



THE PARADOX OF POWER:

Ukraine's Struggle, Russia's Dilemmas, and Global Consequences

Chief Editor Dr. Sandis Šrāders
Editor George Spencer Terry

The Conference on Russia Papers 2024

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Foreword

Brigadier General Alvydas ŠIUPARIS*

Since the first salvos of artillery and columns of Russian troops entering their territory on the morning of 24 February 2022, the Ukrainian people have spent every second defending their independence against Russia's aggression. However, Ukraine's counteroffensive in the summer of 2023 solidified the lines in the east, leading to the brutal return of positional warfare. The failure to deliver spectacular results – the collapse of the Russian defensive line – consequently resulted in a diminished faith among some of Ukraine's Western allies, who are currently seeking the possibility of a swift conclusion to the conflict. As the war enters its second year, this type of fatigue and attrition is all the more caustic to Ukraine's ability to win the war – and win the war it must.

Simultaneously, Russia is faced with its own dilemmas. Internally, the country inches closer to totalitarianism under a confident Putin regime, which rules over a politically apathetic Russian society with an iron fist. Dissent – however minute – is extinguished before it can spread, and the Russian opposition faces a choice of exile or imprisonment. At the same time, domestic conditions within Russia are worsening due to the implicit wartime economy, with a plummeting individual quality of life. Despite this, Russia still believes its complete victory is an inevitability, waiting for Western resolve to dissipate before it can force its original goals for the so-called Special Military Operation: the complete subjugation or destruction of Ukraine. In this way, another type of attrition is ongoing yet not as explicit, that of the Kremlin's hubris and morale.

Separately, Russian revisionism has consequences that reach far beyond its aggression against Ukraine and its heavy-handed engagement with its own society. Russia's continued emphasis on multipolarity in the international system, its blatant disregard for international law, and its recourse to violence serves as an inspiration to other states and actors resentful of their position in the current international order. Iran, Venezuela, and terrorist groups such as *Hamas* come to mind, but other major powers might be inspired to redraw their borders by force as well. If Russia is allowed victory,

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war will once again be legitimised as an effective instrument of state policy. This cannot be allowed.

The precarious situation arising from Russia's aggression against Ukraine is embedded within a complex web of global issues and transformations. Economic disruptions, advancements in technology and artificial intelligence, socio-political discontent, and power dynamics among major nations collectively pose a threat to the delicate balance that currently underpins the liberal international order—a framework from which we all derive benefits. Indeed, the serves as a focal point that crystallises these numerous dynamics within a singular context.

The Baltic Defence College's primary mission is professional military education, and education is all about the provision of deep understanding – that of the world, of concepts, of ideas, and of processes. Similarly, the College's Conference on Russia, as well as its Conference on Russia Papers, play a central role in this educational mission. Engaging with all of the aforementioned topics, the 2024 volume of the Conference on Russia Papers is a focused attempt to reach such an understanding of Russia as the primary adversary of the Alliance. At the same time, the emphasis of this volume extends beyond academic or policy-related boundaries, as we must always strive to understand and estimate all relevant factors and variables in both the creation of strategy and the provision of defense. This foreword serves as a reminder that these collected chapters are not only a volume; they are a dialogue, a reflection, and an exploration of the current and the possible so that we might always be vigilant and ready for all prospects.

Expressing my gratitude, I wish to extend my thanks to the editors of this volume, Dr. Sandis Šrāders and Mr. George Spencer Terry, along with all of the authors and those who contributed to this project. Their dedication and hard work were pivotal to the completion of this volume. It is through their diligence and deep engagement with complex issues that we can be better informed to make decisions and plan strategies for the current and future defense and prosperity of our nations, our allies, and our partners. *Ad securitatem patriarum!*

Brigadier General Alvydas Šiuparis

*January 2024
Tartu, Estonia*

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Introduction

This volume focuses on the paradox of power, illuminating how Russia's deployment of brute force against Ukraine has laid bare not only its weaknesses but also strengths, resonating across a spectrum of actors. The conflict has revealed Russia's inability to attain its initial war objectives, exposing deviations in its professed military prowess. Concurrently, the nation has exhibited resilience and adaptability, employing a totalitarian power structure and diverse ideological tools to capture its society.

Simultaneously, the West has undergone a self-assessment, recognising its own strengths and vulnerabilities. The revelation of a certain level of complacency with the established liberal-democratic global order, from which the West has long benefited, has prompted a re-evaluation. The realisation that insufficient efforts had been exerted to defend and support this order has sparked a paradigm shift. Despite persisting structural and socio-political challenges, a burgeoning consensus on solidarity and burden-sharing has emerged for the future. The pivotal question now revolves around translating this consensus into tangible action.

The overall discussion is thus divided into three themes: Ukraine's struggle, Russia's dilemmas, and global consequences. In terms of content, this volume delves into a spectrum of pressing issues to that effect, commencing with an in-depth exploration of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. This first chapter scrutinises Russia's persistent endeavours to shape and steer Ukrainian domestic expectations and morale, tracing efforts throughout the entirety of Ukraine's independence and even during the ongoing war. Following this, competing analyses of the Russian elite power structure are presented, with implications for the future trajectory of the state. Subsequent chapters dissect the intricate interplay between Russian ideology and its political system. By examining the instrumentalisation of the Russian Orthodox Church and history in Russia, the volume unveils the narrative construction employed by the state, unravelling the motivations that propel Russian actions both domestically and on the global stage.

Shifting focus to specific regions, the volume elucidates Russia's role in the South Caucasus and the intricate dynamics of its influence in the Middle East, particularly in light of the Gaza conflict. The ripple effects of these activities and their impact on Europe form a central theme, offering a comprehensive analysis of an interconnected geopolitical puzzle. These effects on Europe and the overall European response to Russia's actions are a pivotal

aspect, marking the so-called *Zeitenwende*—a transformative juncture for not just individual member states but for the continent as a whole. The volume delves into how Europe remains susceptible to Russian pressures during this transformation and explores the changes unfolding in the continent due to these deep geopolitical shifts. Additionally, the structural obstacles hindering EU and US support for Ukraine are critically examined, providing essential insights for formulating effective policy responses.

A following chapter analyses the metamorphosis of NATO, a steadfast cornerstone in global security dynamics. The volume evaluates the changes that have occurred within NATO and speculates on its future trajectory, shedding light on the broader implications of Russian actions for international alliances. The analysis then turns to the state of Russian hybrid activities, unravelling the intricate web of tactics employed by the Kremlin. Concluding with a gaze into the future, the volume contemplates the potential trajectories of the Russian regime, offering a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted dimensions that collectively shape Russia's impact on the global stage.

The editors extend their appreciation to each contributor for their insightful and thought-provoking chapters. Recognising the perpetual evolution of global dynamics and the inherent unpredictable nature of Russia, forecasting the future remains a formidable challenge. However, the consistently high quality of all chapters is unmistakable, fostering stimulating debates and enriching the discourse. May these analyses, opinions, and prognoses not only function as an academic forum but also serve as a profound reservoir from which to derive well-informed policies on security and defence. Additionally, may they contribute to a more profound understanding of the tumultuous world in 2024.

1. Russia's Wartime Influence inside Ukraine

Political and Security Realms

Aliona HLIVCO*

Abstract

This chapter will focus on diverse phases and ways Russia has attempted to influence Ukraine's politics in the past and how it might do so in the future. This chapter outlines Russia's concerted effort to undermine Ukraine's independence through various means in three phases: *laying the ground* (1991–2014), when the strategic goal was to erode Ukraine's agency and international recognition while undermining its domestic political, institutional, and military capabilities; *military invasion* (2014–2022) – the time of kinetic warfare against Ukraine and a successful international campaign that left Russia justified after it invaded and occupied part of a sovereign state; and the *change of strategy* (2022–2023), when failing to achieve its objectives in the first two phases and encountering resilience in Ukraine's domestic resistance and international support, Russia reinforced its hybrid warfare technics.

Keywords: Russia, political influence, Ukraine, domestic politics

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine signifies a novel form of warfare encompassing clandestine geopolitical, kinetic, cyber, informational, covert, and espionage operations. The need for Russia to diversify its warfare strategies is twofold. Firstly, the capabilities of the Russian military have proven insufficient to combat a country the size of Ukraine using solely conventional military means, as evidenced by last year's attempts to capture Kyiv. Secondly, Russian authorities recognise that to conquer and maintain control over Ukraine and other former Soviet republics, such as Belarus, Georgia, and Moldova, new practices involving infiltration and influence on multiple levels of the socio-political structure of these states must be developed.

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Historical patterns reveal that Russia's military conquests have failed to translate into an enduring unbreakable empire.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia, grappling with a lingering sense of phantom imperialism, has sought to regain control over former Soviet republics through various means. These include manipulating political elites, gaining ownership of key strategic industries in these countries, imposing heavy reliance on Russian energy supplies, engaging in trade, and exercising soft power influence through the dominance of the Russian language, culture, and religion.

Despite the unanimous decision made at the Belovezh forest by leaders of Ukrainian, Belarus, and Russian Soviet Socialist Republics to end the existence of the Soviet Union and create a Commonwealth of Independent States in its place, Russia never truly respected the sovereignty of newly independent countries. On 26 August 1991, only two days after Ukraine's proclamation of independence, the press secretary of Russian President Yeltsin made a statement on behalf of the President that Russia "with regards to the former Soviet republics retains the right to raise a question of their borders." On 28 August, the Vice President of Russian Federation at the time Rutskoy arrived in Kyiv on an official visit to coerce Ukraine into renouncing its newly proclaimed sovereignty, threatening to "review its borders" in case of separation from Russia. These threats materialised six months later when the Russian Parliament issued a decree nullifying the decision of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic's Parliament on the transfer of Crimean oblast from RSFSR to the Ukrainian SSR (5 February 1954).

A dismissive attitude towards Ukraine's independence persisted in Russia's policy towards Ukraine. In his public address "Russia – CIS: Does the West's Position Need to Be Adjusted?," Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Chief Yevgeny Primakov defined the optimistic scenario for the development of the CIS as the strengthening of asymptotic processes amounting to the formation of a confederation within the CIS. The report of Russian intelligence could be viewed as a Russian version of the Monroe Doctrine for the post-Soviet space where the West's actions towards the former members of the Soviet had to be conducted only with the Kremlin's approval. President Putin did not change that course and reiterated in his decree that Russia's strategic economic, defence, and national security interests are concentrated on the territory of the CIS. The political and economic stability of the CIS states is directly dependent on the conduct of friendly political cooperation with Russia.

According to the adopted strategy, Ukraine remained highly dependent on its eastern neighbour across various areas of state governing. Disentangling the interstate ties built over almost a century posed a formidable challenge. Russia perpetuated this dependency through various overt and covert techniques, such as hindering Ukraine's integration into the international system through discreditation, disinformation, and covert influence. Additionally, Russia undermined the effective functioning of Ukraine's governmental bodies by infiltrating them with Russian agents of influence. Ukraine's security apparatus remained intertwined with its Russian counterpart, publicly confirmed when the SVR Chief asserted that "facilitating the integration trends among the CIS countries is a primary task," emphasising that "collaboration can only mean subordination in this context."

The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), the Ministry of Defence, the Interior Ministry, the diplomatic corps, the Ukrainian Parliament, and its political parties all fell victim to Russia's espionage and covert tactics of influence and control over the course of over 30 years of independence. Based on conversations with senior Ukrainian government officials and intelligence officers, Russia's concerted campaign of subjugation can be divided into three stages, spanning from the declaration of country's independence in 1991 until the present day.

Laying the Ground (1991–2014)

The strategic goal during this phase was to erode Ukraine's agency and international recognition while undermining its domestic political, institutional, and military capacities. Internationally, Russia aimed to embed the narrative within global elites that portrayed Ukraine as a failed state with highly corrupt politicians, justifying the need for it to remain under Russia's control. The consequences of this campaign manifested in the West's ambivalence towards Ukraine, particularly concerning European integration and NATO membership. Events such as the 2008 Bucharest NATO summit, the failure to uphold the obligations of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on non-proliferation, or the decision to go ahead with the construction of Nord Stream 2 – a gas pipeline carrying Russian natural gas bypassing Ukraine – underscore the success of Russia's prolonged efforts to diminish Ukraine's international standing.

Concurrently, Russian agents infiltrated Ukrainian political elites and government institutions, disrupting their operations from within. An illustrative example is Pavlo Lebedev, Ukraine's last Defence Minister before the invasion (2012–2014), who fled the country even before Yanukovich, and was present at a Kremlin public meeting when Crimea was annexed. Lebedev faced charges of treason, along with former president Yanukovich and former Minister of Defence Dmytro Salamatin (in office from February to December 2012) for ostensibly reducing Ukraine's defence capabilities while presenting them as reforms of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, disbanding the individual military associations, units, and subdivisions. The State Bureau of Investigation also concluded that Yanukovich and former defence ministers altered the locations of the military in Crimea, facilitating the swift invasion and annexation of the peninsula.

Another area of Russian influence was sowing division within Ukrainian society through disinformation, controlled media, and exploitation of historical cultural, religious, and language differences. This was particularly evident during election campaigns, facilitating ascent of pro-Russian elites to legislative and executive branches of power.

Military Invasion (2014–2022)

As the war broke out and Russia invaded Ukraine, it deployed its full arsenal of agents in the country, actively recruiting new ones through financial incentives, familial ties, or ideological indoctrination in order to reinforce its military efforts and calibrate attacks on critical targets. Yuriy Lutsenko, Ukraine's prosecutor general from 2016 to 2019, revealed to Reuters that during his tenure, "hundreds" of Defence Ministry employees were under surveillance, approved by his office, because they were suspected of ties to the Russian state. Lutsenko believed similar numbers of suspected spies existed in other ministries.

This phase has also witnessed a resurgence of pro-Russian politicians in Ukraine, debates advocating appeasement of Russia at the cost of concessions, elections in occupied territories, and parliamentary votes to grant special autonomous status to the occupied quasi-republics in the East. Internationally, after the initial sanctions, Ukraine was pressured into Minsk 1 and 2 agreements through the Normandy Format (France, Germany, Ukraine, and Russia). The aggressor was successfully reinstated at the PACE

and the invasion and annexation of the territories of a sovereign nation were effectively legitimised by international organisations.

Blinded by a sense of impunity, Russia, having replenished its resources, attacked Ukraine again in February 2022, this time with the goal of occupying the entire country.

Change of Strategy (2022–2023)

Failing to achieve its objectives in the first two phases and encountering greater resilience in Ukraine's independence and international support, the Russian state apparatus reinforced its hybrid warfare techniques. According to a source in the Ukrainian intelligence community, 2023 witnessed a rise in attempts to recruit agents in Ukraine and the temporarily occupied territories, with an objective to influence civil servants and government officials through existing ties to friends and family. An ongoing information campaign sought to demotivate Ukrainian society by spreading narratives about political and military elites' internal strife, loss of hope, defeat on the battlefield, and an alleged abandonment by Western partners.

Similar tactics were employed on the international stage, with fake narratives emerging, such as Ukraine selling weapons received from the West on the black market. Topics like Ukrainian corruption, the rivalry between President Zelenskyy and General Zaluzhnyi, and a battlefield stalemate suddenly took centre stage in Western media and policy discussion, contributing to the purported 'Ukraine fatigue,' a term coined by Russian propaganda since 2015.

A significant threat in this ongoing phase is a series of elections happening from September 2023 to the end of 2024. Drawing from Russia's experience in influencing domestic politics in Western countries, the manipulation of social cohesion, and causing political unrest, there is a heightened concern. A senior official from the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office's Disinformation Unit – a special division working on identifying and countering foreign malign informational influence abroad – noted that the election results in Slovakia and border strikes in Poland came as no surprise, given Russia's attempts to close off Ukraine's western border since the start of the full-scale invasion. With Hungary already adopting a pro-Russian stance, the closure of Slovakia and Poland posed a threat to the impending delivery of Western weapons and humanitarian aid to Ukraine,

as well as disrupted trade exports – the bloodline of the Ukrainian wartime economy.

Historically, Russia sought to exert influence on Ukraine across all aspects of societal life with a primary focus on political and security spheres. Its influence on Ukrainian politics aimed at infiltrating it with pro-Russian politicians or political parties or discrediting the Ukrainian cause by sponsoring far-right nationalist parties. Politicians motivated by money, ideology, or personal ties with Russia rose to power, undermining Ukraine's statehood and the effective functioning of governing bodies, establishing control over the country's strategic industries, and hindering Ukraine's assimilation into the Euro-Atlantic community. Infiltration of Ukraine's security sector provided Russian intelligence with opportunities to cover their presence in all other areas of activity and led them directly into the heart of decision-making, granting access to classified national security information that often gave them the upper hand in planning invasion tactics and enhancing their overall strategy.

The Political Realm

Since the 90s, political competition in Ukraine has often been framed as a struggle between a pro-Eurasian path (leaning towards the communist past and more favourable towards cooperation with Russia) and pro-European forces representing younger generations aspiring to assimilate with the West through cultural, economic, and political ties. While this dynamic demonstrates a level of contestation in Ukrainian identity politics, it also underscores of potentially fertile ground for Russian soft power within large segments of Ukrainian society.

Russian interference in Ukrainian politics can be traced back to the early years of the country's independence. One of the most prominent examples was Vyacheslav Chornovil, leader of the biggest democratic party in the country, *Narodnyi Rukh* (People's Movement). A dedicated opponent of Soviet communism and an advocate for a strong, independent Ukraine, Chornovil met an untimely end in a car crash in 1999. Initially deemed an accident, it was later revealed by the prosecutor's office that the dissident was killed almost two decades later.

President Leonid Kuchma initiated his presidency with close friendly ties to Russia, having worked within the Soviet establishment for his whole

life, being the executive director of a strategic state-owned airspace manufacturer Pivdenmash. He later shifted towards a more pro-Ukrainian stance in his second term, attempting to assert Ukraine's agency both domestically and on the international stage.

His 2023 publication, "Ukraine is not Russia," emphasised the distinctions in national identities and called for the restoration of 'Ukrainstvo' ('Ukrainian-ship') – a national identity seeking resurgence after Soviet oppression, and, among other things, recognising such controversial figures of Ukraine's past like Ivan Mazepa as those who 'provided an alternative' (Ivan Mazepa was a ruler of Ukraine and had close ties with Swedish King Karl XII, with whom he sided in the Great Northern War of 1700–1721 as an opponent to Moscow. For this, he was deemed a traitor throughout the Soviet history and only started being referred to as 'pro-Western hetman' after Ukraine's independence in 1991).

In 2003, Russia initiated its first territorial dispute with Ukraine – the Tuzla conflict. Tuzla is a small island in the waters of the Azov Sea and is legally part of the Crimean Autonomous Republic of Ukraine. In 2003, as soon as President Kuchma embarked on a long foreign trip to Latin America, Russia suddenly began constructing a dam to connect the island with the Russian mainland (Taman Peninsula), claiming that Tuzla was, in fact, not an island and that there was no Russo-Ukrainian border in the Azov Sea. Russia's motives and the end goal behind that move are crystal clear today. Tuzla later became foundational for the Kerch Bridge connecting mainland Russia with annexed Crimea.

The 2004 Presidential elections showcased Ukrainian society's desire to move beyond the Soviet legacy. Following evidence of rigged elections favouring pro-Russian candidate Yanukovich, widespread protests on Kyiv's Independence Square (Maidan) led to the election of the pro-European candidate Viktor Yushchenko. While the victory of pro-democratic forces in Ukraine was secured, the 2004–2005 electoral campaign was the first one to deploy divisive national narratives, classifying Ukrainians into first-, second- and third-class citizens. It was also the first campaign during which candidate Yanukovich's Russian campaign strategists created and deployed the myth of Nazis in Ukraine and pro-Western candidates were declared US proxies. This myth was later perpetuated through the activity of the right-wing party *Svoboda* (Freedom) that was found to be sponsored by a business partner of a Ukrainian oligarch with close ties to Russia due to his gas-trading venture, Dmytro Firtash. Disinformation tools tested in Ukraine

during this time laid the groundwork for global use, coinciding with the founding of the largest Russian propaganda machine Russia Today in 2005.

These efforts paid off, and on the wave of disappointment with the leaders of the Orange Revolution, Yanukovych became the President of Ukraine in 2010. One of his first strategic decisions in office was signing the Kharkiv Pact of 2010. According to the agreement, the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula would remain a base for the Russian Black Sea Fleet until at least 2042 while Ukraine, in return, received discounted prices for gas.

The Pact faced widespread criticism, leading to nationwide protests. President Yanukovych tried to calibrate his geopolitical leaning and, as most of his predecessors, tried to find a balance between East and West. According to sources in the President's close circle, the oligarchs around the President were often believed to be pushing him towards the normalisation of relations with the West to promote their business, enhance trade, and get access to Western markets. At the same time, the post-Soviet political establishment, electoral trends, and close business ties of his family with Russian elites always pulled him back into Russia's orbit. This dynamic resulted in the hesitancy and eventual failure to sign the EU Association Agreement, which resulted in his ousting by the Revolution of Dignity. Russia invaded Crimea several days later.

After Yanukovych fled, a core of Russian political influence in Ukraine collapsed. Russian proxies faced prosecution, and a lustration campaign sought to purge affiliations with the former president from government, civil service, and public offices. Despite a significant reduction in Russian influence, it persisted, with some politicians attempting to capitalise on a diminished but still existent pro-Russian electorate in eastern Ukraine. Many of them maintained alleged ties with Russian intelligence in the wake of the second invasion in 2022. Yevhen Murayev, a former lawmaker and a leader of the party *Nashi*, was identified by the UK's Foreign Secretary as someone whom Russians were planning to install as the successor to President Zelenskyy after the attempted siege of Kyiv in February 2022.

Viktor Medvedchuk, leader of Ukraine's 'Opposition Platform – For Life' party and most visible loyalist to Putin, intensified his activities after the invasion of 2014. In 2017–2018, companies close to him acquired several TV channels to project his influence, including ZIK that was the most popular broadcaster in western Ukraine. Medvedchuk was also a member of the Minsk agreements working group. Investigative journalists later uncovered his involvement in facilitating the movement of contraband across the

demarcation line in the occupied areas of Ukraine. Recordings of conversations between Medvedchuk and separatist leaders implicated then-President Poroshenko, leading to ongoing investigation and criminal cases.

Eventually Medvedchuk was charged with treason in May 2021 and placed under house arrest. Investigators from the SBU accused Medvedchuk of sharing classified information about Ukrainian military units with Russian officials. The day before the invasion, he escaped from his home in Kyiv and was planning to leave the country, but he was caught trying to cross the border. In 2022, he was exchanged in a political prisoner swap for the Mariupol defenders of AzovStal.

Security Realm

Ukraine is still in the process of dismantling Russian influence across its political, security, defence, and law enforcement sectors as the war goes on. Accurately estimating the number of Russian agents infiltrating Ukrainian intelligence proves challenging, but statistics from the State Investigation Bureau shed light on the extensive efforts of Russian insurgency. In 2022 alone, the SBI led proceedings in 1,181 criminal cases related to violations of national security. These include 953 cases on high treason, 184 cases of collaboration, and 14 cases of aiding the aggressor state. In total, the SBI investigated 48,868 cases that resulted in the detainment of 694 individuals, including 163 law enforcement officers. Charges were pressed against 5,577 suspects including five members of parliament, three former members of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, and two senior civil servants. Most of the cases came from Luhansk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Donetsk regions and related to former public office holders and law enforcement officials.

Amongst most prominent examples of senior figures was the former Deputy Head of National Security and Defence Council Volodymyr Sivkovych who was accused of conspiring with four Russian federal service agents. In July 2022, a former deputy chief of the SBU in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea Oleh Kulinich was arrested for connecting a criminal group with Ukrainian SBU officers and Russian special forces officers to lead sabotage activities against Ukraine. Members of Parliament Illia Kiva, Oleksiy Kovalyov, as well as Viktor Medvedchuk and Taras Kozak were charged with treason and collaboration with the aggressor. In July 2023, President Zelenskyi emphasised the need for more significant efforts by law

enforcement agencies to seek out the infiltrators who committed crimes against the foundations of national security of Ukraine. A large number of SBU staff were suspected of treason. Based on this, Ivan Bakanov, the Head of Security Service of Ukraine and the President's childhood friend, was suspended from his role.

Ukraine is actively learning how to develop countermeasures against Russian infiltration and influence techniques and is beginning the process of eliminating embedded agents within its state apparatus. The influence of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, seen as a conduit for Russian influence, has become a focal point for the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU). The SBU is tackling attempts by the Russian Orthodox Church to exert influence within Ukraine, recognising the role it plays in propagating narratives aligned with Russia's interests.

Ukraine continues to be a target for Russian intelligence operations aimed at undermining the country's defence capacity. Sources within the Ukrainian intelligence report a substantial and well-thought-out information operation campaign, named Maidan-3, during November-December 2023. The campaign was designed to destabilise social, political and military sectors in Ukraine, capitalising on exhaustion from the war and adding to the difficult winter months in Ukraine with rolling electricity outages and blackouts from Russian attacks on infrastructure. According to the same sources, the curator of the operation is the former Prime-Minister of Russia and Deputy Chair of the President's Administration Sergey Kirienko. The ideologist behind it is Vladislav Surkov, also known for conceptualising Russia's 'sovereign democracy' and 'Novorossiya' (new Russia) in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

The operation sought to perpetuate global narratives of 'Ukraine fatigue,' corruption, and the perceived hopelessness of Ukraine's fight against Russia. It involved information attacks on the Ukrainian political and military leadership, introducing divisive narratives and questioning unity amongst the political and military leadership of Ukraine while undermining faith in victory. Telegram, according to the intelligence, was chosen as the primary platform for this campaign, with an estimated cost of \$230 million, marking it as the most expensive information campaign since the Revolution of Dignity and the 2014 invasion.

The most alarming aspect of the operation is a series of planned assassination attempts on several Ukrainian government officials, aiming to portray Ukrainian authorities as unable to protect themselves. President

Zelenskyi has disclosed numerous attempts on his life in the past two years, highlighting the gravity of the threat. One recent and sinister episode involved a plot to poison several members of Ukraine's Defence Intelligence and the wife of the Bureau's chief, General Kyrylo Budanov, in early December 2023. Remarkably, they managed to survive the poisoning, which involved the use of heavy metals. Zelenskyi, in his efforts to alert the population, has extensively discussed the 'Maidan-3' in various interviews, emphasising the potential for provocations and forewarning both the domestic and international communities.

Ukraine is actively learning to develop countermeasures against Russian infiltration and influence techniques, beginning the process of eliminating embedded agents within its state apparatus. The support of Western intelligence has played a pivotal role in devising effective deterrence mechanisms. However, building the social and institutional capacity to resist Russian infiltration remains a crucial ongoing task.

Conclusions

Russia's wartime influence within Ukraine delineates a sophisticated and adaptive strategy that transcends and complements traditional military engagements. Starting with the strategic imperative to undermine Ukraine's agency and international standing, Russia's multifaceted approach has evolved through various stages of Ukraine's more than 30 years of independence, each tailored to exploit vulnerabilities and embed manipulative narratives. From infiltrating political elites and fostering societal divisions to the resurgence of pro-Russian politicians during the military invasion, this chapter underscores Russia's persistent efforts to reshape Ukraine's socio-political landscape and return it to the Russian imperial orbit. The consequences have been profound, with challenges to Ukraine's sovereignty, internal disruptions, and impediments to international integration. Similar tactics were deployed internationally to undermine Ukraine's standing and force it back into Russia's 'post-soviet sphere of influence' with the help of Russian media, political lobbying, so-called 'experts' now often deemed 'useful idiots,' and diplomatic and economic coercion.

