

COLD WEATHER, HIGH PRICES, LONG WAR: FINDING OUR WINTER RESILIENCE

By Petr Fiala, Prime Minister of Czech Republic

When Russia's aggression began in February, many believed that Ukraine would quickly surrender and that Russia would prevail and set the terms for peace. The battlefield was snow-covered then, and Russian commanders expected to have control before the ground thawed. Yet the resistance continues as another winter is coming. We in the West have believed in Ukrainian determination from the beginning, but it has also been clear that Ukraine could not make it without our help. It has been our duty since day one to help Ukraine survive this conflict with the fewest possible losses and to provide the Ukrainian people with extensive support. My country was one of the first to offer not just humanitarian aid, but also weapons and ammunition.

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For too long, we were naive in our approach to Russia, repeatedly tolerating and excusing its provocations. The war in Ukraine has – again! – taught us the lesson that being naive is costly. Rectifying our previous mistakes, we have committed to sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and a search for alternative suppliers of raw materials. I am proud of the way we in the West have been working together to respond quickly and decisively to the war. Our pressure must continue, as must our efforts to deter and contain Russia militarily on NATO's eastern flank. Russian imperialism must finally be stopped. The Kremlin simply cannot dictate the rules of international relations.

Meanwhile, families across Europe are worried about the upcoming winter. Vladimir Putin has been

using gas and oil supplies as a weapon against the West, with no concern about the well-being of civilians. He wagered that European leaders would be desperate enough to sacrifice Ukraine in exchange for energy security. However, we know very well that doing business with Russia under these circumstances would not bring any security at all. If European democracies turned their backs on Ukraine in exchange for a false peace of mind, Putin's power to extort and threaten us would only grow. After Ukraine, he would quickly turn to menacing other countries. If we were to play by his notions, we would end up losing everything.

But the manipulation of energy prices and raw material supplies is not the only kind of pressure we are facing. Russia threatens us almost daily with cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns, stoking the migration crisis, and recently even blackmailing us with nuclear threats. All this is to destabilize Europe and the Euro-Atlantic area, and to weaken our alliances and provoke conflicts within societies. Putin is trying hard to undermine our citizens' confidence in our governments, in elementary justice, and in democracy as such. His ultimate aim is to pit European countries against each other. Fortunately, he has failed so far. The European Union and the transatlantic community are exceptionally united.

This year brought despair but also hope. We have been able to rekindle the fundamental institutions of our civilization. The price of our freedom and security is much clearer now. We understand better how essential it is for us to remain strong to preserve peace. We must not lose this momentum. Together, we need to prepare for the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. We need to respond to the problems in the world economy, including the impending food crisis in Africa and the Middle East.

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We must defend the international order against challengers, such as Russia and China.

The Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union has been focusing on these challenges with great attention. We have already achieved significant results, such as negotiating a compromise across EU members in energy savings and mutual solidarity. This is a critical issue for the Czech Republic and other Central and Eastern European countries. We were also proud to host the summit of almost all European leaders last month, an exceptional opportunity for sincere dialogue and negotiating compromise.

Our future depends upon the existence of a fair global environment and successful cooperation within the European Union, the North Atlantic Alliance, and the alliance of Western democratic countries. Standing together, we will pull through all upcoming challenges – toward the good future that we all want to share.

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