

Opening Remarks – Budapest 2022

It is now three years since Euro-ISME was able to welcome you in person to one of our conferences. It is a huge pleasure and privilege for me to be able to do so once again today.

Before I turn to the subject matter of the conference, there are some words of thanks which I must deliver.

My first thanks go to the leadership of this magnificent university who have so generously offered the use of their facilities. The Rector and Vice Dean are with us today and I hope they will accept our warmest thanks, not just for their own help, but for all the help offered by their staff.

Apart from the grandeur of the buildings here, I am struck by two things in particular about the University. The first is the range and depth of the subjects taught within the military faculty. It is without question a very serious military academy which merits comparison with the best. The second is the name of the University - 'the University of Public Service'. It frankly resonates in a way that the 'University of Market Share' or the 'University of the Profit Motive' could never do.

Many of you here today have been or still are involved in public service in some way, perhaps as serving military or ex-military, civil servants or academics. You will know that serving the public is a noble calling. Rarely will it make you rich or famous, but that's not really the point, is it? My hope is that this conference will produce results that will indeed be of service to the public, not just here in Hungary, but worldwide and live up to the ideals of what this university stands for.

I must also thank in particular 2 of the staff here. Dr Mihaly Boda, who is an associate professor here and a former member of the Euro-ISME Board. He was instrumental in securing the invitation which has allowed us to be here today. His colleague Viktoria Kiss has been absolutely invaluable in helping us to make all the very many practical arrangements without which no conference such as this could take place. A huge thank you to you both.

As ever, I thank the Swiss Foundation for the Progress of Humankind for their continued financial and moral support of our work throughout the years. In cooperation with the Foundation and after 10 years of support from them, we are now conducting a major review of our aims and activities and I'll be saying a little more about this work in progress later in the conference.

And finally, I thank you all for being here. Many of you will have made a real investment of time and effort to join us. On behalf of Euro-ISME, I appreciate that very much.

For all the technological wizardry of being able to hold conferences and webinars online, there is simply no substitute for meeting face to face over an extended period and being able to exchange ideas with each other. The Euro-ISME family needs no encouragement from me to engage with each other and I am really looking forward to us all being able to do so over the next few days.

The theme of this year's conference is based around a relatively simple question 'Is military ethics keeping pace with the changing character of warfare?' Without prejudging anything that might be said over the next few days I think I can give you a definitive answer right now. In fact, I can do better than that and give you 2 definitive answers. 'Yes' and 'No'.

About a 3 hour drive to the east of Budapest lies Hungary's border with Ukraine. Of course the war there is not the only conflict in the world, but it will serve as an exemplar for these brief opening remarks.

You will all be familiar with the genesis of the war that is still raging there and the impact it is having not just in Ukraine but throughout the world. Refugees from the conflict have poured into all neighbouring countries, including Hungary. The cataclysmic effect of the loss of Ukrainian wheat and sunflower oil production will directly affect the lives of many millions in food poor countries in Africa and elsewhere. For millions of Ukrainians life will never, ever, be the same again.

It is too early to draw any definitive conclusions, but there are already some clear indications from this war as to whether military ethics is, or is not, keeping pace with the changing character of warfare.

First, there is nothing subtle or innovative about how the Russian leadership intended to fight this war. Huge conventional military forces were massed in preparation. Tanks, artillery, infantry, cruise missiles, the entire panoply of conventional forces were lined up against Ukraine. There have even been implicit threats to use nuclear weapons – and more on that point in a moment.

There have been instances in the way those forces have been used which demonstrate at the strategic, operational and tactical level a disregard for the acceptable ethical and legal norms of behaviour in war. No great rewriting of just war theory or of the public appreciation of what constitutes ethical behaviour in war is needed to understand what is happening here. ‘Traditional’ military ethics provides sufficient tools for us to note – for example – the absence of just cause, proportionality and discrimination.