Despite Ukraine's resolute efforts to counteract Russian influence, particularly within the political and security realms, the evolving threat landscape presents new challenges. Russia's covert operations on the back of

the less-successful-than-expected Ukrainian counteroffensive, exemplifies Russia's adaptability, employing information warfare, planned assassinations, and narratives of internal strife to further its objectives of conquering Ukraine and sowing division within western liberal societies. As the war enters a new phase of heightened geopolitical and informational combat, the ongoing vigilance and the development of robust, effective, and adaptive countermeasures is more critical than ever. The success of Ukraine's fight for independence hinges not only on its military resilience but also on its ability to navigate the intricate web of Russian influence, demanding sustained international cooperation and support to fortify Ukraine against the ever-evolving challenges posed by its eastern neighbour.

2. From Neo-Patrimonialism to Neo-Praetorianism

The Impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War on Russia's Internal Power Structure

George Spencer TERRY^{*}

Abstract

Vladimir Putin's presidency in Russia has often been depicted as embodying the role of a custodian, patron, and balancer within its internal power structure. Scholars have classified this system as neo-patrimonial, characterised by a fusion of traditional authority styles and legal-rational frameworks for legitimisation. However, this chapter contends that the neo-patrimonial system has evolved into a stratocratic neo-praetorian one, a transformation accentuated during regime consolidation and solidified with the ascendancy of the security state and the war against Ukraine. Analysing potential vectors of opposition, the conclusion is drawn that a martial consensus currently guides Russian decision-making, diminishing Putin's role to that of a legitimising figure rather than a hegemon within the overall system.

Keywords: Neo-patrimonialism, Russia, political systems, praetorianism

The Neo-Patrimonial Russian State

The model of governance in Vladimir Putin's Russia "serves as an example of neo-patrimonial rule and comprises all of its key traits" (Skigin 2020, 107). Neopatrimonialism, in its functional form, is a blend of traditional styles of authority within a legal-rational framework of legitimisation. Understood in a Weberian configuration, these traditional styles of authority are predicated on personal and patron-client relationships while legal-rational logics are deployed to justify the existence and functioning of such a system. While the concept was developed to explain the internal dynamics of post-colonial states in Africa (Erdmann and Engel 2007; Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston 2009; Bach and Gazibo 2013), neo-patrimonial has been applied

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to post-Soviet states to clarify the domestic relations of power as well (Fisun 2012; Gelman 2016; Klein and Schröder 2016).

In the Russian case, post-Soviet neopatrimonialism is characterised by four defining features, including rent extraction and prebendalism as the “major goal and substantive purpose of governing the state,” a tendency toward hierarchy and “one-major centre of decision-making,” and the conditional autonomy of all of the actors within the neo-patrimonial system, paired with intense competition amongst “several organized groups and/or informal cliques” (Gelman 2016, 459). Russia’s neo-patrimonial structure has also been able to ensure regime stability through the “distribution of rents among political and economic elites” and the “co-op[tation of civil society] and political opposition” through these same networks (White 2018). With Russia as no exception, the archetypical neo-patrimonial state, therefore, is to be understood as extractive, decisionist in the Schmittian sense (Schmitt 2005), and aggressively competitive, with any ideological trappings solely contingent to pragmatism or to the personal sympathies of individuals within the system.

Figure 1. illustrates the archetypical neo-patrimonial relations of an ideal type in the context of the Russia case:

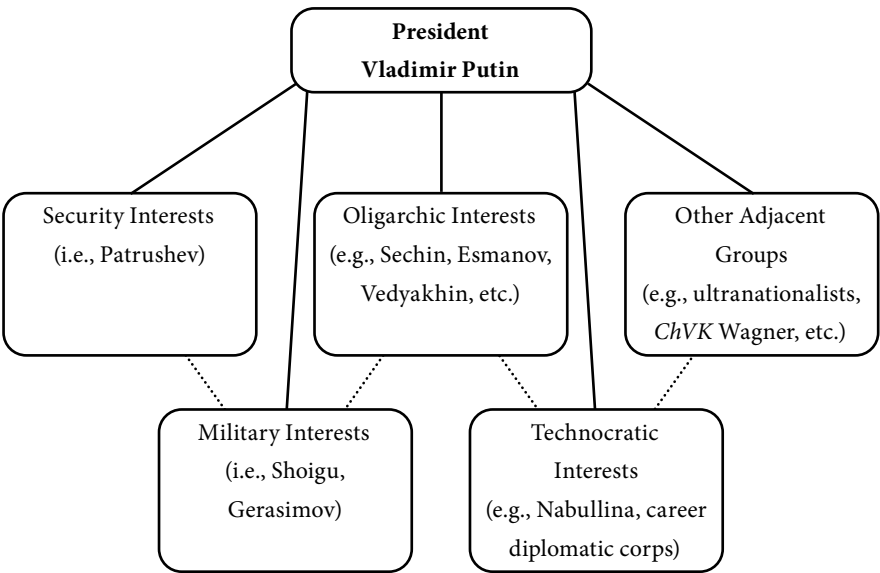


Figure 1.: Solid lines represent patron-client relationships while dotted lines indicate potential conflict or competition.

However, an ostensible crisis regarding the longevity of Russia's neo-patrimonial system has been discussed as a possible explanatory factor behind the so-called 'cultural turn' in Russian politics that began in 2012 with Putin's return to the presidency, which was predicated on the pervasive assertion of "Russia's ability to exist as a state and as a civilisation" (Robinson 2017). Similarly, many outcomes of this 'cultural turn,' namely culturally rooted chauvinism and the neo-imperial supremacy of the Russian civilisation-state, coagulated to form the premises that would inform the *casus belli* for the annexation of Crimea, the First Donbas War, and the Russo-Ukrainian War. Additionally, the processes of regime consolidation (e.g., Robinson, 2012; Hutcheson and McAllister, 2021) that have been occurring in Russia for the last two decades have constricted the acceptable bounds of intergroup competition as well as the number of groups competing. At the same time, as the resources that could be deployed to buttress and support such a system have been severely limited due to sanctions and other conditions created as a consequence of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the possibilities of redistributing rents and buying clientele loyalty have also become increasingly strained.

Given the paradigm shift that was precipitated by the Russo-Ukrainian War, the viability and resilience of the Russian neo-patrimonial system is not guaranteed. By looking at those groups that have opposed certain tenets of the neo-patrimonial system – namely the ultranationalist 'Angry Patriots Club' and *ChVK* Wagner – this chapter argues that the continuing processes of regime consolidation around the *silovik* factions adjacent to Vladimir Putin, which has consisted in the removal of these groups through the mechanisms provided by the neo-patrimonial system, have led to a marked change in the extant power relations. Instead, Russia should now be understood as a neo-praetorian state, that is, a state whose governance is dominated by stratocratic interests while still adhering to legal-rational discursive justifications for the legitimacy of the system.

Situating the Russian Opposition

As a hybrid system, a neo-patrimonial regime exists in a status of constant stress between the two pure types of legitimacy on which it lays its foundations. In such a constellation, those who deny any legitimacy either to the practical reality of the personalist patron-client relationships or their

discursive justifications can be rightly classified as the opposition of such a system. In the Russian case, three broad oppositional groups can be identified on the basis of which of the main internal pillars of neo-patrimonialism they principally oppose.

The first of these groups are the genealogical descendants of the erstwhile Westernisers, those liberal or liberal-adjacent individuals who have either been imprisoned for their vocal critiques of the regime, such as Alexei Navalny or Ilya Yashin, been arrested in absentia, such as in the case of Maksim Katz, or have voluntarily gone into exile while continuing their criticism from Washington, London, or Vilnius, such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky. These critiques stem from their recognition of the contradictions of the neo-patrimonial nature of Russian governance, recognising that the practices of the state, predicated on clientelism, loyalty to the person of Vladimir Putin, and the endemic self-enrichment of these loyal cliques at the detriment state resources are directly in opposition to the realisation of legal-rational norms in the Russian context. In their view, removing the patrimonial factor of this equation would allow Russia to become a democracy, if not a liberal democracy, despite the complexities of such a transition (Gazibo 2013).

The second oppositional group, conversely, takes offense to both the façade of legality and rationality to which the state continues to adhere as well as the patrimonial networks that are seen as deleterious. In this sense, both the discursive legitimisation of the state as such as well as the pragmatics of its functioning are seen as illegitimate. The emergence of this group – the ultranationalists and ‘angry patriots’ – was facilitated by the adoption of the ‘cultural turn’ in Russian politics, and in fact had been somewhat suppressed after the annexation of Crimea. Prominent members representative of this group are Igor Girkin (Igor Strelkov), Pavel Gubarev, and Maksim Kalashnikov.

The last group is made up of a different group of so-called patriots – the Wagner Group and the now ex-Wagnerites. This is a more ideologically diverse configuration than the Russian liberals or the ultranationalists, while there can be some overlap with the former group. In principle, *ChVK* Wagner could be quite supportive of regime interests, as it is primarily *étatiste* in essence and does not necessarily challenge the patron-client networks so characteristic of the neo-patrimonial state. However, the legal-rational façade is viewed not as much as a point of contention as it is seen as a superficiality. In this sense, the competition of the cliques is publicised, and

their internecine conflicts shift from backroom struggles to the subject of mass politics. The late Evgeniy Prigozhin is the prime example of a member of this group.

Of these three oppositional groups, only two actively pressured the Kremlin after the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War. This situation has resulted partially from the complete elimination of the liberal opposition in the decade leading up to the Russo-Ukrainian War. Prominent individuals who could have acted as unifying figures for the liberal opposition have either been assassinated, as was the case of Boris Nemtsov in 2015, or have been wasting away in a cell in Kharp's IK-3 penal colony. After the call for mobilisation in September 2022, many Russians sympathetic to the liberal opposition evaded their draft summons as part of the exodus of possibly over 700,000 individuals (*Reuters* 2022). As a result, the main domestic pressure to the Russian regime has emanated from those who at least tacitly if not enthusiastically supported the war, that is, the ultranationalists and the Wagnerites.

In the first place, Strelkov and his fellow 'Angry Patriots' openly challenged the patrimonial network from the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Through his constant critiques of Shoigu and Gerasimov, he brought himself into the crosshairs of the Ministry of Defence. With his calls for full mobilisation and an official declaration of war, Strelkov positioned himself as Russia's Cassandra, stating that Russia's victory in the war "is not possible" in late 2022 (*UNIAN* 2022). He continued to focus on the operational and strategic failings of the General Staff, and even intimated at their execution for treason. Many of the reasons for operational failure, including the misuse of funds, were attributed to neo-patrimonial rent extraction practices by Strelkov. Nevertheless, Strelkov was able to continue his polemics for over a year and a half, continuously pressuring the Kremlin to remove Shoigu and Gerasimov. However, a rotation to Strelkov's liking never came into place, and he began to shift his focus from the Ministry of Defence to the President. Targeting Vladimir Putin and directly attributing his culpability for Russia's strategic defeat in Ukraine was Strelkov's end (Girkin 2023). Only days after making such statements, Strelkov found himself imprisoned, charged with extremism and inciting rebellion. In an ironic twist of fate, he and Navalny now face the exact same material conditions – a creeping execution through neglect.

Nonetheless, Strelkov has doubled down on his open challenge to Putin after his arrest, going so far as to declare his own candidacy for President due

to the president's refusal "to lead military actions... [as Strelkov] consider[s] himself] to be more competent in military affairs than the incumbent president, and certainly than the incumbent defense minister, so [he] could perform the duty of supreme commander-in-chief as required by the Russian Constitution," additionally labelling Putin as "extremely gullible" and "too kind." Strelkov additionally struck straight at the functional heart of the patrimonial relations, noting the favours that Putin owed to those who "helped him come to power in the nineties" and the fact that he is beholden to his "billionaire friends."

In the second place, Prigozhin challenged certain cliques within the patrimonial network while still expecting that he could benefit from the tacit rules of the game. The mutiny of 23–24 June 2023 unveiled one of the main structural weaknesses of such a system. By openly challenging the Kremlin – through his unilateral conquest of Rostov, the downing of Russian helicopters, and bringing his forces to the border of Moscow Oblast, Prigozhin pulled away the pretence of Russian rule of law and the complete compliance with the Kremlin's orders. Prigozhin made such a decision despite receiving billions of roubles through dubious transactions to the Concord Group for catering for the armed forces, which would have made him one of the more unofficially wealthy individuals in the Russian Federation. However, the distribution of wealth in this case did not buy Prigozhin's loyalty, as his challenge to opposing cliques (namely those adjacent to the Ministry of Defence) led to a situation where his show of force would pressure Vladimir Putin, the *katechon* of the Russian neo-patrimonial system, to temporarily flee Moscow for the old capital. Either unwilling or unable to see his mutiny blossom into a coup, Prigozhin paid for this trepidation with his life.

Both Strelkov and Prigozhin epitomise the certain type of individual that constitutes an existential threat to the survival of the current regime. Unlike the liberal opposition that had been smothered into almost complete irrelevance, both were located in the centre of ideological constructions that the Kremlin itself had built at the beginning of Vladimir Putin's second term as president. Both wanted to strip away the pretence of the logical-rational justifications for institutional structure of power relations for their own practical or ideological reasons. However, one last point is even more critical in this respect – both Prigozhin and Strelkov could not be bribed through promises of wealth or a privileged position within the chain of prebendalism, meaning that the system could neither buy their loyalty nor necessarily co-opt them. For this reason, Strelkov and Prigozhin serve as

the prototypical Gracchi brothers for a future Russian Caesarianism¹ yet to come.

From Neo-Patrimonialism to Neo-Praetorianism

The intensity of Moscow's reaction to its opposition from the ultranationalist camp and *ChVK* Wagner has demonstrated that it views these groups to constitute the most serious threat to the regime's hold on power. With the removal of Prigozhin and Strelkov as regime-adjacent critical voices, the power centre of the Russia state has been categorically strengthened and reinforced around the only interest groups that remained from the past processes of competition as a part of the course of regime consolidation, i.e., *silovik* interests as represented in the security services and military, as the individuals who could not be co-opted by the system have been liquidated and their resources have been effectively redistributed to loyal clientele who neatly fit within the already extant networks. This Putin-centric structure has doubled down both on its mechanisms for maintaining loyalty as well as its domestic and international legal-rational justifications for its policy decisions, as they are still deployed for the conduct of the 'Special Military Operation,' the imprisonment the opposition, the drafting of more soldiers for the front, and for the explanation of the events surrounding Prigozhin's mutiny and consequent assassination.

What remains, then, is the depleted core group of cliques surrounding Putin, which at this point consists only of the *silovik* faction of the Ministry of Defence and the Federal Security Service. Shoigu and Gerasimov, despite their increasing unpopularity, have performed a feat of near system capture, asserting their own interests even in the face of the failed rebalancing effort of replacing Gerasimov with Sergey Surovikin. After his assassination, Prigozhin's combat assets were reallocated to Viktor Zolotov's *Rosgvardiya* (Kuczyński 2023). At the same time, while frictions of minor interest may remain amongst the *siloviki* as such, their guiding institutional interest, that is, the increasing militarisation of the state system, binds them in a pragmatic consensus. The only other patron-client ligatures of the system,

¹ Caesarianism in this case is to be understood both in the Spenglerian and Weberian sense, as the subordination of politics to the principle of power rather than economics and "the plebiscitary character of elections, disdain for parliament, the non-toleration of autonomous powers within the government and a failure to attract or suffer independent political minds".

i.e., non-military oligarchs, technocrats, and those still holding to a purely economic calculus, do not have any leverage against the decisional core due to the conditions imposed by the war – and as such, this relationship can be more aptly described as the contract as vassal and liege rather than client and patron. While privileges are still distributed, the previous sense of relative autonomy vis-à-vis competing interest groups has either diminished or been completely decimated.

Such a structure can no longer be defined as purely neo-patrimonial in its essence. While rent extraction and decisionism are still key features of the Russian regime, competition between regime adjacent factions has been removed entirely, and the previously unchallenged monopoly on decision-making is no longer ironclad and is now diffused with the security and military interest groups. While in the past Putin had balanced factional interests, he now plays the role of providing legitimation to Shoigu and Gerasimov through variously articulated strategic goals for the operation. He is still central to the structure of the contemporary system as a residue of his role in the antebellum constellation of power, as a figurehead representative of stability and national unity that had long been fostered through concerted efforts to establish a cult of personality (Cassiday and Johnson 2010), yet stratocratic interests – namely the Ministry of Defence and the Federal Security Service – play an equal role in agenda setting and deciding state policy.

Figure 2. demonstrates the transformations in the Russian system resulting from the pressures of the Russo-Ukrainian War in conjunction with the already ongoing processes of regime consolidation:

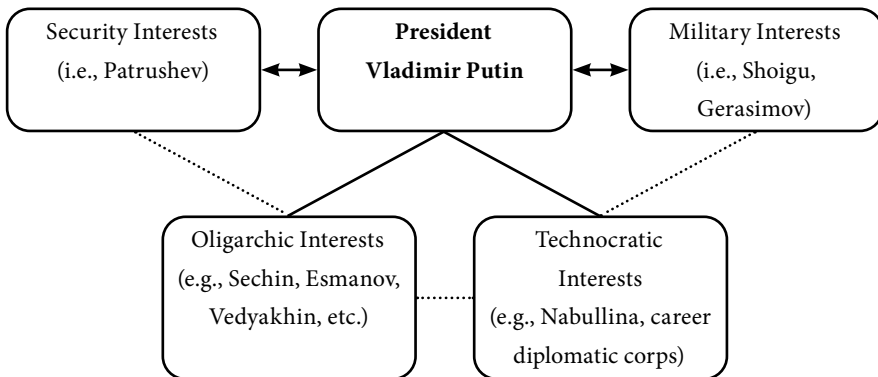


Figure 2. Bidirectional arrows represent mutual dependencies and agenda-setting capabilities, dotted lines signify potential conflicts or areas of competition, and solid lines demonstrate liege-vassal relations.

The Russian internal power structure, therefore, has shifted toward a configuration closer to praetorianism, or as the author argues, a novel type of neo-praetorianism. Praetorianism in its condensed form can be best articulated as the hegemonic position of the military or other stratocratic institutions within the decisional structure of government. The praetorian nature of Napoleon III's regime had been noted by Karl Marx (Marx 1963), and in more recent analyses, such attributions have been made for Pakistan (Haleem 2003), Türkiye (Uzgel 2003), Iran (Hen-Tov and Gonzalez 2011), and Latin America (Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas 2010). The qualitative difference between this type of praetorianism or post-praetorianism is in the maintenance of legal-rational discursive legitimation for the regime characteristic of neo-patrimonialism, especially as a punitive mechanism.

In practical terms, this configuration of the relations of power within Russia has several far-reaching implications. In the first place, the regime in its current form is still Putin-centric but Putin's practical importance is reduced. No longer a nexus of balancing competing interests or distributing rents for loyalty, Putin becomes defunct as the specificity of his structural role is reduced. In the current paradigm, he serves as a figurehead, the voice and face of the *silovik* accord. Debates on the hypothetical post-Putin era should take such considerations in mind, meaning that Putin's successor would be decided by praetorian consensus.

In the second position, the Angry Patriots and the ex-Wagnerites no longer have any systemic representation, as these groups are both prone to the use of violence and find themselves with a non-insignificant level of support from Russian society; even after the mutiny, 29 percent of Russians polled support Prigozhin and *ChVK* Wagner while another 29 percent remain ambivalent or undecided ("Евгений Пригожин: До и После Мятежа" n.d.). Although differently articulated from a Weberian or Spenglerian approach, a Gramscian analysis of such a situation would additionally predict a future emergence of Caesarism as well, as the imbalance of power and the lack of a mechanism to situate political demands through traditional institutions would create conditions for a revolutionary movement based on the ideals of restoration (Gramsci 1971). The continuing process of regime consolidation precludes the possible of their reabsorption *en masse*, meaning that such frictions are to remain for the foreseeable future.

Third, the technocratic elements and non-military oligarchic interests, lacking their previous relative autonomy and potential ability to influence agenda setting, are dis-incentivised to actively support the regime in its

current form, instead opting to conditionally support it in order to maintain current institutional positions, prestige, and wealth. As a contradiction to their reduction to vassalage, however, these interest groups are still those that allow for the practical functioning of this system in bureaucratic, institutional, and financial terms. Therefore, to dismantle such a bellicose neo-praetorian system, any strategy regarding a lasting peace settlement will have to take into account how the technocratic and oligarchic interests can be encouraged to defect through a variety of incentives, including amnesty or guarantees for personal safety, assets, or future positions. As such, while striving to hold every member of the erstwhile neo-patrimonial network accountable for Russia's aggression may be morally pleasing or the only just outcome of the war to policymakers from Kyiv to Washington, this lack of such a defection means the continued survival of the Moscow regime in its current configuration.

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3. Who Cracks First? The Russian Elites or the Russian People?

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Abstract

This chapter explores the persistent expectation among Western political circles and analysts that the security predicament arising from Russia's conflict in Ukraine might find resolution through an unforeseen event. Various hypothetical scenarios are considered, such as heightened inter-ethnic tensions leading to the collapse of the Russian Federation, increased domestic resistance prompting an end to the war, or a shift in allegiance among Russian business elites due to war failures or sanctions. However, scant evidence supports these conjectures. The most probable outcome appears to be the continuation of an increasingly autocratic Russia engaged in the conflict with Ukraine, actively challenging the West for geopolitical dominance. To substantiate this claim, the chapter scrutinises the potential for internal political upheaval, either driven by elites or the general populace.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian war, elite dynamics, Russian society, political upheaval

Hope for the Best, Prepare for the Worst

There is an enduring hope among some Western politicians and political observers that the security dilemma posed by Russia's war in Ukraine will be resolved by a black swan event. Perhaps inter-ethnic tensions within the Russian Federation, exacerbated by the disproportionate mobilisation of non-Russian ethnicities, will cause the country to collapse? Or maybe Russians will become ever more staunchly opposed to the war and force an end to the conflict? Could the Russian business elites turn against Putin due to failures in the war or sanctions-induced loss of assets? While all things remain possible, there is little evidence to support these scenarios. The most

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likely of all outcomes is more of the same: an ever more dictatorial Russia continuing to wage war on Ukraine and undermine the West in a battle for geopolitical prowess. To justify this argument, this chapter examines the potential for elite and/or popular internal political unrest that would significantly change the Russian regime (at a minimum radically changing political course by rejecting all claims to Ukrainian territory and at a maximum disintegrating entirely).

Will the Russian Elites Rebel?

The literature indicates that popular discontent is unlikely to result in revolution without a section of the political elite taking the protestors' side (Goldstone 1982); as such it makes sense to start with elite views. For this chapter, 'elites' means those who occupy leading positions in business, politics and the military-security sector. Since 2011–2012, as Nikolay Petrov has argued, the "internal corporate rules and norms characteristic of the military-security sector" have become characteristics of the entire Russian regime (Petrov 2012, 101). Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 accelerated and consolidated this shift in a way that is directly relevant to understanding attitudes and potential dissent among elites today.

No elites publicly denounced the illegal annexation of Crimea. Instead, they worked hard to administer and oversee the peninsula's occupation, indirectly suggesting a high degree of unity on the issue of Ukraine's territorial integrity and Russia's right to intervene outside its borders. As such, even if one is to accept the argument that the near absence of elite defection after the 2022 full-scale invasion was due to fear and blackmail, this does not explain why the supposed anti-war elites refused to take a stand following the 2014 annexation of Crimea or Russian crimes in Donetsk and Luhansk, when the consequences for doing so would have been less severe than in March 2022. Perhaps the scale of the 2022 invasion changed their opinion, and perhaps the negative consequences for them altered their perspective. Nevertheless, examining elite actions, or lack of, in and after 2014 excludes the possibility that respect for Ukrainian territorial integrity and opposition to Russian military intervention outside its borders were primary motivations for anti-war positions among elites in 2022. Moreover, focussing too much on that small number of objectors can distract from the evidence that the annexation of Crimea satisfied elites in offering new

resources and a sense of belonging to a resurgent great power, as reflected in the increasingly radical anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric they espoused (Volkov 2016).

A similar process of radicalisation developed within and around Russian President Vladimir Putin, no doubt reinforcing and reinforced by this chorus of criticism towards the US unipolar order. During the Coronavirus pandemic, Putin's inner circle shrank dramatically, a tendency that has continued, albeit the members of the circle vary over time. It was during the pandemic isolation that Putin made the decision to invade Ukraine, influenced by long-winded conversations with Igor Kovalchuk on the Russian leader's historical mission and frequent deliveries from the Russian state historical archives (Miller, Seddon, and Schwartz 2023). The small circle consists primarily of securocrats, but the securocrats' role, like that of other elite groups, has not remained static since 2022, as explored in the following categorisation of elites and their attitudes towards the regime and war since the full-scale invasion.

Technocrats

Technocrats can also be termed 'systemic liberals' insofar as these people would likely prefer and pursue a much more pro-Western and democratic course if left to their own devices. That said, their loyalty is first to the Putinist regime, and so the overwhelming majority of them remain pro-Putin. Their expertise has rendered the technocrats crucial to prosecuting the war, protecting the Russian economy from the impact of sanctions, increasing efficiency in military production industries (Purysova 2023), and establishing digital registries for military conscription (Komin 2023a).

The Prigozhin muntiny did not shake their loyalty, just their peace of mind. The speaker of the State Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, indirectly confirmed that many of this group had fled Moscow (Duma TV 2023). Interviews with elites suggest this was out of fear of reprisals and/or a purge by Wagner troops and Prigozhin (Komin 2023b). Although Prigozhin's death has calmed nerves, the technocrats' self-justifying arguments¹ have become less convincing. The possibility of rapid change represented by the Prigozhin

¹ These maxims are the war was a mistake but now we've started, we must finish, or it will be even worse; we can live without the west; the war will go on for decades, but we have the resources; while Putin is alive, nothing will change, just slowly decline, even after him, there'll probably an heir, so nothing will change.

rebellion will leave an enduring effect, especially as the underlying problems of the rebellion, both those that inspired people (the war and treatment of soldiers, corruption) and the inspiring factors (fight for resources and money) remain (Радио Свобода 2023). This encourages the technocrats to remain loyal in their service to Putin, lest more radical actors seize power.

Pragmatists

In contrast to the technocrats, many of whom would prefer a different type of Russia, the pragmatists are subscribed to the basic tenets of Putin's vision of Russia and the world, but more realistic than the securocrats (New Voice of Ukraine 2023). Seeing the war as unsuccessful, they think it should be frozen so that Russia can reinforce its position in the occupied territories and have a pause to regather its strengths and re-strategise. The pragmatists largely consist of state capitalists, who owe their positions to Putin. For example, Rosneft President Igor Sechin and Rostec Chairman Sergei Chemezov are typical members of this group. They advocate a realistic attitude to Russia's military capabilities but are not opposed to Russia's use of its military capabilities against Ukrainians and so pose little to no threat of opposition on their own. Notably, however, sometimes this group has aligned with the radical securocrats (see below) as both have wanted a pause in hostilities to allow Russia to 'rethink' its invasion and occupation of Ukraine (Chotiner 2023).

