet of paper and declaring that he has achieved “peace for our time,” as Neville Chamberlain did on his return from his meeting with Hitler in Munich in September 1938. And, of course, whatever grim thoughts we may have about Putin, equating him with Hitler would be difficult to justify.

Scholz’s unexciting and low-profile if not rather boring approach is actually the right way of how to deal with the current crisis. Impulsive and emotional rhetoric of the kind sometimes used in London during the crisis by **Prime Minister Johnson** is counter-productive though of course he may succeed in deflecting attention from his serious domestic problems by portraying himself as a Churchillian statesman.

The dramatic Cold War-style reporting of **many U.S. media outlets**, where war promises to greatly increase viewer numbers, is not very helpful either. Despite his best intentions, **President Macron** gave in to the temptation to exaggerate the results of his crisis diplomacy with Putin, only to be rebuffed by the Kremlin within a few days. Unwittingly Macron thus contributed to the hyped-up atmosphere of our times.

And within Germany the frequent media interventions of former Chancellor **Gerhard Schroeder** are also contributing to a polarized and heated atmosphere. The former Chancellor is a close friend of Putin’s, holds senior positions at Nordstream and Rosneft and has recently been nominated to join the supervisory board of the Russian energy giant Gazprom.

Still, Scholz’s undramatic approach to the crisis has been severely criticized, both within and outside Germany. In particular, **his position on two important issues has been much attacked.**

While Berlin is Ukraine's largest financial benefactor, Germany has been condemned for not delivering weapons and also stopping Estonia from delivering German weapons to Ukraine. While this looks bad for the outside observer, it is a long-standing convention in German politics not to deliver arms to conflict areas. Ignoring this would cause Scholz **enormous domestic difficulties** with his two coalition partners, including Foreign Minister Baerbock of the Green party, the parliamentary opposition and not least the largely pacifistic German public.

Even more severely criticized has been Scholz's refusal to be publicly drawn on the future of **Nordstream II**, that highly controversial gas pipeline running directly from Russia to Germany and currently awaiting approval by the German regulatory authority.

When Scholz visited Washington recently **President Biden** promised to stop Nordstream II, if there were a full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Standing next to Biden, Scholz prevaricated and did not comment on the issue. Later over dinner he is supposed to have told Senator **Mitch McConnell** and other senators that of course Germany would not let Nordstream II go online in the case of Russian aggression. In public, so far, he has never said this.

Clearly, it is unimaginable that Germany would happily receive gas deliveries via Nordstream II while Russia was fighting a major war in Ukraine. In order to prevent the outbreak of war all kinds of other options are being discussed in Berlin - in cooperation with Kiev, the U.S. and the entire alliance - including **Ukrainian neutrality and some kind of binding guarantee that Kiev will never join NATO**. After all, not a single NATO member is actually in favor of making Ukraine a member of NATO.

Putin, however, has **clearly taken note of the calm and sober voice coming out of the Chancellery** in Berlin. He knows that Germany is Russia's most important economic and geopolitical partner in Europe. He also knows that Scholz is not a pushover and will not be tempted to overdramatize and overpromise.

Scholz will also **not allow himself to be divided from his allies** in the European Union and across the Atlantic in the U.S. He never tires emphasizing the importance of the unity of the EU, NATO and the entire transatlantic alliance. Though he has not gone into any detail, Scholz has nevertheless repeatedly said that Germany would also impose the **most severe sanctions** on Russia if Putin decided to move against Ukraine, an independent and sovereign country.

Scholz's unexciting and low-profile approach is not appeasement. Perhaps instead it is **Europe's last best hope of persuading Putin not to embark on his mission to 'make Russia great again,'** whatever the costs, and once again resort to war to achieve his political objectives.

In the end, of course, it is not Scholz but **Vladimir Putin** who will decide whether or not war will break out again in Europe. This by itself – that war and peace in 21st century Europe should be decided by the whim of just one man – is an aberration. Let's hope Scholz can persuade Putin of the enormous costs this would have for Russia and indeed for everyone else.

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Books just published by Klaus Larres:

Uncertain Allies: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Threat of a United Europe (Yale University Press, 2022);

Dictators and Autocrats: Securing Power Across Global Politics (edited book, Routledge, 2022);

Terrorism and Transatlantic Relations: Threats and Challenges (co-edited with Tobias Hof; Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).





Krasno Analysis: Weekly Spotlight has been founded and is edited by Prof. Klaus W. Larres. “Krasno Analysis” is part of the UNC Krasno Global Events series/Krasno Global Affairs and Business Council. www.krasnoevents.com

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