I just want to pause here for a moment to stress the value which Euro-ISME places on our relationship with Russians who do not share the views of their president. Some intended and valued participants in this conference are not able to be here today because of the war in Ukraine. Last year several Board members wrote articles for a special military ethics edition of the Russian Journal of Philosophical Sciences. We do not tar all Russians with the same brush and I want to make it clear that all Russians who share our commitment to the promotion and practice of military ethics will always be welcome.

In our understandable desire to look forward to the nature of future wars – to avoid the perennial accusation of only being ready for the last war – we had perhaps forgotten that cyber warfare, space warfare, hybrid warfare, the use of private military enterprises and the like have not replaced artillery and infantry, they are additional to them. Conventional warfare has not gone away, so neither has the need for ‘conventional’ military ethics. So in that sense, military ethics is keeping pace with

the changing character of warfare, because that character is perhaps changing less than we had imagined.

But the war in Ukraine is far from being simply a trial of strength of conventional forces.

Russian oil and gas are being used as weapons to shape the will of European states in particular. Whether Russia making Europe largely dependent on its energy was a long term strategic master plan by the Kremlin or just a fact that suits its purposes now is not the key issue today. Russia certainly learned from its build up to the invasion of Crimea in 2014 how to manipulate energy supplies to its own advantage. Unfortunately, Europe as a whole seemed slower to learn that lesson.

Cyber warfare is a factor in the conflict, and not just through direct cyber attacks. The spreading via social media of misinformation and disinformation is aimed at changing public perception of the war. The blocking of western press and social media outlets in Russia is designed to ensure that the Russian public only sees and hears one version of events.

Substantial economic sanctions have been imposed by many countries on Russian corporations and individuals. Although economic sanctions, blockades and the like are not new, it could be argued in this case that they are a 'hybrid' response to a conventional conflict.

So what I think we have in Ukraine is the first truly hybrid war. We have the use of huge conventional forces allied to economic, informational, and cyber strategies. The west's response has been a hybrid one, economic sanctions allied to a partial re-arming of Ukraine, but no direct military involvement. An information war is being waged by all those involved.

Just a brief word on this information war aspect. In my mind 'ethics' and 'the truth' are inseparable. The war in Ukraine is reinforcing once again the importance of the narrative. There are 2 quite clearly incompatible and contradictory narratives in play here. I am increasingly astonished by the Russian narrative, whether expressed by

senior politicians or ordinary Russians, which seems to bear little or no relationship to the truth. The narrative is quite clearly a tool to keep the Russian public behind their leadership and – in the longer term – to protect the position and legacy of their president.

‘Conventional’ military ethics copes less with this novel and complex mix of actors and strategies, not least because so many of them are not ‘military’ in any sense of the word.

It is quite obvious that the impetus for the war in Ukraine was political, not military, so we have to help people understand that military ethics is no longer just about soldiers, aviators and sailors. Politicians start the fire and decide when it is to be extinguished.

And we are seeing once again the importance of leadership in all this. Why should we expect soldiers in the field to care about ethics if their political and military commanders don’t? Thankfully, everyone in this room understands completely the essential contribution that good leadership and training can make. And we are the guests of a military university that demands high standards of leadership. But we should not delude ourselves that such an understanding is universal.

Although we are here to discuss ethics, not political theory, I do wonder whether we should also ask the question ‘Is politics keeping pace with the changing character of warfare’. I think particularly of the post war international order, which worked tolerably well during the frozen conflict years of the cold war, but which now seems to facilitate stagnation and obfuscation rather than action and justice.

I mentioned that I would come back to the implicit threats to use nuclear weapons. Let me remind you of a famous quotation written about two and a half thousand years ago. “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.” The implicit threat to use nuclear weapons and the threat to cut off access to Russian energy have arguably achieved the required strategic effect of keeping NATO out of this war. As with military strategy, so with ethics. The weapons might change, the character of warfare might change, but the nature of war does not. Finding the right

balance between age old ethical principles and - for example - precipitate changes in technology is what this conference is all about.

Finally, thank you for listening and if you do come up with a single definitive answer to the question this conference poses, please do let me know.