Securocrats

Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation and one of Putin's closest advisers, is representative of the securocrat hawks who view Russia's war on Ukraine as existential in importance and civilisational in nature. This view is rooted in a 1970s paranoid Soviet understanding of geopolitics (Kragh and Umland 2023). However, there are shades of differentiation between the securocrats themselves. On one side you have stability securocratism, where the approach of Sergey Naryshkin would be typical. They share the paranoid securocratic worldview, thinking in terms of threats, but are more hesitant regarding Russia's ability to fight those threats.

At earlier points in the war, it appeared that a radical securocratism was gaining in prominence. For example, many of Putin's closest advisers were calling for a wholesale reform of society onto a more militaristic footing and a purging of the military top brass (Chotiner 2023). Patrushev and the head of the FSB, Aleksandr Bortnikov, were numbered among them. Generally speaking, radical securocratism calls for a transformation of Russian society and more aggressive approach towards those who resist their vision of Russia – at home and abroad. On the fringes of this group, there are people linked to the radical right and many members are at odds among themselves, for example both Konstantin Malofeev and Ramzan Kadyrov could be depicted as radical securocrats, but both have clashed recently over a police raid on an unlicensed mosque in Moscow. The Kovalchuk brothers also traditionally belonged to this group of attitudes.

However, the rebellion and death of the arch 'ultra-patriot', Evgenii Prigozhin, reduced the appeal of radical securocratism. Not only did the death of Prigozhin convey a pretty stark message, but also those involved have lost out. For example, General Surovikin has seemingly been exiled to Algeria, after spending considerable time in FSB custody. There is an ongoing crackdown on the radical right, similar to what happened in 2014, exemplified by the arrest of Igor Girkin, aka Strelkov (Laruelle 2022). As became clear during the rebellion, while some securocrats want a revolution in how Russia works, they do not want a revolution that disrupts the elite power structures in any wholesale way. Those who sympathised with Prigozhin's arguments but not with the rebellion, such as Nikolai Patrushev and Viktor Zolotov, the Director of Russia's National Guard have been rewarded. The former's son has taken over many of the lucrative catering contracts that belonged to Prigozhin's company while the national guard has been promised a significant increase in military hardware.

Entrepreneurs and Oligarchs

Used metaphorically in relation to politicians, the term entrepreneurs here denotes those who embrace the war enthusiastically for monetary or other gain rather than out of a genuine belief in its righteousness (Pertsev 2023). As such, 'entrepreneurs' does not represent a category of elites but rather one of their supposed motivations. While only a fool would underestimate the cynical careerism of the Russian elites, there is no reason to assume

that declarative support for the war is simply a marker of naked ambition and that such people in no way support the war (Prokopenko 2023). This was the same mistake that many made with regard to Vladimir Putin's increasingly aggressive rhetoric before 2022; observers viewed his demands as mere propaganda or a bargaining tactic rather than a reflection of his worldview and perception of Russia's national interests. This mistake informed the decision of many governments to adopt of a policy of 'Change through Trade,' to make frequent overtures to Putin, and suggest 'resets,' all of which failed. Likewise, an assumption that pro-war elites are merely entrepreneurial could lead to flawed policy-making. Instead, the best approach to assess elites' support for Putin and the war is to judge them by the evidence of their actions. The entrepreneurialism or sincerity of their actions has little analytical use.

There are, of course, the other entrepreneurs, the so-called oligarchs in which Western governments have placed considerable hope over the years. This was a strategic mistake, mainly because from the early years of Putin's rule the stage was set to invert oligarchic principles. If in an oligarchy having great wealth and owning important assets are the only way of ensuring political power and influence, then in Putin's Russia it is the opposite. Political power and influence are the only way of ensuring you keep, or create, wealth and assets. The very fact that Russian officials patronise businessmen speaks directly to power dynamics: the rich need political approval, not vice versa. The super-rich must toe the line because, otherwise, the state will confiscate their position, power, or life – depending on the egregiousness of the overstep. The supposed power of the Russian business elites is a phantom: they have neither the ability nor the inclination to force Putin to reconsider the war.

In sum, the pragmatists and those securocrats who tend towards radicalism are the most likely sources of regime instability; however, in the case of the former, this would be modest and temporary as it would simply be a recalibration of war aims. In the case of the latter, they are unlikely to pose a threat to Putin himself, particularly following the failed rebellion. Instead, their strongest impact on political stability is likely to come from their policy influence (e.g., a new mobilisation wave) that means the war affects more people and increases public dissent. Whether or not this would be sufficient to 'crack' popular support for the war is discussed in the following section.

Will Russian Public Opinion Turn against the War?

Since 2022, the question of how many Russians support the war has been hotly debated. Ultimately, as with the elites, there is no way to know what people ‘truly’ believe, so instead analysis should focus on empirical actions and expressions, which are then correlated with other evidence to provide a more holistic view of Russian popular perceptions of the war. For example, Russian perceptions of Ukraine can be contextualised via polling during the early years of the war, which began in 2014, when Russia was considerably less authoritarian and there was no criminal responsibility for avowing one’s opposition to military aggression. Since 2014, according to Levada, the vast majority of Russians (86 percent) have consistently supported the Russian government’s decision to annex Crimea (Levada Centre 2021). On average, between 2014 and 2021, only 9 percent voiced opposition to the annexation. In 2021, even among those who believed that the country was moving in the wrong direction and were therefore less likely to be pro-Putin, the level of support for the annexation was 78 percent. This shows that popular disregard for Ukrainian territorial integrity long predated the full-scale invasion. It is tempting to ask whether, had the support for the annexation of Crimea been less overwhelming, there would still have been a full-scale invasion.

On the other hand, the same Levada polling between 2014–2021 contradicts the argument that Russians’ views of Ukraine are driven by a bloodthirsty hatred. In 2015, although Russians’ views of the Ukrainian government were very negative (87 percent), their views of the Ukrainian people were largely positive (63 percent). Around half of Russians saw Ukrainians and Russians as one people, and 63 percent wanted open borders between the two countries, but after 2013 only a very small number supported Ukraine’s absorption into Russia (Levada Centre 2021). Prior to the Revolution of Dignity, this figure had been somewhat higher, hovering between 14–23 percent. The Kremlin’s post-2022 rhetoric justifying the war has mirrored those preferences, describing itself as liberating the Ukrainian people from Western-imposed Nazis, an effective narrative in place since 2014. Some 67 percent of those polled in 2015 blamed the crisis in Crimea on Ukrainian nationalists, while just 2 percent blamed it on the Russian leadership. Just 9 percent believed the government in Ukraine represented the full range of interests of the Ukrainian population. Accordingly, 65 percent of Russians asserted their country’s right to intervene in Ukraine ‘to protect Russian speakers’ (Levada Centre 2014).

Given the findings above, it is unsurprising that most Russians were able to accept the 2022 invasion relatively easily and, in many cases, quite willingly. To help people justify this stance, the Kremlin has funded and provided a plethora of state-aligned television and social media channels offering different narratives, appealing to different tastes, but all in support of the war. To account for the variety in narratives, the theory of authoritarian spectrum of allies can be applied (McGlynn 2023). The model presents media consumers in Russia as comprising five core positions in relation to the war – active support, ritual support (obedient to the government), loyal neutrals (my country right or wrong), apathy, and active opposition – which the government tries to move into more amenable categories of support (e.g., apathetic into loyal neutrals, loyal neutrals into ritual supporters). For a 21st century authoritarian government, ritual supporters are the ideal category, insofar as such regimes distrust political agency even if in support of the regime. An obvious example of this would be the arrest of pro-war demonstrators detained under anti-protest laws by Russian police or the current crackdown on the radical right.

While the authoritarian spectrum of allies' approach was intended as a heuristic way of grouping different Russian publics according to their interaction with and consumption of narratives, further sociological studies have shown that, at least in 2022, this model also provided a fairly accurate guide to the breakdown of attitudes in Russian society. Open Minds Institute (OMI) developed the following distinctions in 2022: Hawks (comprising 23.5 percent of all respondents); Loyalists (24.8 percent); Uncertain (19.5 percent); Moderate Liberals (8.5 percent); Poor – strongly anti-war – Liberals (23.5 percent) (Open Minds Institute 2023a). OMI's polling also provides insights into the behaviour, personality types, and preferences of these clusters that show they align closely with the authoritarian spectrum of allies model. However, these clusters have changed over time. For example, in a 2023 follow-up study, OMI found that the number of uncertain people (broadly similar to the 'loyal neutrals' category) had decreased and that respondents were increasingly passive in their response to the war and so unlikely to take personal action for or against it (Open Minds Institute 2023e).

Admittedly, many of the state-aligned narratives are targeted at an imagined ethnic Russian audience but ethnic Russians remain the majority in most 'minority' republics. In polling made available to the author from OMI, the highest level of support for the war comes from the Siberian and Southern Federal Districts, which have contributed disproportionately to

the mobilisation drive and are ethnically diverse. More in-depth reports on certain regions, e.g., Kalmykia, appear to support the hypothesis that anti-war sentiment cannot be directly linked to being from a minority republic (Берстка 2023). Instead, it would appear to depend on the nation in question, as it is notable that the North Caucasus, primarily populated by non-ethnic Russians, is consistently the region with the lowest level of support for the ‘Special Military Operation.’ (Русское поле, n.d.). It is not possible to dismiss ethnicity as a factor in support for the war, but analysis of anti-war sentiment among minorities requires a more disaggregated approach.

In sum, the passive position of the liberals means they are unable to bring about political change, a situation exacerbated by the fact that most of their leaders are abroad or in prison. Meanwhile, the active supporters have not become leadership critical, despite their policy-critical stance and the failure of the Prigozhin mutiny and his subsequent assassination is likely to reinforce that trend. The growing passivity of the Russian public is a negative indicator of the potential for mass political action, and there is a deficit of evidence for the assertion that minority peoples in Russia are even opposed to the war, let alone ready to secede.

Passive Non-publics Don’t Start Revolutions

For a revolution to happen, the following are required: considerable discontent, readiness to engage and act, and popular and elite demands to coalesce (Goldstone 1982). There is little sign of any at the moment, especially in light of the failed rebellion. Suppose we start from the need for a popular-elite coalition. In that case, there are two unlikely but potential coalitions: the technocrats with the liberals/active opponents and the radical securocrats (possibly bolstered by the pragmatists temporarily) with the active supporters/hawks. For either coalition to happen, the elites would need legitimacy among the people they were courting. They do not enjoy this trust, and given that Russians consistently express distrust and dismay towards corrupt elites, it is hard to see the elites achieving such legitimacy any time soon (Левада, n.d.).

Second, the government has successfully managed popular discontent. The technocrats have optimised the response to sanctions and mobilisation drives have been targeted away from the major cities, which are most likely to protest. Moreover, while the state is repressive, the scale of repressions

is relatively small, with people encouraged to leave the country rather than prosecuted. Overall, many people still see life now as better than before Putin, which means that the argument for radical change is unlikely to overcome the enduring fear of state collapse among many Russians (Open Minds Institute 2023b). This fear props up regime stability and works against the active opposition. So, too, does the unfortunate reality that the opposition is associated with pro-Westernism and that the wider public is unenthusiastic about a pro-Western government in Russia. In a recent survey about Russia's hopes for the future, only 5 percent wanted a pro-Western government (Open Minds Institute 2023d).

Third, there is little evidence of a readiness to act among the Russian people. Prigozhin's rebellion, like the man himself, was rather *sui generis* and its failure, along with Prigozhin's death, have served as anti-examples of 'how *not* to' secure political transformation. This is underscored by the lack of overt reaction during Prigozhin's mutiny among the elites. The passivity of the Russian people and elites has consistently overachieved expectations, suggesting that the re-politicisation of Russia is a key obstacle to political change. Enabling Russians to think of themselves as political agents is an important step but far from sufficient. OMI's findings show that the politicised liberals in the active opposition have the lowest confidence in their ability to influence politics (Open Minds Institute 2023e). This, in part, explains why Prigozhin's mutiny garnered more support from anti-war Russians compared to any other group (Open Minds Institute 2023c): it represented a moment of fracture that some hoped to instrumentalise, as with Mikhail Khodorkovsky's stated reasons for supporting the mutiny.

This rather begs the question as to why the active opposition does not create its own such opportunities. Fear is an impediment among those still in Russia. However, even those abroad do not talk of how they or the Russian people can overthrow Putin, nor do they take upon themselves "active moral responsibility for bringing [the war] to an end." (Greene 2023). Consequently, what is needed is not only a re-politicisation of Russian people but also a 'publicisation' – in the sense of encouraging politicised Russian citizens to accept responsibility towards broader society and recognise their agency beyond the individual level. For this to happen, there would need to be a sharp rather than gradual turn in events.

Back to Basics

In conclusion, neither the Russian elites nor the Russian people are close to breaking under the pressures of the war. The vast majority of those opposed to, or sceptical of, the full-scale war have shown that they will not resist or will do so only on an individual level. The root of Russia's continued war acquiescence is as much the result of extreme individualism as collective hysteria. This presents a difficult challenge since many in the opposition also propagate and exhibit this extreme individualism, rather than responsibility for the nation's actions and resolving them (Greene 2023). There are exceptions, such as anti-feminist war resistance, anarchists, and nationalists, all of whose ideologies are centred around the role of the collective, but their non-representativeness leaves the answer to the question of 'who will break first, the people or the elites' as: neither, at least on the current trajectory.

Such a dissatisfying answer demands a return to the drawing board and consideration of why it matters whether the Russian elites or people are close to breaking? It matters insofar as elite or popular unrest is viewed as a plausible way to prevent Russians from killing Ukrainians. But with that unrest itself remaining unlikely, this approach becomes rather theoretical. If the aim is to ensure Ukrainians' victory over Russia, then the most effective approach is not to persuade a mid-ranking official to release an insipid anti-war statement but rather to produce and supply the weapons Ukraine needs to win. This tackles the roots of the problem – Russia's ability to destroy Ukraine – and is also the most effective, perhaps only, way to move Russian elite and popular opinion. It is noteworthy the biggest shifts in popular opinion occurred following the September 2022 mobilisation and the Ukrainian victories in Kharkiv and Kherson.

On the basis of this chapter, the most sensible policy approach for Ukraine's allies is to focus on what they can control, working to their own benefit and according to their own values by bolstering Ukraine's performance on the battlefield, the success of which is in NATO, US, and European interests. Part of this includes preparing for the worst in Russia, even if we hope for the best. The worst involves a medium-to-long-term continuation of the Putinist regime, increasingly repressive towards an ever more passive population and committed to waging an extended war on Ukrainians. If Western countries want to counter this, then they need to focus on arming Ukrainians, including through joint ventures of defence companies and rearmament programmes that ensure the required weapons stock arrive

in a timely fashion. Working out how to achieve that will prove much more useful than hoping for the Russian people or Russian elites to save us from themselves. Neither will crack, because the structures around both are already broken. The bigger question would be how to fix them, but that is a problem for Russians to solve, and at a later time.

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4. Weaponised Historical Narratives

Russian World War II Narratives as Tools of Kremlin Propaganda

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Abstract

The Russian Federation is actively conducting information warfare, tailoring its propaganda production, and spreading various aggressive narratives to promote its interests. Most of those narratives are hostile towards Russia's neighbours and Western countries. Some hostile narratives are created based on historical narratives, and history is being manipulated to alter future aims. Historical narratives do not only affect modern realities and modern narratives but are also used to shape the future. The Kremlin uses historical World War II narratives in its disinformation programmes to incite anti-Western attitudes and to justify its actions. The Kremlin is exploiting history to further Russia's geopolitical aims, including those in Ukraine. This chapter aims to highlight World War II narratives that have been weaponised by the Kremlin to achieve its political goals and justify Russia's aggression.

Keywords: Historical narratives, World War II, Russia, Ukraine

Introduction: Narratives and their Importance in Current Global Confrontation

Narratives are accounts of a series of related events that shape the way people understand the world around them. There are metanarratives that describe the overall "story" of an event or occurrence. Metanarratives are deeply embedded in a culture, as they provide a pattern for cultural life and social structure and create a framework for communication about what people are expected to do in certain situations (Halverson, Corman, and Goodall 2011, 7). They condition how different ideological groups think, feel, and act and what they believe in. Metanarratives are the base from which all

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other stories branch out, including strategic, hostile, and historical narratives (Vihmand-Veebel 2022, 110).

Strategic narratives are the intersection of communication and power and can be defined as the tools that political actors employ to promote their interests, values, and aspirations for international order by managing expectations and altering the discursive environment (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2017). Strategic narratives reflect policy goals that guide decision-making (Veebel, Markus, and Vihmand 2020, 12). Strategic narratives can be hostile. Hostile narratives are designed mostly as export oriented but are also for internal use. They target feelings and emotions and pinpoint specific vulnerabilities. Hostile narratives are made by combining true and false information. In such constructs, the narration of facts counts more than the facts themselves. Topics are presented to reinforce community and cultural pride. Most content used to build hostile narratives is not always objectively false or even falsifiable. Much of the outcomes are not even classifiable as hate speech. However, it is intended to reinforce tribalism, to polarise and divide, and is specifically designed to exploit social fractures, creating a distorted perception of reality by eroding the trust in media, institutions, and eventually democracy itself (Flore 2020, 13–14).

The Russian Federation is actively participating in information warfare, producing propaganda and hostile narratives to promote Russia's interests regionally and globally. Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the Kremlin has renewed its disinformation campaigns in Russia and intensified its influence operations across Central and Eastern Europe. Pro-Kremlin propaganda is used to justify the Kremlin's actions domestically and to foster division within European societies. One of the tools that are used to promote the Kremlin's propaganda are Russian historical narratives about World War II that have been weaponised and used to construct contemporary hostile narratives to support Russia's geopolitical ambitions.

You Have to Know the Past to Understand the Present: Russian and Western Contrasting World War II Narratives

Interpretation of historical events can affect metanarratives and the strategic narratives that branch out of them. Historical narratives are inherent to the state and the people living in that state. However, historical narratives can be

radically divergent among these countries. This can be explained by the fact that even when discussing the very same subject or event, different countries focus on different objects (Vihmand-Veebel 2022, 114). Some of Russia's historical narratives may seem hostile to the West, but, in fact, they solely represent different perspectives of historical events. It used to be the case with Russian World War II narratives that presented the events and subjects of the largest global war of the 20th century from Russia's perspective.

Even though there are many well-known and generally accepted facts about World War II, there are many different perspectives on that war. Each country affected by the biggest and deadliest war in history has its historical narrative about World War II, which reflects the country's perspective of that war and shows how this country presents its role in World War II. Since there is always more than one perspective on events, historical narratives about World War II can be divergent and even contrasting among different countries.

Besides presenting different views on certain historical events, contrasting historical narratives can be parts of strategic narratives used to serve political purposes of current political leaders. They may even be interpreted as hostile ones and used in hybrid warfare. Some modern Russian scientists argue that in the post-war years, some Western States are making great efforts to falsify the history of World War II in order to influence public and individual consciousness to create a negative image of the Soviet Union and modern Russia (e.g., Cibulka 2017). Such Western diversions on the historical front are said to be achieved by the tendentious selection of facts and the concealment, distortion, and outright falsification of many events of World War II (Orlov 2018, 97).

Whether for political purposes or not as a part of strategic narratives or just different interpretations of historical events, several historical facts and events of World War II are interpreted differently by Russia and the Western countries, forming contrasting narratives about that global confrontation. In Russia, World War II is more often referred to as the Great Patriotic War because for Russia the conflict between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1945 was the most important part of World War II. Until today, the Great Patriotic War is a significant source of national pride for the people of Russia that evokes deep emotional responses. The Russian historical narrative says that the Great Patriotic War was the most important part of World War II and that it was the Soviet Union that claimed an epic and crushing victory over Nazism and saved the entire world. At the same

time, contrasting historical narratives give the credit of winning World War II and defeating fascism to the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union (only as a part of victorious alliance), refer to the German-Soviet war just as the *Eastern Front*, and do not consider it being crucial to the outcome of World War II.

The Russian narrative says that the West is exaggerating the role and the contribution of the Western states, primarily the United States, to both the course of the war and the victory while belittling those of the Soviet Union. However, one of the most significant contrasting historical narratives about World War II concerns the beginning of that war. Even though it is generally considered that World War II began on 1 September 1939 when Nazi Germany invaded Poland, the exact causes of World War II are debated. Besides fascist Germany being the one to blame for unleashing World War II, there is a narrative that says that World War II was caused by Germany, Japan, and Italy. The third common narrative about the culprits of World War II are that Germany and the Soviet Union are the ones to blame. For obvious reasons, the Russian Federation is actively fighting against this narrative, saying that the West is spreading a false narrative in order to create a negative image of modern Russia (Orlov 2018, 95). In April 2022, President Putin even signed a law imposing up to a 15-day detention and fines for anyone drawing parallels between the actions of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany or denying the decisive role and humanitarian mission of the Soviet Union during World War II.

Contrasting historical narratives that accuse the Soviet Union of having a part in unleashing a war are seen in Russia as a part of a psychological war against the nations of the former Soviet Union (Gukalenko 2010, 114). Such narratives are said to be conducted to remove responsibility from certain Western countries that helped Germany and pushed Hitler towards unleashing the war, wishing that Hitler would attack the Soviet Union so that it could be destroyed (Cibulka 2017, 133).

In the 21st century, moderations of these and several other World War II narratives are transferred to modern realities and used in the context of Russia's actions in Ukraine. Since the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict in 2014, Russian historical World War II narratives have been used not only to promote Russia's view of that war but also to achieve Russia's political goals and justify its aggression. Since 2014, Russia's propagandistic disinformation campaigns have been actively using associations with World War II to associate Ukraine with fascism and the Nazis. In 2022, these associations

have become ubiquitous: the analogy with the Great Patriotic War has become the most critical tool for the ideological mobilisation of Russian society (Vishnevskiy 2022). History is being manipulated, appropriated, and exploited to further Russia's geopolitical aims and even to alter the future. The Kremlin wants to control Russia's collective memory of World War II. To do that, Russian officials invoke and use World War II imagery to incite anti-Western attitudes and justify Russia's aggression toward Ukraine – weaponising historical narratives and changing them to become the tools of the Kremlin's propaganda.

Weaponised World War II Narratives

Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin's disinformation architecture had established a spectrum of key narratives which for years had underpinned its messaging and provided a veil of legitimacy for the 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine. Once the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began, Russia's key disinformation narratives were supplemented with additional messaging to form the core foundational narratives that continue to underpin Kremlin influence operations related to the war in Ukraine (Open Information Partnership 2022, 7–8).

To a greater or lesser extent, these narratives are fed by analogies and associations with World War II and the Great Patriotic War. The idea that NATO is a threat expanding eastwards in contravention of treaties signed in the final days of the Soviet Union with the expressed intention of destroying Russia (Open Information Partnership 2022, 7) is supported by a weaponised historical World War II narrative claiming that "in 2022, Russia could not let the West repeat what it did in 1941."

The Russian narrative says that in the beginning of the 1940s the Soviet leadership put too much faith in Germany's promises not to attack the Soviet Union. As a result, the Soviet Union was attacked, millions were killed, German troops almost reached Moscow, and the Siege of Leningrad took place. Furthermore, that all happened because the leaders of the Soviet Union believed that Germany would stick to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact – a non-aggression pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed in 1939 – and would not attack the Soviet Union (Klimov 2022). When Vladimir Putin announced the beginning of the 'Special Military Operation' on 24 February 2022 he said:

“In 1940 and early 1941 the Soviet Union went to great lengths to prevent war or at least delay its outbreak. To this end, the USSR sought not to provoke the potential aggressor until the very end by refraining or postponing the most urgent and obvious preparations it had to make to defend itself from an imminent attack. When it finally acted, it was too late. As a result, the country was not prepared to counter the invasion by Nazi Germany, which attacked our Motherland on June 22, 1941, without declaring war” (Putin 2022).

Putin also stated that “the attempt to appease the aggressor ahead of the Great Patriotic War proved to be a mistake which came at a high cost” for Russia and its people “will not make this mistake the second time,” as it has “no right to do so” (*ibid.*).

In the 21st century, parallels are drawn between the actions and words of Nazi Germany and NATO. A Russian narrative says that not long before Adolf Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, Germany declared the peaceful nature of constructing of its fortifications on the borders with the Soviet Union. They said that the transfer of troops to the Soviet Union’s borders did not threaten the Soviet Union. The Nazis managed to convince the Soviet leadership, and on the eve of the Great Patriotic War, the leaders of the Soviet Union believed the promises of their Western partners. The Soviet leadership is said to have sincerely believed that war would not happen in the near future.¹ As a result, they missed the opportunity to prevent it or at least prepare for an adequate response to aggression. Russia’s narrative says that if the Soviet army had been mobilised in advance, the Great Patriotic War would not have lasted as long and caused so many casualties and destruction. Moreover, maybe Germany would not have dared to attack the Soviet Union, because their only intention was a quick *Blitzkrieg*, and not a protracted and long war (Klimov 2022).

Based on historical lessons, Russia’s current narrative states that these were the reasons why Russian leaders decided to be more cautious after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the United States, together with NATO partners, launched a “large-scale movement of the alliance to the east” and “military bases appeared on the territory of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, like mushrooms after the rain” (*ibid.*). NATO’s assurance that these bases

¹ Even though Russia admits that Soviet Union’s attitude towards Germany started to change by the end of 1940, Russians did start to prepare for a war with Germany but were not expecting it to start until 1942 (Chubarjan 2016, 390). Even Vladimir Putin admitted that “the war did not come as a surprise, people were expecting it, preparing for it” (Putin 2020).

do not pose any danger to Russia was not taken very seriously. The last red line that the West decided to cross and that made the Russian leadership make serious decisions is said to have been the supply of lethal weapons to Ukraine (Putin 2022).

Additionally, Russia notes that Ukraine is not a member of NATO but only in official terms. Unofficially, it has long been closely associated with the alliance: military bases are being built on the territory of Ukraine according to NATO standards and the US military is training the Ukrainian army, including preparations for offensive battles. The Kremlin states that Western countries have regularly spoken about this to Russian officials and claimed that there were no threats to Russia, but the Kremlin could not believe it anymore. In the second half of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, the Russian leadership has been trying to get firm guarantees from its Western partners, but to no avail. The negotiation process of those months has shown that the goal of the West was to “draw Russia into endless negotiations and to further increase NATO’s military presence in Eastern Europe and Ukraine” (Klimov 2022). According to the Russian narrative, the Kremlin saw this reinforcement as being directed against Russia and allegedly considered it quite possible that 1941 would be repeated.

Russia’s narrative states that Russia acted preventively to protect its borders and the security of its citizens. Russian leaders say that there was no other choice, because otherwise Russia would have been attacked first. Since Russia had no right to repeat the mistakes of the past, it did not succumb to “unfounded promises” from NATO and, therefore, in 2022, made a different decision (*ibid.*). According to the Kremlin, Russia was forced to launch a military operation in Ukraine. The Russian narrative claims that the West did not want to recognise Russia’s rights to security and the time had come to call everything by its proper name: the United States and its allies want to destroy Russia. The Russian narrative claims that the peaceful nature of NATO is a lie because the United States and NATO have long had the blood of the people of Serbia, Iraq, Libya, and Syria on their hands and nothing would have stopped them from similar bloodshed in Russia (*ibid.*). This narrative logic, which found very little understanding outside Russia, worked surprisingly well for the internal mobilisation of the Russian people.

This hostile Russian strategic narrative that uses a historical narrative as a tool for the Kremlin’s propaganda to justify its recent actions is an example of pro-Kremlin propagandists discussing the Ukrainian conflict in the context of a distorted interpretation of modern history centred on the

historic rivalry between the West and the East. It also correlates with the Russian claims that the United States has always sought to destroy Russia because it challenges its global dominance, stating that NATO expansion is a fundamental threat to Russia's security and that the West incites conflict directed at Russia. These messages attempt to legitimise and justify Russian military aggression as well as shift the blame for the war onto other actors (Open Information Partnership 2022, 8).

Shifting the blame for the war onto other actors is also a part of Russia's contrasting historical World War II narrative about what events caused the war and who is to blame for it. Just like for the beginning of the World War II, Russia blames Western states for the actions that lead to the Ukrainian conflict, emphasising the desire of the West to suppress Russia on the international stage.

The Russian mainstream narrative about the culprits of World War II says that Adolf Hitler and German National Socialism were the leading force of the aggressive bloc that unleashed World War II and strived for the destruction of the Soviet Union as the main obstacle on its path to dominating the world (Orlov 2018, 91). But certain Western countries helped Germany and pushed it towards unleashing the war (Cibulka 2017, 133). Those who want to falsify history are said to deny the fact that fascism was raised, placed in power, and armed by Western monopolistic companies (*ibid.*). Russian historians say that without certain synthetic fuels and strategic raw materials that were provided by US companies, as well as tanks, planes, trucks, and other equipment supplied by subsidiaries of US corporations in Germany, Hitler would not have dared to invade Poland, and that the German air force and infantry could not have easily defeated their adversaries in 1939-1940 (Orlov 2018, 88).

Russian authors argue that the leadership of the Soviet Union offered Great Britain and France the chance to conclude military agreements to restrain the aggressor (Hitler's Germany) and prevent the unleashing of a global war. However, it is said that these Western governments were not interested in doing so because they wanted to push Hitler towards a war with the Soviet Union (Cibulka 2017, 133). Similarly, in the 21st century, Western governments, primarily the United States, are said to be interested in destroying Russia and inciting a conflict directed at Russia. For that reason, according to Russia's narrative, Russia had to take steps in Ukraine to not only protect the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic from

an attack by Ukrainian troops and to demilitarise and de-Nazify Ukraine but also to protect Russia itself from a possible attack.

Another example of the misuse of contrasting World War II narratives to help achieve the Kremlin's political goals and justify Russia's aggression in Ukraine is also related to the idea that the war in Ukraine is a war between the West and Russia and that NATO states, led by the US, want to harm, or even destroy the Russian Federation. That idea is supported by a narrative stating that "just like during World War II, Russia is now at war with the whole West."

In April 2022, Russian Deputy Commander of the Central Military District Major General Rustam Minnekaev commented on Russian actions in Ukraine and said, "We are now at war with the whole world, as it was in the Great Patriotic War when the whole of Europe and the whole of the world were against us" (Zubarev 2022). A similar statement was made later that month by the Governor of Saint Petersburg, Aleksander Beglov, who said that during the years of the Great Patriotic War, the Siege of Leningrad was conducted by 13 European countries, who now, together with the United States, are trying to blockade all of Russia and, just like their fathers and grandfathers, are supplying weapons to the Nazis in Ukraine (Vishnevskiy 2022). He also added, "Our Armed Forces are fighting with the same enemy, with the same Nazis, as the Soviet Army during the Great Patriotic War" (Biznes Onlayn 2022).

One of Russia's modern key narratives, 'the West, led by the United States, is against Russia' is actively used in the context of the war in Ukraine and also intertwined with historical World War II narratives. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has compared Washington's steps to create an anti-Russian coalition with the actions of the Nazi German leadership. He stated, "Washington's actions in creating a coalition against Russia are comparable to those of Adolf Hitler, who fought against the USSR. The USA is trying to unite Europe against Russia to finally solve the 'Russian question'" (Shishkova 2023). Lavrov also noted that just as Napoleon mobilised almost all of Europe against the Russian Empire and Hitler directed many conquered countries against the Soviet Union, the United States has also organised a coalition of almost all European countries against Russia and is waging war against Russia through Ukraine as its proxy (*ibid.*).

Another Russian core narrative in the Ukrainian conflict that is supported by weaponised World War II narratives is about the allegedly "corrupt and incompetent" Ukrainian government that is compared to Nazis

and labelled fascists. The Ukrainian leadership, starting with the president, is accused of allowing itself to make statements that are thoroughly saturated with misanthropy and fascism (Kosolapova and Rechmenskiy 2022). Accusations that Ukraine and its government are populated by Nazis have become a core pillar of pro-Russian disinformation, especially after Putin declared the invasion as a ‘Special Military Operation’ focused on “de-Nazification” (Open Information Partnership 2022, 9).

Modern Russian narratives about Ukraine are full of terminology associated with Nazism, such as *fascism*, *Nazi*, *genocide*, and *holocaust*. The importance of using specific words, terms, and linguistic expressions – the importance of the linguistic factor – cannot be underestimated in world politics and in the construction of a state narrative. Strategic keywords can be used to achieve specific political aims and promote hostile narratives. Word selection affects the perception of a message and may impact textual reception. Russian state-level propaganda emphasises that the ‘other’ side of the Ukrainian conflict is represented by *fascists*, *neo-Nazis*, *punishers* (in Russian, *капаету*) and *Banderites*, and Russia has to fight against them just like it did 80 years ago (Vishnevskiy 2022).

The terms *Banderites* or *Banderovites* (the bynames for *Bandera’s people*) in Russian narratives have negative Nazi-associated connotations. These terms are derived from the name of Stepan Bandera – the controversial Ukrainian nationalist who has earned the title of Nazi and extremist in Russia. In contrast, Ukrainian independence fighters respect him as a great son of the Ukrainian people (Kotšinev 2022, 64), because during World War II he fought against the Soviet Union. Glorifying the Ukrainian anti-hero after the beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict has been widely condemned by the Russian Federation. President Putin describes him as a Nazi collaborator, whose criminal acts cannot be excused (Putin 2020). Calling 2022 and 2023 Ukrainian independence fighters Banderites evokes a deep emotional response and clear parallels with the Nazis.

Pro-Russian voices have also attempted to foster anti-Ukrainian sentiment by accusing Ukraine and its military of moral and ethical corruption. Russia has consistently accused Ukraine of using civilians as human shields, shelling residential buildings, and perpetrating other war crimes (Open Information Partnership 2022, 9–10). Again, parallels with World War II and the Nazis are brought in an attempt to persuade foreign audiences that Ukrainians are in no way better than Russians when it comes to the conduct of war, for example, referring to an order that was given to Ukrainian

doctors instructing them to castrate Russian prisoners of war (Kosolapova and Rechmenskiy 2022). Such a statement was made by Ukrainian lawyer, theologian, and civil activist Gennady Druzenko, who indeed gave that order and compared Russian soldiers to cockroaches, but later apologised for his words. The Russian media interpreted his words in connection to the Nazis, bringing it as an example of the fascist morality of the Ukrainian leadership. Druzenko was compared with the German doctor Mengele, who practiced in the concentration camp of Auschwitz during World War II. In contrast, Russian narratives harken to the supposed goodwill of the Russian people, who during the Great Patriotic War and the Siege of Leningrad treated the wounded Germans on the territory of the Mechnikov Medical Institute (*ibid.*).

Disinformation actors have also attempted to aggrandise Russia to maintain the myth of its invincibility and create the perception that Moscow's victory is inevitable (Open Information Partnership 2022, 12). That narrative is supported by the World War II narrative about the contribution of the Soviet Union's Red Army to the course and outcome of the war. This Russian historical narrative lionises the Red Army and gives it credit for its principle and crucial contribution to the defeat of Nazism (Putin 2020). Russian narratives also promote the idea that the war in Ukraine will inevitably result in a Russian victory. The end of the statement by the Governor of Saint Petersburg, Aleksander Beglov, which was already mentioned earlier, sums up this idea: "Our Armed Forces today are fighting the same enemy, the same Nazis, as the Soviet Army fought during the Great Patriotic War. And the result will be the same – we will win!" (Biznes Onlayn 2022).

Another Russian disinformation narrative concentrates on sanctions and their impact on the Russian economy. It promotes the idea that sanctions do not affect the Russian economy. On the contrary, sanctions are hurting Europe more than Russia. Imposing sanctions is described as economic blockade and is compared to the Siege of Leningrad during World War II. Moreover, the collective West is deemed responsible for this situation (Biznes Onlayn 2022). In 2020, President Putin pointed out that it is unacceptable to turn the economy into an instrument of pressure and confrontation. He underscored that the agreements of the Treaty of Versailles after World War I basically robbed Germany by forcing the country to pay enormous reparations to the Western allies and, consequently, prepared the ground for World War II (Putin 2020).

Conclusion

History is a science that is often influenced by ideologies and modern realities. However, history itself, as well as the interpretation of historical events and historical narratives, may directly affect modern realities and modern narratives. One of the Russian World War II narratives states that the West is deliberately spreading false narratives about World War II in order to belittle the Soviet Union's contribution to the war and create a negative image of Russia. Russia claims that historical revisionism, the manifestations of which can be observed in the West, is affecting the subject of World War II and its outcome (Putin 2020), and that the West is leaving out, silencing, or distorting facts about World War II (Cibulka 2017, 135).

Since the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict, Russia itself has been re-writing history to support its present narratives. History is being manipulated, appropriated, and exploited. Historical World War II narratives have been weaponised and used in the Kremlin's propaganda in order to support Russia's geopolitical aims and justify its aggression. Drawing parallels between the war in Ukraine and the Great Patriotic War has become an essential tool for the ideological mobilisation of Russian society. First, associations with the Great Patriotic War evoke a deep emotional response, and reinforce tribalism, and cultural pride. Second, these associations polarise and divide, creating a distorted perception of reality. Abusing history affects the perception of the present and future. It all affects how the people of Russia see the realities of modern life, relations between different countries, and the role of their own country in the international arena.

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5. The Weaponisation the Russian Orthodox Church by the Kremlin

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Abstract

The ‘Russian World’ is not just an expression used by President Vladimir Putin and political leaders of Russia in their numerous public appearances, but it is rather a mentality that has created a narrative taken abroad by the wide circle of ultra-nationalist influencers with the Russian Orthodox Church in the first row. Even before the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2014, the Kremlin had secured an expected ally. The Russian Orthodox Church does not only align with the government due to dependence or corruption, but it has historically had the same goal: preserving its territories and influence in countries that Vladimir Putin also deems historically part of ‘Great Russia’ or *Russkiy Mir*. Maintaining its diminishing influence is a common challenge for both the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church, leading to its unopposed weaponisation by the Kremlin. It creates a mutually beneficial bond; while the Kremlin has the weapons and political will, the church has the ideology and influence to back them.

Keywords: Russian Orthodox Church, Russkiy Mir, influence

Historic Roots of Current Affairs

Throughout its history, the Russian Orthodox Church has had a significant influence on politics, society, and culture in Russia. It managed to maintain its organisation throughout the centuries, even during the Soviet period when parishioners and priests were often persecuted, churches demolished or repurposed, and assets confiscated. According to Russian political philosopher, Slavophile, and devout Orthodox Ivan Ilyin, the origins of Russian Christianity can be traced back to Apostle Andrew as one of Jesus’ earliest

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apostles and his activity in propagating Christianity in Chersonesus, Crimea (Hiob 2021).

In Crimea, the first Slavic tribes accepted Christianity, the first Russian saints were canonised after being killed by the Roman emperor Diocletian, and the Crimean Chersonesus territory is often regarded as the cradle of Russian Christianity. Centuries later, regent of Kievan Rus' Olga converted to Christianity, followed by the baptism of her grandson Vladimir the Great in ancient Chersonesus, commencing the nation-wide baptism of the Kievan Rus'. During Vladimir's rule, Orthodox Christianity became the state religion, one that underwent a deep transformation after the Great Schism of 1054.

These roots, harkening back to Crimea, Chersonesus, and Kyiv, have been considered an important part of Russian nationalism and identity by many historians and philosophers, including Nikolay Karamazin and Ivan Ilyin. Ilyin even underlines that "in the deep consciousness the lives of people and its leadership have so much melted together with the church that 'Russian nationalism' and 'Russian orthodoxy' have become inseparable during centuries" (Hiob 2021, 25). The historic legacy and Slavophiles such as Ilyin have allegedly also influenced Vladimir Putin's rhetoric about "Greater Russia" and its historical inseparable roots.

Despite considerable repressions, the Russian Orthodox Church maintained its structure and organisation under Soviet rule. The Church had tight cooperation with the Committee of the State Security (KGB) whilst the highest-ranking or internationally active priests often tended to be members of the committee (Harris 1993). According to Soviet archives discovered in Estonia, Alexey II, the first patriarch of the Russian Federation, closely cooperated with the KGB and was known as *Drozdov* or *Trush*, while his rise in the ranks of the World Council of Churches established in the Soviet Union corresponded to his rise in the ranks of the KGB (Corley 2018). The current Patriarch Kirill, birth name Vladimir Gundyayev, was also a KGB agent by the pseudonym of *Mykhailov*, and Swiss authorities have traced his links with the agency back to the 1970s (Corley 2018).

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the leaders of the Russian Federation have empowered the church to be the "carrier of moral and conservative values" and spent a significant amount of money in the restoration of its traditions and organisation. During his tenure as mayor of Moscow, Yuriy Luzhkov stated before opening the new Cathedral of the Christ the Saviour

in 2000, which was estimated to have cost 1 billion dollars, that the “church is now responsible for the spiritual upbringing of Russians.”

Patriarch Alexey II echoed the sentiment that the unveiling of the Church for the millennial anniversary of the Christianisation of the Rus’ “symbolised both the rebirth of orthodox faith as well as the rebirth of the Russian nation.” According to the Pew Research Center in 1991, 31 percent of the Russian population associated itself with the Orthodox Christianity, and in 2008 as much as 72 percent of the population did so. These numbers have remained practically the same as of now, and in April 2022 the Public Opinion Fund, notes that 66 percent of the population trusts in the Russian Orthodox Church. While the church has been reborn also thanks to the efforts of the secular leaders of the state, it has become a valuable and trusted conduit of communication from first president of the Russian Federation – Boris Yeltsin – to Vladimir Putin.

Putin Finds His Path

Over the course of Vladimir Putin’s leadership, the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church have grown increasingly close. This is partly because Putin inherited the productive relationship between the Kremlin and church from Yeltsin and partly because he became increasingly cognisant of the value of this channel of influence that the majority of the populace trusted.

Although, according to Cyrill Hovorun, who had acted as the theological advisor of Kirill until 2012, Patriarch Kirill was not particularly fond of the KGB (CBS 2022), and Putin had dedicated a significant part of his life to the organisation, there were other unifying factors.

The post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church preached the same leitmotif as Vladimir Putin – opposition to the West and all things Western, increasingly conservative values, and regaining and retaining influence over those territories considered by both leaders to be “rightfully so Russian spheres of interests.” While Putin had never listed these countries “of interest” in a single sheet, it was well done by one of the priests in a video clip shared by opposition politician Mikhail Khodorkovsky. All big and small and white Rus’ should reach as one immortal force from Vladivostok to Kaliningrad and be united with Moldova, Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Baltic states. Arguments supporting the new religious map by the priest in the video were

based on religious as well as military rationales (The Azeri Times 2022). He did not specifically mention Belarus', even though Russia-Ukraine-Belarus is considered by the Kremlin to be the main core of the "Russian world."

The Church had embraced Ilyin's and Slavophile and Euroasianist Lev Gumilev's anti-Western and pro-Eurasian ideas even sooner than the Kremlin had. Although Putin's radicalisation has been gradual, it has grown more visible after the Munich Peace Conference in 2007, and this rhetoric has notably and increasingly become fused with the narratives of the Russian Orthodox Church. While Putin was delivering his famous speech criticising the United States' unipolar dominance and urging NATO not to expand, Metropolitan Kirill was in Cuba, offering to build the first church in Havana and honouring his ally Fidel Castro in the battle against ostensible American imperialism.

Rather than looking to the Soviet Union, though, it was a glorification of the Russian Empire and Tsars. These were times when the Tsar was appointed by God and the Church received rewards from the Tsar. As Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov said that Putin has only three advisors: Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Catherine the Great (Seddon 2023). In 2000, the Russian Orthodox Church had already canonised the last Tsar in the Romanov bloodline, Nicholas II. The territories that Putin considered his sphere of interest seem to significantly overlap with the territory of the Russian Empire while also matching the Church's sphere of interest with regards to parishes and its historic past. Ukraine remains the birthplace of Russian Christianity, the Russian diaspora is the sphere of interest, and some territories that used to be governed by the Russian Empire remain rhetorically disputed by the Kremlin.

In 2012, Kirill remotely joined 'Team Putin,' calling just before the president's elections and stating the 12-years rule of Putin was a miracle from God as opposed to the period preceding Putin's ascent to power, which was comparable to the 1941 Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.

When a year later, in October 2013, the Maidan, or Revolution of Dignity, began in Ukraine against pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych, it put pressure on the Russian Orthodox Church, which had remained the largest religious institution, with two-thirds of Ukrainians identifying as Catholic Orthodox.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate remained the only canonical Orthodox Church despite the parallel establishment of the new Ukrainian Orthodox Church after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Despite this, the Russian Orthodox Church remained the dominant church due to the traditional belief of the importance of its canonicity, hence carrying the Holy Spirit. Autocephaly could only be granted by Constantinople, and all the numerous attempts of gaining independence had been denied.

Tensions escalated during Maidan and the following occupation of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk in 2014. During the Maidan, the Russian Orthodox Church did not take the active stance that was expected from the up to 9 million members of its 13,000 parishes in Ukraine, especially when the Ukrainian Orthodox Church opened its doors to all the protestors and people in need. In the summer of 2014, Patriarch Kirill officially supported the annexation of Crimea, taking local parishes under his direct control while Putin addressed the Federal Assembly:

“A historic reunification of Crimea and Sevastopol with Russia has taken place. For our country, for our nation, this event has a special significance. Our people live in the Crimea, and the territory itself is strategically important because here are the spiritual origins of the formation of the multifaceted but monolithic Russian nation and the centralised Russian state” (OrthoChristian.Com 2014).

Putin kept returning to the significance of this origin story and to Chersonesus and Kyivan Rus’ almost annually, stating that the baptism of Vladimir was the key event in the formation of the Russian history, state, and culture, and that Chersonesus still nourishes the roots of the brotherly nations of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus (Kremlin 2015). This thought has been continuously echoed from the Russian Orthodox Church to religious paramilitary units fighting in the Donbas. These historical and religious roots became constant justifications of the Kremlin’s politics.

Since its first mention by President Dmitri Medvedev in 2011, the concept of the Russian World (Russkiy Mir) was added to the mix as well, appealing to the idea of a shared Orthodox and Slavic heritage. Ilyin’s, Gumilev’s, and other Eurasianist ideas began their life in the mutual propaganda of the Kremlin and the church.

In 2019, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople granted autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and granted its independence from the Russian Orthodox Church for the first time since 1686. The threats of Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov of Russia defending the interests of Russians, Russian speakers, and the Orthodox community remained unheard. In response to the *Tomos*, Moscow broke off its ties with Constantinople,

leading to what has been called the gravest split among Christians since the Great Schism of 1054 that divided Eastern Orthodoxy from Catholicism.

By 2020, a third of Ukrainian Orthodox believers identified themselves with the new Ukrainian Orthodox Church, while 14 percent decided to stay with Russian Orthodox Church, leaving them continuously under the influence of a Kremlin that became more and more bellicose. Since the large-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, the rhetoric of both the Kremlin and Patriarch Kirill have continued to be echoed, justifying the war in Ukraine as being necessary to purge Nazis and oppose NATO expansion. This escalation has received significant criticism from part of his clergy as well as from other religious leaders. Even Pope Francis told Patriarch Kirill, “Brother, we are not clerics of the state and the Patriarch cannot transform himself into Putin’s altar boy” (Fontana 2022).

Just days after the mass killings in Bucha, Patriarch Kirill blessed the armed forces, calling for people to join the army and to protect the Fatherland with their lives, seeing it as a duty for everyone while applying Gumilev’s passonarity concept that the Russian people can out-suffer anyone or survive in any conditions while being able to protect their land like no one else (Патриархия.ру 2022). When in September 2022 the call for mobilisation was met with discontent in different parts of Russia, Kirill used his soft power to state that sacrifice in the course of carrying out military duty washes away all sins (Radio Free Europe 2022). During the war in Ukraine, Putin has become more radicalised while the Russian Orthodox Church has always echoed his positions. Like back in 2012, Kirill laid out the first of the three priorities of the Russian Orthodox Church – the church should always support the Kremlin in whatever decisions it makes (Adamsky 2019), even if this means becoming a party to the Kremlin’s genocide and war crimes in aiding in the deportation of thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia and a ‘re-education’ that denies their identity and nationality (WAOP 2023).

Giving independence to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church created two structures – one Orthodox Church directly under Constantinople and one under Moscow. When the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate also tried to declare its independence in May 2022, it was too little too late for everyone. While over two thirds of Ukrainians thought that the Ukrainian Church under Moscow aided the Russian invasion, Russia did not see any will nor reason to grant its independence (Tarasyuk 2023).

Documents started leaking that high-ranking priests, including Metropolitan Onufriy, the head of the Moscow-linked Ukrainian Orthodox Church, had Russian passports and the Ukrainian Security Services launched raids of church premises that led to detentions and extraditions of priests, charged with state treason. In addition, Metropolitan Pavel (Pyotr Lebed) was detained and charged with supporting Russian aggression and inciting inter-religious hatred as he rejoiced over the Russian occupation. Metropolitan Pavel was a well-known figure in Ukraine, earning him the nickname “Pasha Mercedes” due to his lavish lifestyle and love for expensive cars, Metropolitan Pavel even protested this nickname in court. In August 2023, Metropolitan Pavel was released on an almost one million dollar bail while the payer of this guarantee was never revealed.

The Abbot of the Holy Trinity Church of Odesa, Vasyl Vyrozub, summarised this to CBS in the following way: “At this moment, this war is the immediate result of the religion. The result of the work, preaching, and propaganda of the Russian Church” (CBS 2022). Just few month later following the words of Vyrozub, the Transfiguration Cathedral of the Moscow-linked Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Odesa was hit by Russian missile. As of July 2023, over 1160 holy sites have been damaged in Ukraine as the result of Russian aggression (UN Press 2023).

And Then the Money

Significant financing also supports the union of Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin, and the budget of the Church is one of the best-kept secrets since the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to an investigation by Meduza in 2016, it is virtually unknown how much the Church spends, and in 2014, their untaxed profits were 150 million dollars (Meduza 2016). It is not known what the current Church income or government funding is, but in 2016 alone, it received 34 million from the government. The government has also been financing the building of infrastructure and the purchase of assets such as religious paintings. Since 1991, over 30,000 new churches have been built, mostly directly funded by the government or by Kremlin-related oligarchs. In 2020, Sergei Chapnin wrote that Orthodox congregations in Russia have developed a completely incomprehensible accounting system, necessitated by a profoundly corrupt administrative structure (Liboreiro, Koutsokosta, and Murray 2022).

While the speaker of the Orthodox Church has described the financial situation to be extremely difficult due to pandemic (Orthodox Times 2020), this does not seem to reflect the financial situation of the decision-makers of the church. According to Sergei Chapnin, former editor of the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, some of the clergy joke that their ministry reminds them of a franchise system: they are assigned a business (the local church) and the appropriate business attire (robe and cross), and the bishop in turn demands monthly payments (Chapnin 2020, 70). This way the wealth accumulates at the top of the Russian Orthodox Church and Patriarch Kirill is alleged to be one of Putin's oligarchs.

Vladimir Gundyayev, i.e., Patriarch Kirill, has been sanctioned by the United Kingdom, which has stated that Patriarch Kirill has made multiple public statements in support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. He therefore engages in, provides support for, or promotes any policy or action which destabilises Ukraine or undermines or threatens the territorial integrity, sovereignty or independence of Ukraine (Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation HM Treasury 2023). The Patriarch has also been on the EU sanction list with an accompanying letter stating that he has been a long-time ally of President Vladimir Putin, acting as one of the main supporters of Russian military aggression against Ukraine.¹ According to information from several news agencies, the EU was not able to impose sanctions on Kirill due to a veto by Hungary (Liboreiro, Koutsokosta, and Murray 2022).

Additional sources of income and promotion stem from direct or indirect funding from oligarchs that comes in different forms, such as donations, the gifting of icons, the construction of churches, and media promotion. One of the most radical examples might be the Kremlin-linked ultra-orthodox and monarchist oligarch Konstantyn Malofeev. Malofeev is the founder of the ultra-right monarchist media corporation Tsargrad, referring to Constantinople, and Malofeev is currently under personal sanctions of the United States. In 2020, YouTube blocked the channel of Tsargrad, citing sanctions.

Malofeev is so far the only private Russian individual whose assets in the United States have been confiscated for support of the war, and these assets were given over to Ukraine when US Attorney General Merrick Garland approved the transfer of 5.4 million dollars of forfeited assets to Ukraine to compensate the harms of Russia's unjust war. According to Malofeev, Tsargrad TV is on a mission to spread the word of God and Putin, and Putin

¹ "Report: EU Commission Proposes Sanctions against Patriarch Kirill." Catholic News Agency. Catholic News Agency, May 4, 2022.

has been given to Russia by God (Al Jazeera English 2017). Meanwhile, the chief editor of Tsargrad and well-known nationalist Alexei Dugin stated that “Democracy and liberalism are satanic” (Al Jazeera English 2017).

According to the EU, Malofeev is closely linked to Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea, while his former employees include several well-known separatists such as Alexander Borodai and Igor Girkin. The oligarch is also the target of an international arrest warrant for the suspicion of creating and financing illegal paramilitary organisations. Since 2010, Malofeev has been the founder of the Charitable Foundation of St Basil the Great, supporting the development and growth of the Russian Orthodox Church. At a book presentation, when asked who Russia’s new monarch and the founder of the next ruling dynasty should be, he simply replied: “I definitely think that the worthiest candidate to become the emperor of modern Russia is Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin” (Titov 2023).

As another example closer to the Baltic countries is President of Russian Railways, Vladimir Yakunin, referred to as a friend of Putin and a former high-ranking KGB officer, who allegedly donated up to 3 million euros for the construction of an Orthodox Church in Tallinn, Estonia. In 2014, Yakunin was placed on the US State Department list of Russian officials and businessmen sanctioned with regards to the annexation of Crimea. These are just a few examples of many of the Russian Orthodox Church being financed not only by the government but also by Kremlin-linked private money, making it even harder to track and uncover.

The Military Wing of Holy War

From the late 2000s, the Church started to become increasingly integrated into the social and military lives of Russians. Orthodox culture courses were introduced in schools, military chaplaincy was rolled out in the military, and religion started to be part of daily military life while becoming more a part of identity. Soon, even each leg of the nuclear triad had a patron saint, the portraits of the saints were hung in the headquarters and command posts, icons appeared on nuclear platforms, aerial, naval, and ground processions are routine, and military clergy provide consultation and care, working as assistants to commanders (Adamsky 2019).

Russia’s nuclear arm is especially closely tied to the Russian Orthodox Church, with priests being almost constantly present and blessing every

mission. The world might have been surprised to see a priest blessing a missile before a rocket attack on Ukraine, but for Russia, it was rather a common practice, not an exception. Professor Dmitry Adamsky, from the Lauder School of Government has dedicated his whole book to the topic of Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy.

Besides the regular Russian army, paramilitary groups have also taken part in occupying different parts of Ukraine, most famous of them being Wagner. Some of them have been financed from the government budget, others presumably by oligarchs. What is less known though, is that ultra-nationalist, imperialist, and religious groups have also been taking part in occupying parts of Ukraine. One of those groups is the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), and its extended military arm, the Russian Imperial Legion, has been engaged in occupying Donbas since 2014.

RIM describes itself as an imperialist, ultra-reactionary, Russian Orthodox, fascist, anti-liberal, and anti-communist organisation and sees in war the opportunity to create the unified “New Russia” (“Novaya Rossiya”) (Webber and Bertina 2023). As Pavel Sulzhenon, priest and member of the paramilitary wing of the RIM stated quite clearly: “Ukraine is part of Russia and an important part of Russia, as the baptising of the Rus’ took place in Kyiv. Our nation was born there” (Al Jazeera English 2017). Sulzhenon sees it as a holy war, stating that he receives his direct orders from priests. While the Imperial Movement attempts to position itself as a separate Kremlin-critical unit, several links have been found to the Russian Defence Ministry and the Kremlin’s propaganda wing.

RIM has established connections with the World National-Conservative Movement (WNCM) through the Russian political party *Rodina* while tightly co-operating with neo-Nazi groups and far-right politicians in Russia and abroad. The United States has named RIM a terrorist organisation. While there is no proven direct connection to the Russian Orthodox Church, it echoes the ideas of Orthodoxy, monarchism, and empire. The question remains if the Russian government or Kremlin-affiliated oligarchs could be financing RIM just as they financed Wagner and other paramilitary groups fighting in Ukraine.

Russia has been supporting the Church not only monetarily and mandating it with soft power but also by amending the legislation that not only supports religious views but also is implemented by the harshest convictions of the corrupt justice system. The law that criminalises offending the feelings of religious believers has been increasingly used as a tool alongside church

complaints to silence the enemies of Putin and the regime, the first and most famous being the case of Pussy Riot in 2012. There is no real protection for freedom of speech to balance this, and as a result, the Church has the right to label their hate speech as religious belief while opposition cannot exercise this liberty.

The Defender of Civilisation in Syria

Russian politics towards its zones of interest, including certain parts of the Middle East, has become the target of propaganda through the Russian Orthodox Church, which can also be seen in the Russian involvement in Syria. Even after the fall of the Soviet Union, close ties between Syrian and Russian leaders have been continued by Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin when Putin engaged in a brutal war against al-Assad's opposition in 2015.

Besides the political rationale, there is also a bond created between the al-Assad regime and the Russian Orthodox Church. While Russia has been trying to profile itself as the saviour of the Christian world and its values, this rhetoric has been favourably met by al-Assad who belongs to a minority Muslim group, claiming Putin to be the sole defender of Christian civilisation one can rely on (Kellan 2015). This comment was made after the bloody war started in 2015 with millions of people fleeing their homes and hundreds of thousands of civilians being killed.

Besides the overall rhetoric, there are two specifically interesting regions in Syria for the Russian Orthodox Church, which it likes to draw back to its roots as if to confirm its sacred heritage and legacy – the cities of Palmyra and Maaloula (Washington Post 2019). Palmyra is home to some of the oldest Christian churches, and according to historian Michael Roztovtzeff, Catherine the Great held Palmyra in great value, comparing herself to Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, and even comparing her court to Palmyra.

In 2016, a Russian orchestra performed in Palmyra while Petersburg is still sometimes called the “Palmyra of the North.” Through the veterans’ charity organisation “Combat Brotherhood,” Russia has also allegedly financed the restoration of the old St. Thecla Monastery in Maaloula (Orthodox Christianity 2018), a city that still speaks Aramaic, the language of Jesus. Russian deputies were hailed as the first pilgrims to the city by an Orthodox Christian website and Russia still continues to promote its aid to Maaloula. The aid is being delivered by representatives of the President of

Russia in Syria and of Church while Syrian religious representatives thanked the fraternal Russian nation and especially 'His Excellency Russian President Vladimir Putin and His Holiness Patriarch Kirill' (Moscow Patriarchate 2022), expressions that are familiar from the propaganda in Ukraine.

Conclusion

As father Cyrill Hovorun very well put it in the interview with CBS, "I believe that the Church is the main supplier of Putin's ideology. This war has a simple formula: war equals guns plus ideas. The guns are supplied by the Kremlin and the ideas come from the Church" (CBS 2022).

Without the integration of its resources and its networks of power into the state, the Russian Orthodox Church would be little more than a grandiose artefact (Sherr and Kullamaa 2019). Without having the national idea, presence, and protection of the Church, the Kremlin could be seen as little more than a criminal regime. While the Russian Orthodox Church needs the Kremlin for the legitimation of its power by arms, finances, and legislation, the Kremlin needs the holy blessing and protection of institutions in which majority of Russians worship. They are bound together by the common aim to restore and regain of what they see as Greater Russia, both believing to their election by heaven, not by hell, simultaneously becoming an internationally pariah as a terrorist regime and its enablers.

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6. The Strange Case of Russian Anti-Semitism

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Abstract

Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, anti-Semitism (in both public discourse and policies and as manifested in the infrequency of anti-Semitic incidents) was at a historical low, and simultaneously Russia's relationship with Israel was on the rise. Officially, the Kremlin denounced xenophobia and made a crucial distinction between the isolationist ethnic nationalism that it condemned and the broader Russian imperial nationalism that has become Putinism's dominant framework, especially after 2014. The war against Ukraine, which Russia conceptualises as the continuation of its "struggle against the Nazis," is waged in the actual space where the Holocaust took place, and also, semantically, in the historical "bloodlands," following Timothy Snyder's term, that intersect with and evoke issues of Jewishness and Anti-Semitism, reactivating all manner of revisionist discourses about war-time collaboration, the Holocaust, and Ukrainian Jewish history. The Russian regime and its propagandists spin various conspiratorial narratives about the war and Ukraine's leadership that both reactivate dormant Soviet-era prejudices and create new ones (e.g., "sects," "global Satanism," "Western elites," "liberals as the fifth column," etc.) that are linked to Jewishness. Russian anti-Semitism is an inherently dynamic phenomenon that is shaped by and is included in the escalation in the Middle East, Russia's war against Ukraine, and Russia's hostile relations with the "collective West" and as such should be considered within international, domestic, and historical contexts.

Keywords: Russian anti-Semitism, conspiracies, Russia's war against Ukraine, Israel's war against Hamas

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From Gaza to Dagestan

The recent pogroms and riots in the North Caucasus, which followed a two-and-a-half-week massive anti-Semitic campaign on regional Telegram channels, came in the midst of a global surge in anti-Semitism following the 7 October attack by Hamas on southern Israel and the subsequent IDF operation in Gaza (Toler 2023). First, on Saturday 28 October 2023, an angry mob besieged a hotel in Khasavuyurt, Dagestan, galvanised by a rumour that refugees from Israel were staying there. The next day, a crowd of several thousand people chanting anti-Semitic and pro-Palestinian slogans stormed the airport in the republic's capital of Makhachkala. Some trashed and looted the shops in the halls, while others poured into the tarmac and tried to storm a plane that had landed from Tel Aviv. In Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria, a Jewish cultural centre was set on fire and defaced with slogans "Death to the Jews." In Karachay-Cherkessia, women demonstrators called on the authorities to prevent "Israeli refugees from entering the republic and grabbing our land" and demanded the expulsion of local Jewish families.

The authorities were indecisive in their response and remarkably lenient in their treatment of the participants. While non-violent anti-war protesters face years in prison for perfectly legal actions, a handful of rioters in the North Caucasus received up to ten days in jail on administrative charges, with a few sentenced to 60 hours of community service. Putin blamed the anti-Semitic incidents on "evil forces operating from abroad," "Western intelligence services," especially "the USA and its satellites," such as Ukraine. The pogroms were thus reframed as an extension of the war that Russia is waging in Ukraine against Washington's "global dictatorship."

Russian leaders and key propagandists have made it abundantly clear which side they support in Israel's war against Hamas (Slisco 2023). On 26 October 2023, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov received a delegation of senior Hamas members and also met with his Iranian counterpart (Iran is widely regarded as an important sponsor of Hamas). On a meeting dedicated to the outbursts of anti-Jewish violence in Dagestan held on 30 October, Putin changed the subject to talk about the humanitarian situation in Gaza: "When you look at the suffering and bloodied children, you clench your fists and tears come to your eyes" (Osborn 2023).

Russia's endorsement of Hamas translates into a global disinformation campaign that it has been waging alongside Iran and China to undercut Israel and its key ally, the United States (Meyers and Frenkel 2023). It signals

the end of more than three decades of entente between Russia and Israel, which has been cemented in the last 16 years by Putin's personal and ideological affinity with Netanyahu's brand of nationalist authoritarian populism (see Weiss-Wendt 2022). In its efforts to assert itself as a leader of the Global South, Russia seems ready to resume its old Cold War era role as a patron and champion of the Palestinian cause. Conveniently, in targeting both domestic and foreign audiences, its propaganda can draw on the rich repertoire of anti-Zionist narratives it has inherited from the four decades of Soviet demonisation of Israel, some of which have already been reactivated in Russian TV shows, "Z" (pro-war) Telegram channels, and the massive disinformation campaign being waged across multiple digital and media platforms. This campaign seeks to relativise Russia's own aggression against Ukraine, distract global public attention from this war, and possibly undercut Western supplies of arms and military support to Ukraine. It pushes the narrative of "double standards" by comparing Western condemnation of Russian aggression against Ukraine with what it claims to be an endorsement of Israeli retaliation against Hamas, comparing the numbers of children killed in Ukraine and Gaza. It spurns conspiratorial fantasies, blaming all current military confrontations in the world on the machinations of the United States, which Putin recently likened to a "spider" that is the "root of all evil" – an image eerily familiar to scholars of both Nazi anti-Semitic and Soviet anti-Zionist propaganda (Slisco 2023). Last but not least, the sheer scale of this digital and media campaign, overwhelming users with an avalanche of visceral, emotionally charged content, some of it AI-generated or recycled from other war zones such as Syria, further polarises global public opinion and deepens confusion and distrust of all reporting and media coverage of both the Russian aggression against Ukraine and Israel's war against Hamas.

However, the current rise in violent anti-Semitism in Russia is more than a mere reflection of the global trend, fuelled by the post-7 October escalation in the Middle East, and to better understand its dynamics, it is crucial to examine not only the international but also the domestic context.

Anti-Semitism as the Arch Conspiracy Theory

To those observing the rise of anti-Semitism in Russia since the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the riots in Dagestan were a continuation of

very disturbing developments. Since 24 February 2022, Putin, his officials, and propagandists have made a slew of anti-Semitic comments. Most, although not all, of these remarks relate to the Russian leadership's obsession with Volodymyr Zelenskyi's Jewishness that has long posed an awkward problem to Russia's "denazification" narrative. In an interview with Russian propagandist Pavel Zarubin on 29 August 2023 Putin argued that "Western managers put an ethnic Jew in charge" in order to "cover up the anti-human nature of modern Ukraine" (Zarubinreporter 2023).¹ Speaking at an annual economic forum in Saint Petersburg on June 16, 2023, Putin admitted to always having had a lot of Jewish friends since childhood, who "say that Zelenskyi is not Jewish, that he is a disgrace to the Jewish people" (Kaplan 2023). This remark echoes the words of foreign minister Sergey Lavrov in his 1 May 2022 interview on Italian TV who was similarly struggling to explain Russia's portrayal of Ukraine as a "Nazi state" given the Jewish origins of its democratically elected president: "[That Zelenskyi is Jewish] means absolutely nothing. Wise Jewish people say that the most ardent anti-Semites are usually Jews." "Hitler too, had Jewish blood," Lavrov added (BBC 2023).²

In his highly personalised authoritarian regime, Putin has long played the role of "tsar-liberator" and emancipator, sending signals down the power vertical and to the population at large about the changing do's and don'ts, overturning previously held taboos. With a few exceptions, of which more can be found below, public expression of anti-Semitism has long been one such taboo in Russian political and public discourses, solidifying Putin's reputation as someone sympathetic with Jews, even a philosemite. Today it no longer matters whether Putin personally harbours anti-Semitic prejudices or not. If he does, parenthetically, it would not have been all that unusual, since Putin and others from his entourage, from Lavrov, to Chemizov, Patrushev, and Cherkesov, hail from the Leningrad KGB, which by many accounts, was one of the most viciously anti-Semitic of all the KGB organisations. However, Putin's personal convictions are beside the point: what matters is what he says and does, since these are the signals eagerly awaited by his propagandists and senior officials who then spread them further. The very logic of his regime and the forces it has unleashed domestically

¹ "This makes for an extremely disgusting situation in which an ethnic Jew is covering up the glorification of Nazism and of those who led the Holocaust in Ukraine, which brought the destruction of millions of people," Putin said.

² Following public outcry in Israel, Putin called Prime Minister Naftali Bennett to apologise for Lavrov, but subsequent anti-Semitic remarks by both Putin and his entourage and leading propagandists were not followed by any apologies.

and globally has made the return of anti-Semitism into political rhetoric inevitable.³

Putinism has long been described as lacking a cohesive ideology and remarkably capable of mutating and adjusting to various ideological demands. From Putin's third term onwards, the ideological vacuum at its core has been increasingly filled with Manichean 'us-versus-them' conspiracy thinking that has contaminated public imagination, manifesting itself in various ways, in Russians' denialist attitudes to COVID-19, the besieged fortress mentality, and currently, with the pervasive public denial of Russian atrocities in Ukraine. In a sense, anti-Semitism is *the* arch-conspiracy narrative that feeds various discourses from the corruption of culture and economic exploitation to a global cabal and offers a convenient repertoire of interchangeable enemies, all of which can be substituted with the code word "Jew."

Current anti-Semitic discourses proliferating in Russia do not need to be logical or cohesive, as their efficiency lies in planting certain buzzwords, like "cults," "liberals-traitors," "the fifth column," "Western globalist elites," "Russophobes," and "Satanists," linking them in public consciousness with Jewishness. The fertile soil of the cultural memory of Soviet anti-Semitic and anti-Western campaigns then does the rest. What is new here is the transition from latent anti-Semitism, which used to be publicly condemned in post-Soviet Russia, to overt or thinly veiled anti-Semitic innuendos that are unabashedly voiced by Putin's advisers, diplomats, and propagandists and no longer cause embarrassment.

³ Russia's growing radicalisation and isolation in the post-2014 era made Putin as the self-proclaimed leader of the global far-right, ever more ready to embrace of the most radical, xenophobic international, groups. RT has repeatedly given stage to conspiracy theorists, neo-Nazis, members of the AfD, white supremacists, and anti-Semites, including RT's favorite "expert" on a plethora of subjects and a notorious Holocaust denier Ryan Dawson, who is introduced as a "peace activist." In 2015, RT aired an anti-Semitic segment denouncing Hillary Clinton as an "Illuminati candidate" because the tech company working for her campaign had a logo vaguely resembling an Illuminati triangle and their parent company had a Hebrew name – i.e., "backers who spoke Hebrew." The same year, Saint Petersburg hosted an International Conservative Forum with Ugo Voigt, Samuel Taylor, Nick Griffin, Jim Dowson, and Roberto Fiore among its guests and speakers. While many of the participants were notorious neo-Nazis, advocates of alt-right conspiracy theories, white supremacists, and Holocaust denial, the Forum sought respectability by denying accusations of Nazi sympathies and externalising the label, decrying instead the "fascists in Ukraine" and the "euro-bureaucratic Nazis in Brussels". For more on the subject, see Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (London: Routledge, 2017).

“Satan’s Seed”

A 2022 soldier’s manual approved by the Defence Ministry explains the goals of Russia’s invasion in Ukraine to the freshly mobilised recruits:

“Ukraine as a state does not exist, it is a territory of the former USSR temporarily occupied by a terrorist gang. All power there is concentrated in the hands of citizens of Israel, the US, and the UK, who have masterminded the genocide of indigenous inhabitants. [...] Today all of us, Russian Orthodox and Muslims, Buddhists and shamanists are fighting against Ukrainian nationalism and the global Satanism that backs it” (Razumov et al. 2022).

The passage echoes the 2019 article by Sergey Glazyev, Putin’s economic adviser at the time, in which Glazyev argued that US support for Zelenskyi was a sign of the Americans acting in cahoots with far-right forces in Israel in order to implement a mass transfer of Israeli Jews who were allegedly tired of the endless war in the Middle East and eager to settle in the lands of south-eastern Ukraine that, Glazyev asserted, had been “cleansed” of ethnic Russians by the Kyiv regime (Glazyev 2019). “Global Satanism” as Russia’s main enemy in Ukraine, made headlines again in late 2022 when former President Medvedev declared that Russia fought “to stop the supreme ruler of Hell, whatever name he uses – Satan, Lucifer or Iblis” (Reuters 2022).

This newly found obsession is more than just a spill over from the Russian Orthodox Church’s apocalyptic rhetoric with regards to the war in Ukraine. It signals the addition of another bogeyman to the repertoire of different evils that Russia is currently fighting in Ukraine that is planted next to references to “Jews” or “sects.” Another Russian official’s rhetoric clearly illustrates how this new trope of “satanic cults” fits into the repertoire of the freshly emboldened high-ranking anti-Semites. In his column for the nation’s most popular weekly in October 2022, a two-star general Aleksey Pavlov, assistant to Nikolai Patrushev, head of the Security Council of Russia, spoke of the need to “de-satanise” Ukraine, which he claimed had been turned into a totalitarian hyper-sect masterminded from Washington D.C. and home to hundreds of neo-pagan cults. One of these cults, Pavlov asserted, was Chabad-Lubavitch, an Orthodox Jewish Hasidic movement traditionally popular in Eastern and Central Europe (Pavlov 2022). Patrushev rushed to apologise for his assistant, who was sacked by Putin three months later, with no public reasons or explanation offered. The usually compliant Chief Rabbi of Russia, Berel Lazar, expressed outrage at the

incident, warning of the onset of “a new era in Russia’s relations with Jews” (Gross 2022).

This new era has been inaugurated with Zhenia Berkovich’s and Svetlana Petriychuk’s May 2023 arrest on charges of “justification of terrorism” for the play *Finist the Brave Falcon* that Petiychuk wrote and Berkovich directed in 2021. The play tells the story of Russian women who were lured by Islamic radicals to join them in Syria and who were later sentenced to prison time in Russia for their “ties” with ISIS. The prosecution in Berkovich’s case employed a team of pseudo-experts to analyse the play, among them – a certain Roman Silantiev, Ph.D., the inventor of the pseudo-science of “destructology” that deals with “destructive cults and extremism.”

In an interview Roman Silantiev explained his support for Berkovich’s and Petriychuk’s arrest by claiming that:

“[Theatre productions] justifying terrorism are absolutely unacceptable [...] even when it’s done by people who have, I beg your pardon, Jewish background. It’s not the first time that I get to see it – the Jews actively support the Wahhabis, it seems that they do it to spite the Russians. We have an entire group of Jews that have joined this organisation [ISIS] and nicely met their end there. When I see all of that, given that the Wahhabis want to slaughter all of the Jews, when I see the Jews defending these actions... it’s simply post-modern. But it’s there, it’s there in famous theatres, and we have to put an end to this outrage” (Lomovka 2023).

“The Liberal Traitors”

Berkovich’s case activates another powerful anti-Semitic trope: for both the official media and large swaths of the receptive public, “a Jew” has come to mean liberals, the proverbial “fifth column” of traitors who flee (i.e., betray) the country and do not support its war. With her unambiguous anti-war stance, Berkovich fits the bill to a tee, although she stayed in Russia. This trope has been in the making for more than a decade, chiselled in a series of public scandals involving targeted attacks of liberal figures of Jewish origins. The attackers invariably suffered no consequences; the notoriety boosted their careers rather than destroyed them.

In 2012, an ultra-nationalist writer and political activist, Zakhar Prilepin, penned “A Letter to comrade Stalin” written in the name of “Russia’s liberal community” that, Prilepin asserted, demonises Stalin instead of being grateful to him for “saving [their] tribe”:

“If not for you, [comrade Stalin], our grandfathers and great-grandfathers would have been killed in gas chambers... and our question would have been finally solved. You slayed seven layers of Russians in order to save our seed. [...] When we tell you that we, too, fought in the war, we are aware that we only fought in Russia, against Russia, on the backbone of the Russian people” (Prilepin 2012).

Prilepin never once used the word “Jew” but references to the Holocaust make the true target of his writing unmistakable. The anti-Semitic letter did not damage his career in the least: Prilepin continued to receive major literary awards in Russia and repeatedly took part in Frankfurt Book Fair even after he had become a commanding officer in the People’s Republic of Donetsk, casually boasting in his interviews of having killed a lot of Ukrainians.

In 2013, opposition journalist and politician Leonid Gozman posted a critical review of a new TV-series, in which he compared the notorious Red Army intelligence service SMERSH to the SS and the NKVD to the Gestapo. The next day Ulyana Skobeyda, the staff writer of the nation’s popular tabloid, posted a lead that stated: “Sometimes one regrets that the Nazis did not make lampshades from the skins of the ancestors of today’s liberals. We would have had fewer problems today.” The lead was quickly changed to “The liberals are revising our history in order to cut the ground from under our country,” but the original post became viral, with the journalist keeping her job (Skobeyda 2013).

In the spring of 2014, a huge poster was hung in Moscow’s central bookstore, clearly with the approval of the authorities. Above the faces of opposition figures denouncing the annexation of Crimea, the caption read: “The fifth column: strangers among us.” One of the depicted “traitors,” Boris Nemtsov, was assassinated 10 months later. In a letter of condolence to Nemtsov’s 87-year-old mother, Putin addressed her by her maiden name, Eidman, which is clearly Jewish. For generations, Soviet Jews excelled at picking up subtle signals of danger from above, and the act of ‘unmasking’ someone’s Jewish name is clearly perceived as anti-Semitic.

More recently, Putin publicly mocked the founder of Russian e-commerce giant Yandex, Arkady Volozh, and his former adviser and one of the fathers of Russia’s economic reforms in the 1990s, Anatoly Chubais, both of whom now live in Israel. Putin accused Volozh of ingratitude towards Russia and suggested that he was condemning the war in Ukraine only to curry favour with the Israeli authorities. Of Chubais he said:

“Why is Anatoly Borisovich hiding there? They showed me a picture from the Internet where he is no longer Anatoly Borisovich but Moshe Israelivich living there... Why is he doing this? Why did he run away and move to Israel with an illegal status?” (Rozovsky 2023).

Russian propagandists, including RT chief Margarita Simonyan, as well as the “Z” Telegram channels and pro-war culture makers, have attacked celebrities who spoke out against the war in Ukraine and have since left the country, especially those of them who have settled in Israel: “They said they didn’t want to live in a country that was waging war,” the argument goes, “only to move to the one that is constantly at war with its neighbours. Double standards, how typical” (Seddon and Weaver 2023).⁴ In a much-publicised interview, Soviet-era actress Valentina Talyzina claimed that the famous singer Alla Pugacheva (who supported her husband, comedian Maxim Galkin, listed as a foreign agent by the government, in his criticism of the war and Putin’s regime) and the actress Liya Akhedzhakova, a long-time critic of Russian politics, were both “hiding their real Jewish patronymics” (AMIC 2023). In this way, Jews are rhetorically equated with the “liberal intelligentsia,” which is synonymous with being “foreign agents,” which in turn is associated with alleged disloyalty, treachery, cowardice, duplicity, and hostility to the country’s interests and the war it is waging.

“Russophobia as the New Anti-Semitism”

Russian propaganda routinely weaponises accusations of anti-Semitism and historical responsibility for the Holocaust to justify its military aggression against Ukraine. By this logic, the “Nazi,” the anti-Semite, and the “aggressor” is always the other, while Russia is increasingly vying for the position of the main victim, which is coined in the popular expression, “Russians are the new Jews.” A new discourse that has emerged in recent years sees any criticism of Russia’s actions as an expression of “Russophobia,”⁵ which is

⁴ Simonyan posted on X following the Hamas attacks on Israel that she expects to see the return of Russian emigres: “The country that isn’t at war with its neighbors is at war with its neighbors again. Let’s welcome the exodus of Russian pacifists. Actually, no, they’re not welcome.”

⁵ The term Russophobia is usually attributed to the 19th-century Slavophile conservative poet Fyodor Tyutchev, and it took a distinctly anti-Semitic character when it was popularised by dissident nationalist Igor Shafarevich, author of the 1982 eponymous samizdat essay, who accused Jews, “the small nation” of undermining the “big nation” (Russians) from within.

then compared to anti-Semitism. Back in 2017, when questioned by Megyn Kelly about Russia's possible interference in the 2016 US elections, Putin compared these accusations to anti-Semitism: "When one is stupid and inept then the Jews are always to blame. We know what such attitudes lead to: nothing good can come out of it" (Pramuk 2017). In 2022, he again likened an avalanche of Western sanctions against Russia to anti-Semitic attacks: "The West dropped its mask of civility and began to act belligerently. It begs a comparison to the anti-Semitic pogroms in fascist Germany" (AFP 2022).⁶ The chairman of Russia's Human Rights Council and Deputy Justice Minister, among others, has been lobbying for the introduction of criminal liability for "Russophobia," and a member of Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society Alexander Brod, who identifies as a Jew, in his March 2022 article compared "a wave of Russophobia in the West" with the Nazi persecution of the Jews (Brod 2022). Three days later, Brod's thesis was repeated during the meeting of the Russian government chaired by Putin. The fact that such ideas are articulated by somebody who is professionally dedicated to the promotion of Jewish culture is, of course, deeply disturbing, and reminiscent of the Soviet practice of co-opting public Jewish figures into the activities of Soviet anti-Zionist committee. The Vice-Speaker of the Federation Council called Russophobia "the anti-Semitism of the 21st century" yet warned to proceed with caution in criminalising it (Novaya Gazeta Europe 2023; Robinson 2019).

The equation of anti-Semitism with "Russophobia" struck a chord with the Russian public at large on both ends of the political spectrum, as it was eager to pose as the main victim of both the war against Ukraine and Western sanctions. Rock band "Leningrad" recorded a song titled «Входа нет» ["No Entry,"] in which the lead singer decried "genocide unleashed against the Russians" and claimed that for Europeans "A Russian is a new *zhyd* [kike] and should be burnt in a furnace." In the video released with the song, dancers are clad in Russian folk shirts with huge Jewish stars sewn onto their chests. Discussions of EU travel restrictions on Russian-language

⁶ In that same speech in mid-March 2022, Putin spoke about the "fifth column": "The West will try to rely on the so-called fifth column, on national traitors, on those who earn money here with us but live there. And I mean 'live there' not even in the geographical sense of the word, but according to their thoughts, their slavish consciousness. Such people who by their very nature, are mentally located there, and not here, are not with our people, not with Russia. But any people, and even more so the Russian people, will always be able to distinguish true patriots from scum and traitors, and simply spit them out like a gnat that accidentally flew into their mouths, spit them out on the pavement."

social media accounts in the spring and summer of 2022 similarly drew comparisons between Russians struggling to obtain EU visas and the Jewish passengers of the MS St. Luis fleeing Nazi persecution in 1939, adopting some of the Kremlin-spun propagandistic clichés that delegitimise the historical narratives and security concerns of Poland and the Baltic states by invoking wartime collaboration in the destruction of local Jews.

Russian Jews Fear the Revival of Soviet Anti-Semitic Policies

The above-mentioned discourses do not show the entire repertoire of anti-Semitic accusations circulating in the Russian media and political rhetoric, as a more comprehensive inventory would require a much longer study well beyond the scope of this chapter and would include both domestic and imported narratives of the Jewish “puppeteers” behind the war in Ukraine and the Maidan, Zelenskyi’s alleged connections to the international “Jewish circles” that enable him to procure support for Ukraine, and so much more (Gershovich 2023). The frequency with which references to Jews, Israel, or various aspects of Jewish history (most notably, the Holocaust) have been used by Russia’s leading politicians, culture-makers, and propagandists since the onset of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine understandably cause mounting concerns among the country’s remaining Jews.

In the summer of 2022, sociologist Aleksey Levinson of the Levada Center conducted a series of group discussions with the Jewish residents of several large Russian cities. Whereas in the Levada Center’s 2020 study respondents claimed that there was almost no anti-Semitism in Putin’s Russia to speak of, the 2022 survey revealed a pervasive *expectation of its growth* and fear of the possible return to Soviet anti-Semitic practices (Levinson 2022). This return is all the more expected since Russia’s domestic and foreign politics has noticeable shifted towards Soviet practices both in terms of style, rhetoric, and substance, and the state – embodied by the president – is still perceived as the key agent capable of stirring or suppressing hostility towards certain minorities (Gudkov 2022). The closing of the Russian office of *Sokhnut* (Jewish Agency for Israel) in 2022, the forced departure of the former Chief Rabbi of Moscow Pinchas Goldschmidt (listed as foreign agent by the government) who refused to support the war against Ukraine and called on the Russian Jews to emigrate, as well as the vilification of Israel

and public anti-Semitic innuendos, are all perceived by the Russian Jews as familiar signals that their fortunes have changed.

The return of anti-Semitism to the public sphere is an important symptom of the ongoing degeneration of both the political system and the 'norms' that held society together, which have become increasingly unhinged since the start of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Just as the rise of anti-Semitism in the last years of Stalinism reflected both the isolationist paranoia of the public and the regime's search for new enemies, so the current resurgence of anti-Semitism in Russia is a miasma signalling the moral decay of social and political institutions and pervasive conspiracy thinking. It is useful to understand anti-Semitism not as a coherent ideology, but as a state of mind, an element of consciousness, or – to use a biological metaphor – a bacterium that can lie dormant for years until its host organism is weakened by a crisis, then becoming pathogenic and beginning to multiply at an astonishing rate. At present, both the international context – Israel's war against Hamas, Russia's war against Ukraine – and the domestic imperatives that stem from the very nature of Putin's regime (isolationism, conspiratorial thinking, witch-hunts, and a conscious rejection of previously held taboos and norms) have created a pathogenic environment that has reactivated previously dormant Russian anti-Semitism and brought it to the centre of public and political discourse. It remains to be seen whether this will remain purely rhetorical or whether it will be translated into discriminatory practices in the future.

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7. Russia's Policy in the Middle East and Its Approach to the Gaza War

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Abstract

In the wake of the war in Ukraine, the Middle East has become increasingly important to Russia as part of its quest to realise a vision of a multipolar world, weaken the United States, and use the region to adapt to the sanctions regime. Russia was surprised by the war in Gaza and, to the contrary to manipulative reporting, was not involved in its planning or execution. However, it saw a great opportunity in it, especially in diverting Western attention from Ukraine, and improving the conditions for Russia's military posture there. Moscow's pro-Palestinian stance is intended to leverage this opportunity (while paying the price in relations with Israel), but it manoeuvres cautiously between the rival camps in the region. Russia is involved in the Gaza war mostly through diplomacy and information warfare, and its small military force in Syria is passive. The future will see Russia continue to be an important player in the Middle East, probably with improved military-security toolbox, contingent on stabilisation in Ukraine.

Keywords: Russia, the Middle East, Gaza War, Hamas, Ukraine

This article will look into the growing importance of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) for Russian foreign policy priorities, describe Russian policy in the Middle East after the invasion of Ukraine, explain the Russian response to the war in Gaza, and attempt to point out possible trends in the development of Russian policy in the MENA region in the future.

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The Changing Importance of the Middle East in Russian Perception over the Years

The Middle East and North Africa has been important for the Russian Empire for centuries due to its proximity to the Persian and Turkish empires, which led to a series of major wars, the Russian yearning for “hot water,” and the religious importance of Palestine and Constantinople.

After World War II, the region again became one of the main theatres of the Cold War. The Soviet Union sought to ride the anti-colonialist wave against the British and the French and establish socialist regimes in the region. It had considerable successes, but the new ‘friends’ turned out to be disloyal, and gaining the sympathy of the regional actors required the Soviets to invest extensive economic, military, and political resources in their favour. In the 1980s, the Soviet desire to invest in the MENA began to wane. It disappeared entirely with the destabilisation of the Soviet economy and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The 1990s, under the leadership of President Boris Yeltsin, were a low point in Russia’s standing in the Middle East. Despite the attempt to present itself as the successor to the Soviet Union, Russia was focusing on its internal problems and struggled to influence the regional processes. However, during this period, the foundations of a new Russian foreign policy were laid by Yevgeny Primakov, one of the most prominent Russian Arabists, who became Russian Foreign Minister in 1996 and Prime Minister in 1998. Primakov presented a vision of a multipolar world in which Russia serves as one of the most prominent poles. This vision reflected a confrontational approach to the West and a striving for Russia’s return to a position of influence, including in the MENA (Borshchevskaya 2021).

Primakov’s vision was put into practice during President Vladimir Putin’s tenure. Russia gradually restored its relations with Middle Eastern countries. A series of crises – the occupation of Iraq by the United States (2003), the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Libya, Tunis, and Yemen during the Arab Spring (early 2010s), and the civil war in Syria since 2010 contributed to the consolidation of Putin’s anti-Western worldview and his perception of the region as a central arena for challenging Western dominance. Even so, in Putin’s first 15 years in power, the MENA remained of secondary importance.

The military intervention in the Syrian civil war in the fall of 2015 was a turning point in Russian regional involvement. This stemmed from the

convergence of several processes, but primarily the escalation of the Russian-Western conflict in 2014 following the annexation of Crimea, which turned it into a central prism for conducting Russian foreign policy. By sending his forces to Syria, Putin sought to demonstrate the ability to project military might far from Russia's borders, like other global powers, proving to US President Barack Obama that Russia is not just a regional power. By saving the Assad regime in Syria, Putin wanted to show that Russia cares about its clients – unlike the United States, which allowed the Mubarak regime in Egypt to fall. Framing the fighting in Syria as part of the fight against ISIS was intended to create a common agenda with the United States, similar to Putin's backing of the US-led coalition against Al-Qaeda after 9/11.

Although the Russian intervention did not bring about the return of all of Syria's territory to the control of the Assad regime, it was perceived as successful. It led in 2017 to the agreements for a 49-year lease (and the possibility of an automatic extension for further 25 years) of two military bases in Syria – an airbase in Hmeymim (Pravo 2017) and naval one in Tartus (Federation Council 2017). In doing so, Putin's Russia fulfilled a centuries-old goal of the Russian Empire – to gain a permanent military presence in the Mediterranean, raising the relative importance of the MENA region in Russian foreign policy priorities.

Russia's MENA Policy Following the Invasion of Ukraine (2022)

Following Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, MENA countries refused to downgrade their ties with Moscow in spite of Western pressure. No country in the region imposed economic sanctions on Moscow, and all continued political dialogue with varying intensity. Some have even significantly expanded their ties with Russia. Paradoxically, while Russia's global power image weakened (against the backdrop of a failed invasion), the MENA has become more important to Russia.

Russian national security documents published after the invasion reflect the growing importance of the MENA to Russia. The MENA is mentioned in detail in the "Maritime Doctrine" (July 2022) and in the "Foreign Policy Concept" (March 2023), while previous versions of these and similar documents barely mentioned the region. These documents indicate Russia's aspiration to maintain a military presence in Syria and the waters basins of the MENA (Black, Caspian, Mediterranean, Red, and Arab seas), strengthen

ties with Iran, Türkiye, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other countries in the region in general, with the members of a “friendly Islamic civilisation” (President 2022, 2023).

President Putin, known to cultivate personal relationships with foreign leaders, cherished the MENA rulers’ refusal to isolate his country politically and economically. The schedules of the Kremlin and of other Russian senior officials reflect that since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, they have been holding much more meetings with their MENA counterparts (especially Türkiye, Iran, and the Gulf states), both at the bilateral level and multilateral formats. The Middle Eastern leaders are the second most important group in Putin’s contacts with foreign colleagues (in first place – leaders from the post-Soviet space). Since the beginning of the war, Putin has rarely made foreign visits, and only three have taken place outside the post-Soviet space – two of them in the Middle East (Tehran, July 2022, and Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, December 2023).

Following the war against Ukraine, Russia positioned itself as the most vocal opponent of the West. Thus, it has strengthened its partnership with the anti-Western actors in the MENA, primarily, Iran (which has considerable influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria through a network of militias funded by it) and the Assad regime in Syria. Russia is also encouraging Washington’s long-time allies to remain in a neutral position over the war in Ukraine.

Even while the Biden administration is trying to rehabilitate America’s regional posture and prove that it has no intention of abandoning its allies (unlike the Obama and Trump administrations), the MENA rulers refuse to choose sides in the competition between the global powers, preferring not to damage relations with Moscow, as its anti-Western and neo-anti-colonialist rhetoric about a multipolar world and non-interference in internal affairs appeal to their authoritarian regimes. At the very least, relationship with Moscow strengthens their bargaining power vis-à-vis Western capitals. Maintaining ties with Moscow and Beijing helps Middle Eastern countries reduce Western pressures for democratisation and human rights protection.

Russia and the MENA countries assist each other in matters of legitimacy and international status. Although the countries of the MENA are not a cohesive group, they are a gateway to the broader Muslim world and to African countries, which have significantly increased in the priorities of Russian foreign policy following the rupture with the West. Russia aspires to represent the ostensible global majority, and a substantial portion of the

votes of this majority consists of Muslim and/or African votes. Russia seeks their support (or at least not joining anti-Russian initiatives) in international organisations. Moscow rewards the MENA regional powers by integrating them into BRICS, SCO, and the Eurasian Economic Union. It was agreed that Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt would join BRICS in 2024. Iran became a full member of SCO in 2023, a year in which the dialogue between the organisation and Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar began.

The MENA is increasingly important to Russia's economy in several dimensions: direct trade and investment, influence on the energy market, and the adaptation of the Russian economy to Western sanctions. Russia's direct trade with most Middle Eastern countries has risen in the two years since the invasion of Ukraine. Türkiye has become Russia's second most important trading partner (after China) after trade between the two nearly doubled in 2022 to more than \$60 billion (TRT, 2023). Russian trade with the UAE almost doubled to about \$9 billion (Turak, 2023). There has been a robust growth in Russian trade with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other countries. However, for most countries in the Middle East, this is an increase from a low base.

Russia and the Middle Eastern countries continue coordinating their oil price policy through joint Saudi-Russian control of the OPEC Plus cartel. This was crucial for the Russian economy to contain the shock of Western sanctions in 2022. However, despite the price decline in 2023, it remained high enough to support Russia's relative macroeconomic stability. The interest in coordinating oil prices between Russia and Middle Eastern countries will only strengthen in the coming decade. The demand for hydrocarbons is going to fall, and producers will need even closer supply coordination to maximize their revenues.

Russia is exploiting Türkiye, the UAE, and other countries in the MENA as part of a broad network of circumventing the Western sanctions, including importing dual-use components (Samson et al. 2023; Valero & Nardelli 2023). There is a wide range of avenues of action, from exporting products no longer sold directly to Russia by Western companies that implement sanctions to giving Russian companies leeway, including those that have lost money to smuggle sanctioned products. Middle Eastern governments are manoeuvring between Western pressure to close loopholes in the sanctions circumvention system and the economic opportunities that trade with Russia presents to them.

Russian companies are retaining investments in oil and gas development projects in the MENA (mainly in Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria). Russia is discussing with Türkiye the idea of turning the latter into a regional hub for the sale of Russian gas, in an attempt to overcome the barriers on selling the Russian gas to Europe. In addition, Russia continues to build nuclear power plants in Türkiye and Egypt and provides them extremely favourable financial terms. When accomplished, these power plants will provide Moscow with additional influence over Cairo and Ankara for decades to come. Russia's Rosatom also slowly continues the construction of Bushehr 2 and 3 reactors in southern Iran.

Iran and Türkiye are critical links in Russia's plans to build new international logistics corridors as an alternative to the trade routes blocked between Russia and Europe: Russia-Azerbaijan-Türkiye-Mediterranean corridor to Southern Europe and Africa, and the North-South Corridor – from Russia to Iran (via Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea or Central Asian countries) and from Iran to India and Asian countries (Shokri 2023). Most of Russia's international trade was rerouted to Asia, and Moscow hopes to expand its commerce with Africa. The routes through the Middle East are shorter and cheaper to build than land routes to China and the Pacific and are expected to reduce Russian dependence on China.

The wealthy Gulf states are limiting their direct investment in Russia (for fear of Western punishment) but continue to negotiate with Moscow about expanding future investments. The growing presence of Russian companies in the Gulf and Türkiye and joint ventures with MENA countries in the post-Soviet space create an ecosystem for investment and technological development alternative to what Russia was prevented from doing because of the sanctions. Middle Eastern countries are willing to cooperate with Russia in non-dollar (UAE dirham, Iranian rial, rupee, yuan) trade and develop a financial system more immune to Western sanctions, even if these processes are not without difficulties (Dutta 2023; Greene 2023; Kolesnikov 2023; Reuters 2023; Smagin 2023).

The war in Ukraine has highlighted the dependence of several countries in the region on grain imports from Russia or Ukraine (which was disrupted by Russia during the war). Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria were particularly vulnerable, while Türkiye gained politically and economically as long as the Ukraine "grain deal" was in place.

The war in Ukraine has changed the nature of Russia's military-security involvement in the Middle East. Prior to that, Russia was one of the leading

arms suppliers in the region, especially to Iran, Syria, Egypt, Algeria, and Iraq. Because of the need for weapons for the war and the tightening of the Western sanctions' regime, for now, Russian arms exports to the region almost stopped, and vice versa, Russia imports weapons from the MENA to be used on Ukrainian frontlines. Moscow is grateful for Tehran's drones and other weapons sales in 2022 at a time when Russia was in severe military distress on the battlefield. Contrary to expectations, Russia does not reciprocate, and its arms sales to Iran are advancing slowly (Bennett & Ilyushina 2023). Russia also started to import weapons and spare parts of Russian origin previously sold to MENA countries (Groves & Said 2023).

Russia maintains a military presence in Syria, but it retains there a limited order of battle, mainly intended to ensure the protection of Russian facilities. There is still an informal presence of Russian mercenaries in Libya, designed to support Russian interests and General Khalifa Haftar's control of the east of the country. Syria and Libya remain logistical hubs for the operation of Russian mercenary formations in the MENA and Africa after the Russian MoD reorganised its control structure over private military companies following the suppression of the Yevgeny Prigozhin rebellion and the dismantling of the Wagner force (Ozdemir 2023).

The existence of a sizeable Muslim minority that affects its internal stability is an important factor in Russian MENA policy. Russia encourages the involvement of MENA countries (especially the Gulf states, Türkiye, and Egypt) in economic and cultural relations with its Muslim provinces and fosters dialogues of a Muslim religious establishment as a mechanism for controlling the population. It strives to strengthen its positive image in the Islamic world.

Russia's involvement in the MENA is accompanied by many challenges, some of which have been exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. The region's role as an arena for influence competition between the global powers creates counter-pressure to Moscow's efforts to build partnerships with regional actors. Moscow is trying to drive a wedge between the United States and its traditional partners in the region (the Gulf states, Türkiye, and Egypt).

Russia tries to avoid taking sides in regional rivalries (Sunnis-Shiites, Israel-Iran, Türkiye-Kurds, among others) but prides itself on talking to everyone. Hence, Moscow must constantly balance its moves with the rival parties. In order to overcome these hurdles, Russia adopts a pragmatic transactional policy, does not seek the role of regional hegemon, and instead tries to promote its geostrategic and economic interests, operating first and

foremost through diplomatic and cognitive tools and currently trying to minimise the use of hard military power (which is currently focused on Ukraine). It quickly leverages opportunities while willing to absorb public embarrassment and amend its policy later.

Russia's ability to deepen relations with regional actors is limited by mistrust and historical prejudice. Despite an unprecedented rapprochement between Russia and Iran, Tehran is highly suspicious of Moscow due to centuries of Russian aggression against it. Similarly, Türkiye is pursuing a pendulum policy between Russia and the West. Ankara's support for Ukraine during the war, and in particular, the closure of the Bosphorus Straits to warships, adds to its conflicts of interest with Moscow on Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus.

Russia's Relations with Israel and the Palestinians on the Eve of the 7 October 2023 Hamas Offensive

Benjamin Netanyahu's second term as Prime Minister (beginning in 2009) saw Russia and Israel moving closer. Putin and Netanyahu understood each other and knew how to reach an agreement. This was evidenced by the deconfliction agreement between the Israeli and Russian air forces in Syria after the entry of Russian forces into Syria in 2015. The Russians disregarded Israeli attacks against Iranian targets in Syria as long as Israel did not challenge Russian control of the country. At the same time, economic ties expanded, as did the cultural and political relations between the countries. Putin greatly appreciated Israel's absence from the 2014 UN General Assembly vote against recognising Russia's annexation of Crimea. Against this background, the Russian establishment media was careful not to criticise Israel, an approach markedly different than its lashing out at Western countries.

Israel chose a middle ground after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Unlike in 2014, it joined public condemnation of Russia and voted against it at the UN, but it did not impose sanctions, maintained flight routes, and continued political dialogue with the Kremlin. However, in the summer of 2022, the inauguration of Prime Minister Yair Lapid, who has voiced anti-Russian views since the beginning of the invasion, raised fears in Moscow that Israel would adopt a more hostile political line with Russia. Netanyahu's return as prime minister in December of 2022 also did not lead to

a rapprochement between the two countries, as Moscow continued to fear that Israel would increase security assistance to Ukraine.

Throughout his long reign, Netanyahu established the Israeli-Palestinian strategy of conflict management (as opposed to “resolving the conflict”) and entrenched the separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Netanyahu’s main argument was that there is no partner for political dialogue with the Palestinians since they are divided, and the Palestinian Authority is hostile and illegitimate, and a terrorist organisation controls Gaza.

Although Russia’s official position opposed Netanyahu’s approach, Putin refrained from confronting Jerusalem excessively on the Palestinian issue as long as two counties enjoyed warm relations. The Russian Foreign Ministry called for the establishment of a Palestinian state but joined the pessimistic outlook (prevalent before 7 October 2023) on the possibility of a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Russian Foreign Ministry continued to maintain regular contacts with representatives of the various Palestinian factions, including Hamas as well as the others considered terrorists in Israel. It sponsored an annual meeting in Moscow aimed at promoting unity among the Palestinians to create an ostensible partner for dialogue with Israel. Russia refused to designate Hamas as a terrorist organisation but maintained limited ties with the organisation’s political wing.

Russia during the Gaza War

Russia was surprised by Hamas’ brutal attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. There is a large volume of unreliable reports that Russia was deeply involved in the planning and execution of the attack (Mirovalev 2023). However, serious journalistic projects show that the Hamas military leadership in Gaza did not consult even its close allies (Iran and Hizballah) on the attack, let alone Russia, which kept loose political engagement with Hamas leadership outside Gaza (Hubbard & Abi-Habib 2023; Rakov 2023a). However, Russia recognised that the consequences of the crisis that followed provided them with major strategic opportunities. The most significant opportunity for the Putin regime was to divert the attention and the military and financial resources of the United States and the West from the war in Ukraine. The timing of the crisis in MENA coincided, favourably, in Moscow’s view, with the unsuccessful end of the Ukraine’s counteroffensive. In addition, the war in the MENA presented an opportunity for Russia to try to gain sympathy

in the Global South as part of rehabilitating its global power image while attempting to weaken the United States (Smagin 2023).

Against these opportunities, two risks can be pointed out from Russia's perspective. The first is the development of an all-out regional war that would endanger Russian assets in Syria and threaten its Iranian partner (which could stop arms shipments to Russia). The second is that the war will strengthen the regional status of the United States due to its robust backing to Israel.

In the first week of fighting in Gaza, Russia presented a one-sided, anti-Israeli, anti-American position. Russia adopted the Hamas narrative that the 7 October attacks were a part of the liberation struggle against the Israeli occupation and failed to condemn Hamas atrocities. The Russian diplomatic-media propaganda apparatus explained that the United States was responsible for the crisis in light of its backing of Israel over the years and the creation of a deadlock on the Palestinian issue. The United States has also been accused of escalating the crisis over the Biden administration's security assistance to Israel and the transfer of US aircraft carriers to the region.

Criticism of Israel in the Russian establishment and state media was unrestrained. In the first days after the attack, they mocked the Israeli intelligence failure and the collapse of Israel's power image and were full of anti-Semitic remarks. Some even eulogised Israel as a state (Rakov 2023b).

President Putin framed the war in Gaza not only as a regional crisis but as an expression of the injustice towards the Palestinians that rests in the heart of every Muslim. In his first statements on the subject, he attacked the United States, accused Ukraine of smuggling weapons to Hamas, and criticised Israel. Only on 13 October (the seventh day after the attack) did Putin find some positive words for Israel (recognising its right to self-defence in light of the unprecedented attack it had experienced), but in the same breath, he compared Israel's moves in Gaza to the siege of Leningrad or to Nazi actions. This attitude led to a rise in popular anti-Semitism on the streets of Russia. A high point in this anti-Semitic atmosphere was the riots by pro-Palestinian activists aimed at an Israeli plane arriving to Makhachkala airport (in Russia's Dagestan region, which is predominantly Muslim) at the end of October. The Kremlin perceived it as a negative development that damaged Russian internal stability and moved quickly to punish the perpetrators and local officials.

Following the initial one-sided position, one could identify a gradual moderation and more balanced approach in the state propaganda coverage of the war in Gaza and in official statements. Nevertheless, both Russian

diplomats and the media continue to voice extreme anti-Israeli criticism from time to time. One can only speculate as to why Russia acted to moderate the line of its statements. It may have realised that an extremist position severely damages its relations with Israel, which has indeed stopped seeing Russia as a relevant political address for de-escalating the situation. Russia may have understood that embracing Hamas might be seen damaging by many actors in the Muslim world (the Gulf monarchies and Egypt).

On the diplomatic level, the Russian leadership is intensively engaged in consultations, mainly with Muslim countries and in the UN Security Council. Despite official statements favouring an immediate ceasefire and a return to the negotiating table, Russia has not tabled any political initiative. It tried to present itself as being in dialogue with all sides: Hamas, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and other countries in the region. Since this did not translate into a significant political role for Moscow, it attempted to assume a humanitarian role, persuading Hamas to release Israeli hostages with double Russian citizenship and repatriating Russian citizens from Gaza. Hamas indeed released three Israeli hostages with additional Russian citizenship at the end of November, stressing that it was a special gesture to the Russian president. Though the Israeli public viewed this special gesture with suspicion, it saw Russian involvement in this issue positively.

Even though Iran and the militias under its auspices (in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen) have been at the centre of a confrontation with Israel and the United States during the war, Russia has not coordinated closely its diplomatic activity with Tehran. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi met Putin for the first time in Moscow on 7 December, two months after the war began and only a day after Putin personally visited Iran's regional rivals in the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Russia's activity during the war focused on the political-diplomatic and information warfare domains. It almost wholly lacked the use or threat of military force, even though exchanges of blows between Israel and Lebanese Hezbollah took place close to the Russian army's area of operation in Syria. Throughout the crisis, Israel continued to conduct attacks in Syria against pro-Iranian targets, including several attacks on international airports in Damascus and Aleppo, in order to signal to Iran and the Assad regime the need to stop arms transfers from Iran to Lebanon via Syria. As before the war, Israeli air force could attack in Syria with Russia's tacit consent.

When international criticism on the IDF (Israeli Defense Force) attack in Gaza increased, claiming it was severely harming civilians, Russian media

waged an information campaign, designed to legitimise its military's misconduct during Ukraine war. The Russian code of conduct was described as humane and restrained – as compared to alleged Israeli war-crimes. The United States and the West at large was described as hypocritical, defending the “Israeli crimes” (Gabuev & Notte 2023).

Summary

For the past two years, the importance of the MENA for Russia has increased due to its deep crisis with the West. Nevertheless, Moscow's ability to influence the dynamics of the current war in the region is limited because of its focus on Ukraine (Rakov 2023a). The war in Ukraine and strategic competition with the United States are the main prisms for understanding Russia's response to the escalation in the MENA. Looking through these prisms reveals that continuing the crisis at the current intensity benefits Russia and does not demand a deeper involvement from it.

Moscow is reactive to developments in the region, operating with non-military tools (it uses military tools to try to advance a breakthrough in Ukraine). Russia quickly recognised the strategic opportunities, chose to back the Palestinian side to improve its image in the Global South, and was willing to pay a price in its relations with Israel to take advantage of this opportunity. However, a marked Russian effort has been made to correct its initial response and balance commitments to various regional partners. The Western-oriented countries engage in strategic hedging while manoeuvring between US and Russian (and Chinese) interests.

Looking ahead, the importance of the MENA as a vital space for realising Russia's global strategic goals is expected to be maintained or even increase. Russia's caution in the MENA could diminish if its self-confidence about the future of the war in Ukraine grows or if a vacuum of US influence arises in the region. In these scenarios, the trend of strategic hedging will become even stronger.

Given Moscow's massive investment in its defence industry and operational learning in Ukraine war, the limited use of military tools and the difficulty of exporting weapons to the region might prove to be ephemeral. Despite balancing its positions against different regional camps, Russia will continue strengthening security cooperation with Iran in light of a shared anti-American agenda, which is not expected to change in the years ahead.

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8. The Changing Security Landscape in the South Caucasus

Russia's Gains and Losses

Ambassador Malkhaz MIKELADZE^{*}

Abstract

The paper analyses the evolving security environment in the South Caucasus after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It explores the competition among external forces for regional influence, the changing dynamics within South Caucasus countries, and the resulting threats to regional security. Special attention is given to examining Russia's instruments of influence during different periods, including the post-Soviet era, President Putin's leadership, and the aftermath of the second Karabakh war. The assessment highlights a shift in power distribution over time. Besides this, the article examines Russia's gains and losses in the new security environment. Furthermore, it explores potential measures to promote democratic and stable development, emphasising the region's significance in the broader context of European security.

Keywords: Russia, South Caucasus, 3+3, second Karabakh War, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan

Introduction

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many prominent experts and political figures viewed the future prospect of peaceful coexistence with a newly established independent Russia very enthusiastically. The renowned political researcher Francis Fukuyama spoke of the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992) in which the liberal model ultimately triumphed on a global scale. According to Fukuyama, history must be seen as an evolutionary process, and the end of history marks the cessation of conflict, with liberal democracy emerging as the ultimate form of government for all countries.

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Liberal Russian elites proclaimed ideological freedom, as reflected in Article 13 of the 1993 Russian Constitution. Moreover, the 1993 Foreign Policy Concept stated the priority of achieving “sustainable development of relations with the United States [*and the West as a whole*] with a focus on strategic partnership, and in the future, alliance.” Then-President Yeltsin declared a steadfast commitment to a dynamic and effective partnership aimed at enhancing international stability, security, and peace.

Despite declaratory statements, the West and Russia held divergent views on the prospects of a closer partnership. The West anticipated the democratisation of the Russian state and a gradual integration of the country into the Western community. In contrast, Russian elites envisioned the swift inclusion of Russia into Western Europe, coupled with the full acknowledgment of Russia’s distinct ‘global’ role and her legitimate zones of influence. This ambiguity, combined with the West’s caution in dialogue with the nuclear power, has provided the Kremlin with the opportunity to pursue its own objectives in its neighbouring areas.

Russian elites have consistently regarded the South Caucasus specifically and the Caucasus more broadly as a strategic focal point and exclusive zone of interest that has existential significance for Russia’s national security. While Western leaders had overlooked the developments on Russia’s periphery, the Kremlin’s destructive posture enabled interethnic hostilities, civil wars, and interstate conflicts by supporting destructive movements and exacerbating existing tensions. The presence of Russian military troops on the ground, the so-called peacekeeping operations, protracted conflicts, and the adjustment of Russia’s role as an ostensible mediator impeded the countries in the region from embarking on a state-building process and pursuing a pragmatic, result-oriented policy. This status quo has also limited the involvement of Western countries in these regional affairs.

Besides, Russia’s strategic achievements were facilitated by the absence of a robust regional security system in the South Caucasus, which, in turn, stemmed from the divergent foreign priorities of the three countries. For instance, as a counterbalance to Georgia’s proclaimed European course, Armenia viewed Russia as the sole viable strategic partner capable of safeguarding the country’s security against external threats. Simultaneously, Azerbaijan adopted a balanced policy in which relations with Russia played a decisive role in the restoration of the country’s territorial integrity.

Despite the aforementioned factors and Moscow’s influence on local developments, the anti-Russian sentiments in the countries of the region have

retained a substantial significance among ordinary citizens, and the allure of European life and values for the societies increased steadily. Meanwhile, the unstable situation in the region, economic challenges, corruption, and widespread human rights violations acted as facilitators for significant regional developments.

The Game-Changing Dynamics

At the beginning of the new millennium, the South Caucasus became a battleground for a significant competition between authoritarianism and democratic values. On the one hand, the new foreign priorities of Putin's Russia, including the promotion of the idea of a multipolar world with Russia's global role, and the so-called Rose Revolution in Georgia with democratic values on the other hand, set the stage for a zero-sum game – reminiscent of a new Cold War. The aggressive reforms in Georgia supported by the West along with Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations were perceived by Putin's elite as a direct threat and an attempt to penetrate into Moscow's traditional sphere of influence.

Tbilisi's unilateral steps aiming at the peaceful reintegration (Socor 2006) of the Tskhinvali region into the rest of the country (Corso 2005) (thereby ending Moscow's dominance over the mediation process) triggered an aggressive military reaction from the Russian side with the launch of a five-day war against Georgia in August of 2008. This war resulted in the occupation of 20 percent of Georgian territory. The inconsistent and fragmented international response to the 2008 August war with Georgia has persuaded the Kremlin that it can achieve strategic goals through military means without any punishment.

Open confrontation with Georgia for the Russian Federation meant the loss of the crucial tools to shape developments in Georgia. However, after the political adjustment in domestic politics in Georgia since 2012, in line with its formal policy on normalising relations with Russia, the Kremlin has been adopting a "carrot and stick" approach toward Tbilisi. This involves employing provocative actions in the occupied regions such as so-called borderisation (creeping occupation by moving the Russian occupation line deeper inside of Georgia), restrictions on freedom of movement, and the arrest or assassination of ethnic Georgians deemed adversaries to Russian interests. Simultaneously, Russia utilises soft power tools to promote economic ties

that support the political influence of pro-Russian forces and eventual polarisation of society. When combined with efficient information campaigns, these steps are undermining the image of the Western democracy, thereby politically challenging Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Russia's approach to the 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia differed significantly. Despite mass demonstrations against the pro-Russian government, Moscow proceeded with caution, taking into account Armenia's dependence on Russia both in terms of security and the economy. Additionally, neither the United States nor the EU played a visible role on the ground, making any aggressive Russian response likely to harm the Kremlin's stance within the country.

However, the non-violent change of authoritarian rule, the subsequent fight against corruption, and the arrest of controversial figures linked to the Kremlin (The Armenian Mirror-Spectator 2019) strained relations between Yerevan and Moscow. Furthermore, the Armenian government's aspirations to align more closely with Europe continues to be a source of irritation for the Kremlin.

Despite the competition between Russia and the West over influence in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan has been renowned for its balanced approach in dealing with external actors. Nevertheless, the West's inability to properly respond to the so-called recognition of the so-called independence of Georgia's regions in 2008 (as well as the annexation of Crimea), its lack of progress regarding conflict settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh, and its reluctance to demand the withdrawal of Armenian forces from the occupied territories (as stipulated in the 2008 UNGA resolution (UN 2014), coupled with Western criticism of Azerbaijan's performance in democratic reforms, have progressively compelled Baku to explore alternative pathways in restoring the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Azerbaijan's growing economic and military capabilities, combined with its alliance with Türkiye, presented a clear signal to Russia that Moscow could no longer manipulate the protracted conflict in its relations with Baku and Yerevan. As a result, the Kremlin pragmatically opted to adjust its stance by adapting to new realities in order to maintain its role as a mediator in the modified regional landscape.

The Second Karabakh War Refines Regional Landscape

The 44-day war in 2020 has significantly altered regional developments. Alongside its military victory, Azerbaijan successfully achieved a psychological breakthrough by uniting the society under a patriotic spirit. In this context, Azerbaijan emerges as a regional leader capable of showcasing not only its military power but also in proposing peace initiatives. These initiatives aim at transforming the South Caucasus into an area of cooperation, fostering sustainable development after decades of conflict.

Simultaneously, Armenia faces new challenges that necessitate the creation of a new national security system, a revision of existing foreign priorities, and the promotion of sustainable economic development.

The third, Georgia, maintained a neutral position throughout the escalation by calling on both parties for a ceasefire. During this period of tension, Tbilisi's activities were limited by offering to be a venue for negotiations to the conflicting parties and urging the importance of the activation of international mediators by halting air and land transit of military cargos (National Security Council 2020) and facilitating the prisoner exchange process with leading mediation from the United States.

Azerbaijan's frustration with international mediation, both before and after the 44-day war, called into question the West's potential to continue mediating between the conflicting sides within existing frameworks. In particular, the activities of the Minsk Group were completely disrupted due to Baku's position. The EU's mediation was fragmented as well, and a ceasefire agreement was only reached due to Moscow's intervention. This development satisfied Russia's ambition for a special role in the South Caucasus region.

The provisions of the Ceasefire agreement dated 9 November 2020 are noteworthy (President of Russia 2020). At first glance, they appear to enhance Russia's influence on the conflict resolution process. Specifically, Russia has acquired the right for legal military deployment in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region for a period of five years with the automatic prolongation option unless either the Armenians or the Azeris request the early withdrawal with a six-month advanced notification prior to the expiration. Russian troops, totalling around 2000 personnel units, began moving to Karabakh immediately in the early hours of the day after the announcement of the ceasefire on November 9.

Additionally, Russian observation posts were deployed in various areas and Russian military police were authorised to conduct regular patrols (Batashvili, 2020). Furthermore, the agreement stipulates that the Lachin corridor that connects Karabakh to Armenia shall be under the control of the Russian troops. The ceasefire agreement also includes provisions for the control of transport communication between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic by the Border Guard Service of the FSB of Russia.

Overall, Russia has bolstered its military presence in the South Caucasus region through the deployment of its troops in all three countries (the city of Gyumri in Armenia, Karabakh, and the surrounding areas in Azerbaijan, as well as in Georgia's regions occupied by Russia). At the same time, by refraining from supporting Armenia during the hostilities, Moscow has highlighted the significance of the country's security ties to Russia, as well as the pro-Western Government's inability to defend the Armenian enclave by military force.

Considering its allied partnership with Armenia, the Kremlin successfully navigated the signing of a controversial declaration (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2022) with Azerbaijan, which coincided with the onset of its aggression in Ukraine. Among other important objectives, this declaration underscores commitments to Azerbaijan, qualitatively identical to those made to Russia's another ally – Armenia – providing a sort of justification for the Kremlin's position of abstaining from open support for Armenia in the event of renewed hostilities.

It is noteworthy that following the 44-day Karabakh war, economic co-operation between Moscow and Baku has surged. This became evident in a significant rise in total turnover (The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2023) and the promotion of Russian investments, particularly in the energy sector (Lukoil 2021). Furthermore, the implementation of new transportation projects is expected to simplify Russia's railway communication (along with other transit corridors) with both Armenia and Türkiye. Simultaneously, active Russian involvement in these initiatives may contribute to a reduction in Georgia's transit function potentially impacting the viability of Western support.

With great confidence, Russia adeptly adjusted its influence mechanisms to the new realities on the ground, securing control over the conflict area as well as potential regional transport corridors. Furthermore, another significant external actor involved in the 44-day war was Türkiye, which

showed unwavering support to Azerbaijan. Guided by the maxim expressed by former President Heidar Aliyev, two states – one nation, Türkiye and Azerbaijan have been bound together in an incomparable strategic relationship, formalised by the 2010 agreement “On Strategic Partnership and Mutual Support.” The alliance with Baku holds strong symbolic meaning for Ankara as it is tied to pan-Turkic ambitions and Türkiye’s broader political and economic goals in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Türkiye’s support particularly through the deployment of Turkish Bayraktar drones played a decisive role in enabling Azerbaijan to achieve military superiority over Armenia during the conflict.

Despite Moscow’s leading role in mediating the ceasefire, Russia was not interested in damaging relations with Türkiye. Therefore, it engaged in continuous dialogue with Türkiye at various levels during the active phase of the war. Under pressure from both Azerbaijan and Türkiye, Russia agreed to the joint monitoring of the ceasefire with Turkish observers and supported more new initiatives on regional transport projects. Moreover, Moscow and Ankara share a preference for keeping international, especially Western, involvement in the Karabakh conflict to a minimum.

The negative attitude towards the results of the second Karabakh war was expressed by the third important external player in the region, Iran. The significant changes taking place in the region appeared unexpected to Tehran thus threatening its involvement in the processes in its vicinity. The altered regional geopolitical order resulting from the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war has significantly diminished Tehran’s ability to exert influence over Azerbaijan. Baku’s territorial gains have led to strengthened ties between Azerbaijan and regional Iranian adversaries, such as Türkiye and Israel (Shahbazov 2023). Additionally, the new realities pose novel threats and challenges to Iran’s internal security. From Tehran’s perspective, potential provocations in relations between the large Azeri population and the relatively small but influential Armenian minority, coupled with emotional protests (RFE/RL’s Radio Farda 2020) by Iranian Azeris in support of Baku, are viewed by authorities as potential sources of destabilisation in the country.

Several events contributed to the strain in relations between Tehran and Baku, including the dismissal of the peace plan presented by Iran during the war, an attack on an Iranian village close to the border, and the appointment of the first-ever Azerbaijani Ambassador to Israel (Staff 2022). The expansion of Azeri-Israeli military cooperation, military drills conducted by Iran near Azerbaijan and Armenia in response, and accusations

of Iranian carriers delivering lethal cargo for Armenia have also worsened this relationship.

The strengthening of the Turkish-Russian tandem in the region and the potential launch of the so-called Zangezur Corridor further heighten concerns for the Iranian authorities. The situation was complicated by a clear expression of pan-Turkish sentiments, exemplified during the celebration of the victory in the Karabakh war, where the President of Türkiye quoted a famous Iranian-Azerbaijani poet regarding the historical division of Azerbaijan's territories between Persia and Russia (Motamedi 2020).

The aforementioned regional developments have shown that Iran, which could have been an active participant in the conflict settlement process, has been marginalised. Official Tehran had a dilemma. To support Baku meant recognising Türkiye's salient role in the South Caucasus. Support of Armenia could be considered a stance with France and the West. To seek peace and negotiations would signal Tehran's political weakness (Zharkov 2020). In such circumstances, Iran re-established its presence in the region with the direct support of Russia by leveraging positive relations with South Caucasus countries (Iran is the only country in the neighbourhood with diplomatic relations with Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan). Since interests to limit Western influence in the South Caucasus are a shared and existential goal for Iran, the 3+3 cooperation framework enabled Iran to fulfil its objectives and remain politically influential.

The New Regional Initiatives

The aftermath of the second Karabakh war gave rise to a number of regional initiatives and diplomatic endeavours.

In December 2020, President Erdoğan introduced the concept of a six-country regional cooperation platform, including Russia, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Iran, Georgia, and Armenia during his visit to Baku (Tuncel 2021). The idea garnered immediate support from Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan.

Emphasising Russia's pivotal role in the region, the inaugural meeting of the framework was convened in Moscow on 10 December 2021 with the participation of deputy foreign ministers from five countries, not including Georgia. The formal rejection of the possibility of Georgia's participation in this platform was announced by then-Foreign Minister D. Zalkaliani, citing the occupation of Georgia's regions territories by the Russian Federation.

However, a few months later, in response to Minister Lavrov's statement expressing conviction that "despite all the problems it is experiencing," they [Georgians] would be able to see interest in this project (Azizova, Hovhannisyan, and Khutsishvili 2022), Zalkaliani responded with a degree of ambiguity. He stated, "... I would like to present a position for public consideration – we should, in some form, be part of these significant geopolitical projects and relations. This involvement should not come at the expense of state interests or concessions to the occupier. It is essential for us not to lag behind the evolving processes in the region and ensure participation in all new, including infrastructural, projects. Failure to do so may result in Georgia losing its role and function" (Chichua 2021). Such ambiguity has caused some confusion from the involved parties announcing the open-door policy for Georgia.

The non-participation of Georgia in this platform raises questions about the effectiveness of the initiative and poses obstacles to fully-fledged regional cooperation. It thus does not align with the crucial goals of neighbouring actors – to limit the engagement of other external players in the developments of the South Caucasus and establish effective control over transit routes across the region. This concern became more pronounced after the second meeting of the platform in Iran on 24 October 2023, which again had only five members in attendance. The assessment of the meeting by state parties, such as 3+3-1 framework, suggests an expectation that pressure on Georgia to join the initiative remains on the table. It is noteworthy that the next meeting within this framework is scheduled to take place in Türkiye in 2024, providing another opportunity to involve Georgia in the framework.

Simultaneously with the 3+3 platform, the Prime Minister of Georgia announced a new Peaceful Neighbourhood Initiative at the 2021 UNGA. This initiative aims to facilitate dialogue and confidence-building, leading to the implementation of practical solutions to regional issues such as the security of energy and transport routes, and the settlement of existing conflicts with the engagement of Western partners. Owing to a lack of specific proposals and substantial support from the West, this initiative remained confined to express only declaratory backing from regional countries.

At the same time, there has been a notable increase in positive mediation efforts by European and US stakeholders in the negotiation process between Baku and Yerevan. On 6 October 2022 specifically, a quadrilateral meeting took place involving President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President of the European Council Charles Michel, and France's President Macron.

During this meeting, an agreement was reached for the deployment of a civilian EU monitoring mission to the territory of Armenia along with its border with Azerbaijan (with Baku providing obscure consent to cooperate with the mission).

Moreover, with mediation from the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to a long-term negotiation plan for a comprehensive peace agreement. The unequivocal commitment to the territorial integrity of Armenia and Azerbaijan within the reached agreements was perceived by many experts as a breakthrough in the negotiating process and a confirmation of the shift in Armenia's negotiating position. The focus would now be on the security and general rights of the inhabitants of Karabakh, not on the status of the region (Caprile and Przetacznik 2023).

On 14 May 2023, after the trilateral meeting with leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, President Charles Michel emphasised the confirmation of the unequivocal commitment to the 1991 Almaty Declaration and the respective territorial integrity of Armenia (29,800 km²) and Azerbaijan (86,600 km²). Furthermore, President Michel stated that both sides made clear progress in their discussions aimed at unblocking transport and economic links in the region. Positions on this topic have now come very close to each other in particular on the reopening of the railway connections to and via Nakhichevan. Their respective teams have been tasked to finalise in principle the agreement on the modalities for the opening of the railway connections and the necessary construction works together with a concrete timetable (European Council 2023).

2023 Hostilities

On 19 September of 2023, Azerbaijan initiated a large-scale offensive in Nagorno Karabakh. The Ministry of Defence of Azerbaijan claimed the conduct of local anti-terrorist activities and cited landmines allegedly planted by Armenians, resulting in the deaths of two Azeri civilians and four police officers. Baku demanded the disarmament and withdrawal of all ethnic Armenian soldiers, as well as the unconditional surrender of this territory to Azerbaijan. The statement concluded with a notice that the Russian peace-keeping contingent, and the joint Russian-Turkish Monitoring Centre was informed about the operation.

However, Russia denied this information and added that the Russian peacekeepers were informed only a moment before the start of the operation. Nevertheless, the Russian peacekeepers did everything to stay out of the conflict despite there is evidence of an artillery strike on one of Russian military bases as well as Azeris opening fire at Russian peacekeepers. An official apology was expressed by Azeri President Ilham Aliyev during a phone call to Russian President Vladimir Putin (TASS 2023).

The two-day conflict resulted in more than four hundred casualties on both sides. The most significant outcome of Azerbaijan's offensive was the effective cessation of the self-proclaimed Artsakh Republic to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's seizure of the region also led to almost the entire Armenian population of the so-called Nagorno Karabakh fleeing to Armenia. This prompted Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to accuse Azerbaijan of conducting ethnic cleansing in the region.

Considering the restoration of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, Russia's inclination to persist in its previous tactics of manipulating the status of the Karabakh expired. The Russian peacekeeping forces stationed in and around Nagorno Karabakh deviated from their mandated function, but it remains only a matter of time before their full withdrawal from the territory of Azerbaijan is requested. Furthermore, Baku's potential willingness to consider the opening of a transport corridor to and via Nakhichevan under Armenian jurisdiction not only diminishes Russia's ability to exert control over new transportation networks in the region but also renders such control unnecessary.

Conclusions

Previously, the conflict in and around Karabakh was the sole post-Soviet space conflict where Moscow and the West cooperated in a single peace arrangement. However, the outcome of the 44-day war in 2020 along with the hostilities in 2023 on top of Russia's military aggression in Ukraine have fundamentally shifted the balance of power in the region. From the Russian perspective, disagreements between Armenia and Azerbaijan have been side-lined even regarding the Karabakh issue itself (Khalatyan 2023). The emergence of parallel negotiation processes and mediations between Armenia and Azerbaijan is now perceived as a means of vying for influence in the South Caucasus.

Thus, it is likely that Russia will continue taking steps to minimise Western mediation in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations. However, facing limited sources due to the war in Ukraine and Western sanctions, Moscow's main focus will likely shift towards diplomatic measures. These may include attempts to prolong negotiations on border delimitation between Azerbaijan and Armenia as well as the so-called peace agreement between the two countries. Additionally, based on the provisions of the 2020 Ceasefire agreement, the Kremlin will facilitate the activation of negotiations on transport corridors with its own mediation. Russia may also extend support for the 3+3 cooperation platform by encouraging Georgia's participation in this framework. At the same time, the possibility of provocations in border areas between Armenia and Azerbaijan render the social and political support for pro-Russian forces more appealing.

Regarding Georgia, the Russian approach will likely depend on Tbilisi's success in European integration, hostage to domestic political priorities and Russia's efficient abuse of carrots and sticks. Some of this influence might parallel investments in political influence along with the commercial presence to win the support of the pro-Russian society.

The current objective for the Russian elites in their formal relations with the Georgian government is to create the necessary conditions for maintaining the status quo, so-called business as usual in spite of the absence of diplomatic ties. Even though bilateral links are lacking, the presence of multilateral structures allows for interagency collaboration on matters of mutual interest such as agriculture, trade, customs, transit routes, and investments amongst many other items. These are alternative mechanisms to possibly create closer relations if the Georgian political priorities emphasise Russia even more.

Economic ties are another component of Moscow's ability to impact developments in the region. The experience of imposing economic sanctions on Georgia in 2006, combined with the high dependence of regional countries' economies on commerce with Russia alongside the recent trend of utilising neighbouring areas to avoid Western sanctions (benefitting some regional circles), creates a favourable environment for Russia to exert economic pressure on regional actors. In the current circumstances, Western support could be perceived by regional states as the primary means to counter Russia's political goals in the South Caucasus. A new Western strategy for the South Caucasus should be well-coordinated between Europe and the United States, encompassing a wide range of issues.

Regarding Armenia-Azerbaijan relations, both the EU and the United States should stress to the two sides the priority of a delivering a diplomatic solution that is based on the respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty. Additionally, facilitating negotiations on transit corridors without preconditions could pave the way for greater economic cooperation and trust-building between both countries, an even more efficient way to presenting cooperation as a better option than conflict.

With Georgia, there should be joint efforts to counter Russia's soft power and information operations as well as to bring the government and opposition together in meaningful dialogue to cut the political deadlock in Tbilisi. This approach should be coupled with granting Georgia EU candidate status, with it meeting the conditions for integration and converging with Western political institutions and principles.

Regionally, initiating a broader dialogue with the countries of Central Asia, Türkiye, and China could contribute to changing the regional status quo and create conditions for establishing a zone of cooperation rather than competition. In this regard, the expressed support from Berlin and Central Asian leaders for initiatives to develop the "Middle Corridor" route under the Global Gateway initiative could serve as a promising example for the prospects of cooperation (Şimşek 2023).

Simultaneously with the domestic efforts to remedy market-based sensitivities and vulnerabilities, Western assistance to all three countries to enhance economic resilience to internal and external influences along with a further strengthening of macroeconomic stability through market diversification is a crucial factor for the sustainable development of the region.

Western support and substantial engagement in the establishment of a new regional security architecture is crucial to counterbalance Russia's influence in the South Caucasus. This holds strategic importance for the international actors, given the region's geo-political importance. The significance is heightened in the context of the ongoing confrontation with the Russian Federation following its aggression in Ukraine. Additionally, the region has key implications for the security dynamics of the wider Black Sea Region as well as it playing a vital role in ensuring the energy security of Europe.

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9. Israel's War on Hamas Splits Europe – and Enhances Russia and Iran

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Abstract

This essay investigates the impact of the Israeli war against the Hamas terrorist group within the context of the broader Middle East. Moreover, this essay notes how different interest groups perceive the ongoing conflict. Even though the Arab-Israeli conflict has been dragging on for decades, there have been some positive openings with new countries adjourning peace treaties with Israel. This surge of war activity has pitted formerly pro-Western countries in the Middle East against the West, pushing them even together with their former foes such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, this conflict has opened possibilities for Russia to exhaust US and European resources in the Middle East. Furthermore, Europe has been somewhat divided in their support or opposition to Israel and the Palestinians, but more importantly has been hesitant to take a substantial stance. These divisions offer possibilities for Russia and China to expand their geopolitical interests in places like Europe.

Keywords: Israel, Hamas, war, Russia, Iran, Europe, America

Introduction

The war in Gaza has exposed deep divisions within Europe regarding its policy towards Israel and Palestine. The only unity has been found in condemning Hamas and its attacks on 7 October, but there has been no such unity in a stance against Israel's killing of thousands of Palestinians. Among many things, Europe's response to the Israel-Hamas war has also been described as shambolic, which could have implications for Europe's credibility and influence in the region.

The Israel-Hamas conflict has a significant impact on European politics and society, leading to a shrinking space for European citizens to denounce

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both sides, eroding the basic principles of coexistence. Societies are deeply divided over the Israeli-Palestinian question, with expressions of anti-Semitism and islamophobia reaching unprecedented heights. The European Union and most member states are trapped in a binary view of the conflict, with right-leaning governments, parties, and sectors of society unconditionally supporting Israel's military response in Gaza while erasing the broader scale of Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the context or even following their own narrative within international humanitarian law and war crimes aspects executed after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Europe is seen as a hypocritical and passive player, lacking proactive engagement and influenced by polarising narratives. At the same time, as a result of public pressure, the dynamics of the Middle East itself are changing. Iran meets Saudi Arabia at a summit, looking to find some political solutions. Russia and China also protect their interests, which play an even more significant role in Europe, including European foreign and security policy. At the same time, actors such as Türkiye and Iran are using the war in the name of their own interests, where connections with Russia can also be observed. Consequently, while facing domestic challenges, Europe's foreign policy vectors and opportunities in this context are not limited to the issue of Israel and Hamas but also leave traces of relations with China, Russia, NATO allies, and the broader Global South.

This chapter analyses the impact of the Israeli-Hamas conflict on global and regional dynamics. It will scrutinise the developments within the Russian-Iranian-Hamas triangle and assess their implications for European security. Additionally, the study will explore the responses from European political elites and societies, examining the polarisation stemming from these reactions.

Global and Regional Context

International policies towards the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict have had a number of interconnected elements. Contrary to popular belief, because of the mistrust among the Middle Eastern countries and its close ties with Israel, the United States cannot be a peacemaker in the region. However, the complexity remains steady and deep, particularly due to the strained relations between the United States and Iran, as well as the fact that the main ally of the United States in the entire Middle East region is Israel.

Therefore, it is hard to argue that the United States is the only power that can promote the Middle East peace process.

Within the Middle East, the United States, under the leadership of President Joe Biden, is navigating a nuanced approach by expressing support for Israel while concurrently advocating for restraint. The heightened US involvement in the region may redirect attention and resources from its overarching strategic competition with China. This shift carries implications for Europe's association with the United States, influencing shared priorities and resource allocation, including the war in Ukraine. Notably, Biden's decision to link assistance for Ukraine with support for Israel presents an opportunity to garner bipartisan support, effectively overcoming resistance from Republican lawmakers. Nevertheless, this increased United States engagement in the Middle East is perceived by some as a divergence from the primary focus on strategic competition with China.

China's vigorous response and its emphasis on perceived Western double standards in the conflict also pose potential complexities for Europe. This scenario has the capacity to test Europe's ability to maintain a neutral stance and deftly manage diplomatic relations with both Israel and Palestine. China's endorsement of the Palestinian cause aligns with its broader diplomatic outreach to the Global South and underscores its critique of Western inconsistencies. However, such a stance could complicate China's mediation efforts in the broader Middle East, particularly regarding fostering closer ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East holds broader geopolitical ramifications, potentially impacting global security and stability. These consequences may indirectly reverberate across Europe. It is imperative for pertinent stakeholders to acknowledge their shared interests and collaboratively strive for a prompt resolution to the conflict, emphasising a political framework to ensure both enduring security for Israel and the right of the Palestinians to self-determination and to build their own state without further occupation. As the circumstances indicate, it could even happen in cooperation with countries in the region. With the start of the Israel-Hamas war, any reconciliatory processes between Israel and the broader region have stopped. Although at present there is no complete consensus among the regional powers on possible outcomes, the existing consensus is quite solid and noteworthy.

Israel Drives Arabs Closer

The war in the Middle East has disappointed many Arab interest groups who feel that Western countries are delaying humanitarian relief and hesitating to mediate de-escalation measures. There are expectations and demands for accountability for alleged war crimes from all belligerents. Regional leaders have convened diplomatic events to pressure Israel for a ceasefire, deliver humanitarian aid to Gaza, release Israeli hostages, and plan for post-war governance in Gaza.

On 11 November, Saudi Arabia hosted an “Extraordinary Arab-Islamic Summit” in Riyadh to discuss the war in Gaza. This was a historic development in that it brought together most regional leaders, including representatives of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye. There was a consensus among the participants on the need for a ceasefire in Gaza, but there were disagreements on the nature of the solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The conservative Arab states accepted Israel’s presence in the region but insisted on addressing the Palestinians’ demand for statehood. Iran, on the other hand, refused to endorse a two-state solution and argued that Israel should not exist at all (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation 2023).

Disagreements regarding the fate of Hamas also appeared. While Iran and its allies opposed Israel’s aim of destroying Hamas, some Gulf states seemed to favour removing Hamas as the governing authority in Gaza. Egypt, however, opposed efforts to permanently end Hamas’ rule, fearing a power vacuum and intra-Palestinian conflict. The summit’s closing statement focused on condemning Israeli aggression in Gaza and called to prepare evidence to support the legal and political initiatives regarding Israeli international humanitarian law violations using instruments provided by the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court, and the Human Rights Council. Some participants proposed severing economic relations, imposing sanctions, and cutting diplomatic ties with Israel, but the Gulf States rejected these proposals (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation 2023).

On 5 December, the 44th Gulf Summit was held in Doha, which also stated that the main objective was to achieve a comprehensive halt to the conflict in Gaza, put an end to the blockade on the Strip, and alleviate the hardships faced by the Palestinian population. The message emphasised the need for the international community to assume responsibility and address

this matter without applying double standards (Foreign Ministry of Oman 2023).

The fate of Hamas is a significant source of disagreement among regional powers, with some favouring its removal as the governing authority in Gaza. Conversely, Iran and its regional partners have sought to limit Israel's military operation against Hamas through a number of means. They aim to compel Israeli restraint and prevent the destruction of Hamas without sacrificing Hezbollah in Lebanon or Syria, therefore engaging in rather low-level attacks. A similar strategy is also observed when it comes to the Houthis in Yemen, who are aligned with Iran and have attacked Israel by launching missiles and drones as well as seizing an Israeli-linked cargo ship, increasing global threat on international trade routes.

This can be seen as part of Iran's efforts to pressure Israel and limit its military operation in Gaza. Iran has also targeted US forces based in Iraq and Syria in an effort to compel the United States to impose restraint on Israel's operation in Gaza. Such a development is very dangerous, as it provokes the direct involvement of the Americans. The death or injury of American personnel may result in greater US involvement in the region, whether it is a broader fight against terrorism or under any other terminology. The past lessons show that this type of involvement might create long-term irreconcilable instability in the region. Even if there are mixed messages from Tehran and Hezbollah regarding their willingness to protect Hamas, they continue to signal its presence and its red lines. The implied threat of escalation is being used to persuade Israel not to destroy Hamas. At the same time, Israel is practicing strategic restraint and sequencing its military operations rather than fighting on two fronts at once. The Biden administration is urging restraint and trying to prevent unanticipated escalation.

Türkiye's Erdogan has opposed attacks and killings of civilians in both Israel and Gaza and has advocated for a free state of Palestine. Erdogan's stance on the Palestinian issue and the conflict in Gaza is crucial for maintaining support from his loyal voters, particularly Muslim conservatives. While Türkiye's relationship with Israel has been strained due to events such as the Israel-Gaza conflicts, it is evident that it overshadows Türkiye's actions in Syria and Iraq, easing some of the pressures on Ankara.

At the same time, as the *Financial Times* recently reported, the United States is greatly concerned about Türkiye's financial links to Hamas. The United States has imposed sanctions on individuals and companies it

believes are Türkiye-based Hamas operatives or involved in the re-exportation of high-priority battlefield items. Türkiye's trade in dual-use components with Russia and suspected intermediaries has also increased significantly, causing frustration among the United States and its allies, including NATO, raising concerns about Russia gaining access to Western-made parts for its war machine through Türkiye. The United States' concerns over Türkiye's financial links to Hamas come at a sensitive moment for Türkiye's relations with the West, as Ankara is being lobbied to approve Sweden's accession to NATO and is seeking to purchase US F-16 fighter jets (Samson and Yackley 2023).

The Russia-Iran-Hamas-Europe Axis

The Israeli war on Hamas has taken the attention of the international community away from the war in Ukraine. It has increased regional tensions between Israel and Iran, as well activating several regional Iranian proxy groups, particularly Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. The Middle East region is again dynamic, and with Iranian-Russian shared interest and current relations dynamics, Europe cannot afford fatigue.

Russia and Iran have developed a close working relationship in recent years with tight financial, military, and political ties. Russia has become the largest foreign investor in Iran, investing billions of dollars in various sectors. The two countries have responded to US sanctions by establishing a program to "dump the dollar" by connecting their bank-to-bank financial messaging systems (Escobar 2023).

On the military side, Russia's and Iran's bilateral meetings and Iranian-built drones and missile air-defence system inspections emphasise long-term military cooperation between the two actors, which we also witnessed playing out in Ukraine. Meetings between Russian and Iranian officials, along with their support for Hamas, indicate a closer operational relationship between Russia and Iran. As long as we do not have conclusive evidence of direct support from Russia and Iran to Hamas, we have to take into account the possibility of their involvement in providing support, including weapons, military training, and financial assistance. Further investigation in order to determine the extent of Russian and Iranian support for Hamas would also affect the European approach towards both Russia and Iran.

Deepening ties between Russia and Iran have various implications for European interests and security. First, of course, it is in Europe's interest to support Ukraine until Russia is defeated. But Europe's interests go beyond Ukraine. As Europe witnesses a diminishing capacity to influence or constrain Iran's nuclear program, it concurrently experiences a waning ability to sustain Western hegemony in global order. Russia and Iran, aligned in their pursuit of a multipolar world order that redistributes influence away from the Western sphere, have found opportune circumstances in the Ukraine conflict to draw non-Western nations closer to this shared vision. Russia has intensified its diplomatic and economic interactions with countries across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, as well as with international organisations such as the BRICS group, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the Eurasian Economic Union. Moreover, Russia has shielded Iran from scrutiny by the International Atomic Energy Agency and has rebuffed resolutions urging Iran to cooperate with United Nations inspections of nuclear facilities (Geranmayeh and Grajewski 2023).

The Hamas attack itself, and its military capabilities have also raised questions about the extent of Russian and Iranian involvement in supporting the group. The evidence is currently quite limited, but what we do know is that Russia has maintained a relationship with Hamas for over a decade and has had high-level meetings with its political and military leaders. The evidence suggests that Russia has provided long-term political support to Hamas, with the meetings with Hamas and Iran also indicating possible engagement on the military side.

Nevertheless, it is still under question whether or to what extent Russia (and Iran) provided support to Hamas, including weapons, military training, financial support, and intelligence, and whether they knew about and approved of the attack. The timing of the meetings between Russian and Hamas leaders in Moscow, just days after Hamas received an invitation from Russia, is seen as significant, possibly indicating Russia's promise to support Hamas in changing the status quo with Israel. Russia may have had strategic reasons for supporting Hamas, such as opening up a second front in the Middle East to distract its adversaries.

Europe's Domestic Disarray

The European Commission does not have a strong foreign policy. This is the responsibility of each Member State. As the EU contains 27 countries, they often coalesce in what they want and believe in. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there was a consensus on how to respond; the Israeli-Palestinian issue, however, has always been a very divisive subject.

One of the early shortcomings of the EU occurred when, following the 7 October Hamas attacks on Israel, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Parliament President Roberta Metsola chose to visit Tel Aviv to express support for Israel (European Commission 2023; European Parliament 2023) without consulting other EU member states. While the majority likely endorsed this move, some countries were uneasy about them acting on behalf of the entire EU. In this regard, it is important to note that Ursula von der Leyen is a German politician, the German representative of the European Commission, and this move reflected her nationality rather than her political position. Since then, the EU has faced challenges in presenting a unified front or establishing a cohesive stance. This decision has resulted in a rift within the leadership of the EU. In contrast to Ms. Von der Leyen and Ms. Metsola, Mr. Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, adopted a more moderate stance, while Mr. Charles Michel, the President of the European Council, has positioned himself somewhere in between. Consequently, divisions within Europe extend not only among its leadership and member states but also within each Member State.

Individual countries are going their own way and engaging in their own diplomacy. While Germany has rejected calls for a permanent ceasefire, leaders of Spain and Belgium recently visited the region and are among the vocal advocates of ending the war. The division between EU member states and political division among domestic parties within member states might have serious political consequences, especially considering the upcoming European parliament elections. The rise of far-right political forces in Europe, as seen in the Dutch elections, for example, are very strongly supportive of Israel, and some of them explicitly support the occupation and building of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories. That is precisely the case of the potential new Dutch leader, Geert Wilders, as for him, Israel is a sort of a model country that applies a very tough line against "Others" – the Arabs and Muslims – linking to the debate about immigration and integration

in European societies. The Israel-Palestine issue thus becomes a part of the culture war that is going on in Europe.

European initiatives that foster democracy and good governance in Palestine have not yielded the intended outcomes. Instead, they have exacerbated governance challenges in the region. The European Union has supported democratic practices and governance in Palestine through financial aid, reforms across different sectors, and backing for electoral processes and technical improvements (The European Union 2022). As concluded in previous studies, the EU's decision to exclusively engage with non-Hamas members, providing one-sided contact and assistance, has deepened internal political divisions among Palestinians and impeded efforts towards reconciliation between various factions.

Historically, the EU's restrained support and financial withholding from the Palestinian Authority following the establishment of the National Unity Government involving both Hamas and Fatah has fostered divisions and hindered advancements. These actions have contributed to the prevalence of lawlessness and a deficit in governance within Palestine (Tocci 2007). The EU's limited influence over the conflict has restricted its ability to navigate independently, confining it to operate within the periphery of policies dictated by the United States. This seems to also be the case in the context of the escalation of aggravation in 2023. The lack of understanding of Hamas and its role in Palestinian society misses the key political reality that "unlike global jihadist groups, Hamas is the mass nationalist movement" (Tocci 2007). Labelled a terrorist organisation or not, they have become deeply ingrained in Palestinian society.

Europe is not a military power, but it is a crucial trading bloc for Israel and the broader Middle East, and it has leverage in this regard. Future scenarios also present challenges. How could Europe support Palestinian-Israeli coexistence after the end of the military confrontation? Politicians can agree on the two-state solution, but unfortunately, it is just a slogan. If Europe wants to advance the two-state solution, one of the things this means is countering the growth of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which make the two-state solution impossible. This is where Europe immediately gets into difficulty, as there is no political will among the member states, especially those who unconditionally side with Israel. The solution to the conflict is impossible without changing the political rhetoric and terminology itself. While the European Union's endeavours to assist in the state-building process with the Palestinian Authority are commendable,

a significant drawback lies in the exclusion of Gaza from developmental initiatives.

The European Union is already dealing with several simultaneous crises, all of which are related to its foreign and security policy. The war between Israel and Hamas is one of them that is not only putting a stress check on the whole union but also is highlighting the different approaches of its twenty-seven member states, which hinders its ability to address urgent issues in real-time. When analysing a European threat perception related to events and instability in the Middle East, it often comes down to issues such as terrorism, refugee flows, the potential spread of extremism, energy security, and humanitarian concerns.

When we look at the recent data, in 2022, member states reported a total of 28 completed, failed, and foiled terrorist attacks. This marked an increase compared to the 18 attacks reported in 2021 but remained below the number of attacks reported in 2020, which stood at 56. Most of the reported terrorist attacks were categorised as left-wing and anarchist terrorism, while there were six jihadist attacks reported. Two of them were completed, four were foiled, and no failed jihadist terrorist attacks were reported. Two people died in jihadist attacks in Europe in 2022. Considering the data provided by the European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2023, Jihadist terrorist invasions in 2022 have been decreasing compared to 2021 and 2020 (Europol 2023).

Regarding migration, one could argue, especially economists, that migration is a great necessity, much more than a security threat to Europe. Mr. Borrell argues that “Legal migration offers many benefits,” (Borrell 2023) and he might be right. Compared to our neighbouring regions, including the Middle East, society in Europe is aging. With the rise in displacement due to climate change, regional conflicts, and natural disasters, migration levels in Europe are just going to increase. But is Europe ready for this additional pressure?

Based on the above, while terrorism and migration are not the most immediate threats to Europe, the damage caused by Russia is. That is why it is essential to realise that the Israel-Hamas conflict does not exist in a vacuum and is also directly related to Russia’s interests, which requires a strong demonstration of posture and attitude on the European part, where Europe is having a tough time by defining its position, and level of involvement.

European Social Discord

European governments' responses to the Israel-Palestine hostilities have had harmful effects on societies in Europe, including inadequate responses to anti-Semitism and islamophobia, discriminatory immigration policies, and restrictions on pro-Palestinian protest and expression. There has been a significant increase in anti-Semitic incidents in several European countries since the start of the hostilities, raising concerns about the safety of Jewish communities.

According to the Human Rights Watch report on October 26, in France, from October 7 to 24, there had been 588 acts of anti-Semitism, leading to 336 arrests. Meanwhile, in Germany, there were 202 incidents between October 7 and 15, a substantial increase compared to the same week in 2022, when the number of reported incidents reached 59 (Human Rights Watch 2023). On the flip side, there has been a significant increase in islamophobic hate crimes in Europe. However, the absence of comprehensive data in certain countries hampers the development of effective policy responses. According to Human Rights Watch, 291 islamophobic incidents in the United Kingdom from October 7 to 19 were reported, which is six times more than during the same period in 2022 (Human Rights Watch 2023).

Mapping the hate crime data gathered within various European cities reveals a lack of valid records that might also impact the effectiveness of policy response. That leaves both Jewish and Muslim societies within Europe endangered. As a result, a number of European authorities have imposed excessive restrictions on pro-Palestinian protests, which raises serious concern about the approach and political motivation concerning the right to protest discrimination and free expression in the broader context.

Unfortunately, hate crimes also affect a wider part of society, including journalists, researchers, and academics, apart from their nationality or ethnic belonging, both personally and professionally. Such expressions of hostility as online harassment and death threats directly affect their ability to conduct investigations and report sensitive issues. Hate speech, smear campaigns, and subsequent threats against researchers and journalists undermine Europe's democratic society and impede open debate on foreign and security policy. As the work of researchers is based on scientific methods and supports public discussion and decision-making, the polarisation of society caused by the Israel-Hamas war is profoundly troubling and has direct consequences on the availability of objective information, the diversity

of opinions, and public opinion in general. Failure to prevent such crimes, in the long-term, exposes the public to the consumption of narratives of unfriendly players, including Russia, and weakens the public's resilience against several other hybrid threats, including the information warfare that the whole of Europe is subject to.

Conclusions

The ongoing war between Israel and Hamas has clearly marked Europe's inability to agree. Presently, Europe's stance reveals vulnerabilities, with members from smaller nations with limited representation in EU institutions facing a notable disadvantage. The dominance of Germany within various EU institutions, has led to an imbalanced leverage dynamic. The European Union is not effectively operating as a unified entity, which is its primary function, and lacks a coherent message regarding any collective position. The call for humanitarian pauses rather than a decisive push for a ceasefire falls short of meeting the expectations of Europe as a bloc and as representative of our societies.

It is just not good enough. EU institutions and member states are unable to address urgent issues, while anti-Semitism and islamophobic hate crimes are on the rise in Europe. The war is being instrumentalised to sow hatred and fear in Europe. EU member states' lack of unity over the conflict affects Europe's security and stability. For Europe, the events in the Middle East will never be as important as security challenges stemming from relations with Russia. There stands our clear and present danger for today, while our most significant threat in the long term will be China. With Russia and China as the greatest threats for the years to come, if Europe wants to have a chance to be an equal player against them, it should speed up its unity regarding its foreign policy. It should use the instruments that it has as an economic power as well as define its foreign policy goals towards the Middle East and broader Global South.

While the Middle Eastern powers are calling for evidence gathering and proposing to resolve the matter using instruments provided by international law, suggesting the imposition of sanctions, and cutting of diplomatic ties with Israel, Europe has struggled to even condemn the violations executed by Israel in Gaza. Europe's inability to reach an agreement that is rooted in the very foundations of European civilisation creates the image of a

powerless player, which, in the long term, may limit Europe's opportunities for influence in the region and in the broader context. It will not be considered a significant actor at the political level. Instead, the United States will represent Western interests in the Middle East region based on its priorities and world order vision, which can be supplemented with the national policies of individual European countries.

Russia's perspective on the international system is very different from the one that European liberal democracies represent. In Russia, the concept of multipolarity and balance of power has been under discussion since the 1990s and still is the case. For that reason, the split between the West and the Rest as a result of the Israeli-Hamas war is advancing and threatening both European influence and transatlantic geopolitical perceptions. The war against Ukraine has strengthened ties between Russia and Iran, and the distraction of global attention from the Russian war in Ukraine enables Russia to expand its ideas, strengthen its ties with less like-minded countries, and destabilise existing world order.

Politically, Russia's role in Europe remains the same, as emerged after the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The attitudes of Western society still exert pressure and international isolation of Russia. However, together with the wider Global South, they have not hesitated to express criticism of Israel's military actions in Gaza and their consequences for Palestinian civilians. Russia is not the central orchestrator of Hamas activities. However, it enjoys the division of Europe on this issue and uses the opportunity to strengthen its position based on an anti-Western narrative of double standards and hypocrisy.

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10. Russia's Remaining Power Leverage over Europe

Five Ways Russia can Strangle Europe

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Abstract

In February 2022, as Putin geared up for the invasion of Ukraine, it seemed that the Kremlin could severely weaken Europe's ability to resist Russian aggression with just a few strategic moves. Europe was heavily reliant on Russian energy supplies, grappling with the urgent need to devise a plan for handling a potential influx of millions of displaced Ukrainians. This unfolded against the backdrop of the EU's reputation for sluggish decision-making, a dilapidated European defence sector, and Russia's decades-long investment in shaping Europe's information landscape and supporting radical far-right political movements.

Keywords: Russia, Europe, influence, politics

Introduction

As Putin prepared to launch his invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it looked like the Kremlin could decisively knock out Europe's capacity to resist Russian aggression by inflicting just a few major blows. At the time, Europe was significantly dependent on Russian energy supplies. It was also facing the challenge of swiftly devising a plan to manage the potential rapid influx of millions of Ukrainians displaced by the war. This all set against the backdrop of an EU notorious for painstakingly slow decision-making processes, a European defence sector in decrepit shape, and a Russia that had invested for decades in Europe's (dis)information scene and radical far-right political movements.

Russia's strategy, nonetheless, failed. Yet even though Europe has learned to recognise Moscow's sources of leverage and heed these vulnerabilities, the Kremlin has become more patient and willing to drag out its efforts to achieve its aims. In continuing its military assault on Ukraine, it has come

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to rely on a nefarious mix of actions intended not to destroy Europe immediately but rather to contribute to its eventual death through a million small cuts. Instead of delivering one major blow, Russia is expanding its arsenal of drawn-out and pernicious tactics.

These methods are designed to mobilise external actors to turn against Europe or to cut off Europe from its vital connectivity and critical relationships with the outside world. Russia can distract, paralyse, and incapacitate Europe by destabilising and thwarting reform progress in the Western Balkans and by doing its part to make military conflicts in Africa more frequent and intractable. Migration has already been weaponised against Europe, and Russia will continue to seek more avenues to instrumentalise migrants.

It can also exploit its remaining – much lower in volume but not negligible – supplies of energy and raw materials that are exported to Europe. Finally, it has been looking to undersea cables and pipelines as a tool to critically sabotage Europe's connectivity and power grids. None of these methods, taken on their own, are likely to cause sufficient damage to put Europe at severe risk. However, applying them simultaneously over a protracted period of time could eventually exhaust Europe unless it proactively connects the dots in advance and builds up resilience across the board.

Wrecking the Western Balkans

Wielding power in the Western Balkans is a tool for Putin to distract the EU and NATO and obstruct their integration processes (Zweers, Drost and Henry 2023), find allies, diminish Europe's economic sway, undermine EU credibility, and force the EU to squander its financial, military, and political resources.

The EU and NATO have intensified their relations with countries in this neighbourhood in recent years. Meanwhile, other geopolitical heavyweights, like China or Türkiye, have increased their investments in the region. Russia, therefore, is by far not the only or primary influence actor in the Western Balkans. Yet, a precarious balance of ethnic, religious, and political relations in the region, uneven trust towards the EU and NATO among different segments of populations, and the relative fragility of local economies and democratic institutions all provide fertile ground for Russia to exert influence.

Russia boasts a notable advantage over the EU; it does not require others to undergo complex or difficult reforms to establish closer relations. The EU wants Western Balkan countries to do more and deliver better results. Russia needs them to do nothing or less especially in terms of democratisation.

Even preserving the status quo or stalling countries from making progress towards joining the EU or NATO (Vavra 2023) will be a good outcome for Russia. Nevertheless, with relatively little effort, Russia can achieve much more – it can stoke heightened tensions if not an outright armed conflict in the Balkans (Stradner 2021); (Shedd and Stradner 2023).

Over the past few years, Russia has honed its methods to run clandestine operations in the Balkan countries. While it is often difficult to formally substantiate the claims and tie them back to Russia in a manner that would hold legal muster, they plausibly include efforts to influence election results, attempt coups, or undermine NATO integration, for example, in Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bellingcat, *The Kremlin's Balkan Gambit: Part I* 2017; Bellingcat, *Balkan Gambit: Part 2. The Montenegro Zugzwang* 2017; Bellingcat, *Russian interference in North Macedonia: A View Before the Elections* 2020).

Amid a military build-up between Serbia and Kosovo, Russia, which does not recognise Kosovo as an independent state, has been anything but a detached observer. Russia has actively stoked ethnic tensions and distrust to polarise relations between the countries and their international partners. Apart from the direct activities of the Serbian-language versions of Sputnik and RT (both parent companies are under the EU sanctions (Cabrera Blázquez 2022)) with their impressive reach, the Serbian-language information space and social media are rife with websites and groups echoing narratives spread by RT and Sputnik (Karcic, *Soviet-era disinformation campaign makes a comeback in the Balkans* 2022; Vavra 2023).

It plays to Russia's advantage that the country can leverage its energy resources as a way to flex its muscles. As Europe started to rapidly search for alternatives to Russian supplies after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Serbia announced an "extremely favourable" three-year natural gas deal with Russia in May 2022 (AlJazeera, *Serbia secures gas deal with Putin, as West boycotts Russia* 2022).

Though peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina has always been fragile, concerns have mounted over Russia's potential encouragement of the secession of Republika Srpska (the Serbian Republic). According to media reports, Milorad Dodik, the Serb member of the tripartite Bosnian presidency, has

consulted with Putin on the steps necessary to disintegrate Bosnia (DW 2022). While NATO has not ruled out Russia's further intervention either (ANSA 2023), Boris Johnson, UK Prime Minister at that time, put it bluntly: "We cannot allow the Western Balkans to become another playground for Putin's pernicious pursuits. By fanning the flames of secessionism and sectarianism Russia seeks to reverse the gains of the last three decades in Bosnia and Herzegovina" (Reuters, UK sends military experts to counter Russian influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina 2022). And while the EU and NATO must further beef up their military stabilisation forces on the ground and intensify their political investments in the country, they will need to find ways to counter home-grown and regional revanchist forces – exactly the ones that Russia aims to support (Ruge 2022).

Russia's potential to wreak havoc (Karcic and Mandaville, Dislodging Putin's Foothold in the Balkans 2023) has not gone unheeded. Since February 2022, multiple European leaders have pointed to the problem, pledging a larger European presence and more support to the Western Balkans countries "to stop the Russians" (Reuters, Europe needs to limit Russian influence in Balkans, Italy says 2022). Reflecting on these discussions at a NATO meeting, Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu summed up the general sentiment: "The message is clear: that all NATO allies are aware that the beast also wants to take control of the Western Balkans, and we need – by practical, deliverable support – to help these countries to survive" (Irish, Ilie and Siebold 2022).

Russia is well aware that increased tensions or an escalation of simmering tensions in the Western Balkans will put a strain on Europe and NATO and will undoubtedly divert military, diplomatic, and economic resources to the Balkans to the detriment of Ukraine. Putin is also likely calculating that with his strong backing of Serbia and an ability to wield power in the region, he can succeed in portraying himself as a negotiator and the key to peace in the Western Balkans. By forcing the hands of the West to negotiate with Putin on the Balkans, so the logic goes, it could make the West more open to talks and more flexible on Ukraine (Shedd and Stradner 2023).

Europe and NATO indeed will need to stay committed to the region and develop a broader range of support and response instruments to counter Russia's strategy there.

Destabilising Africa

Russia has grown its footprint in Africa over the past decade and continues to seek to expand it outward into the future (Droin and Dolbaia 2023). Enhanced diplomatic outreach, buttressed with trade offers and prioritised access to food and energy supplies and coupled with information campaigns, constitute part of Russia's strategy. Reliance on *Wagner* troops to provide security services for hire is another.

Much of Russia's effort services needs to diversify its trade and supply routes in the face of Western sanctions. African countries so far have largely perceived Ukraine as a Western problem. They have also calculated that their national interests are better pursued not by breaking ties with Russia and joining the Western sanctions regime but by seeking better deals with Russia wherever possible.

However, Russia's efforts on the continent are hardly always pursued in good faith. Instead, they often are involved in moves to bolster particular warring factions, commit abuses of power, and undermine prospects for stability and peace in fragile states. As a result, Russia often aggravates conflicts in the region rather than contributes to the continent's security.

The formal engagement of the Russian state military apparatus in Africa appears modest on the surface and covers legitimate and even benign activities – arms trade, joint exercises (TASS 2021) or support for UN peace operations in Congo, Western Sahara, Sudan, and South Sudan (Grissom, et al. 2022).

Yet, the presence of Russian private military companies (PMCs) with strong ties to the Kremlin is far more noteworthy. In exchange for providing military and security services to anyone who needs them and is ready to pay, Russia receives favourable deals, access to critical raw materials and energy sources, and other concessions (Arnold 2019).

The Wagner group became notorious after backing the Assad regime in Syria and for the role it has played in Ukraine since 2014. Even though Yevgeny Prigozhin, the group's influential leader, was eliminated in August 2023 (AP, Russia officially confirms Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin died in plane crash 2023) after challenging too many power holders of the highest levels in Moscow, the Kremlin has a strong interest in the continuation of the PMC's activities in Africa (Malobisky 2023).

Wagner's track record in Africa includes propping up tottering regimes (Droin and Dolbaia 2023), propagating disinformation (often relying on

troll farms developed by Prigozhin in cooperation with GRU to facilitate Russia's global influence operations), meddling in elections, extracting all possible resources from oil and diamonds to gold and timber (Faulkner 2022), and generally serving as a quasi-state advancing Russia's influence (Pokalova 2023) while staying in the shadows and providing Putin plausible deniability.

Wagner has played a role in the wars in Syria, Mali, the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Sudan, Libya, and likely the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Schmitt 2019). At times, some of these regimes have become heavily dependent on Wagner troops. After Mali expelled the French military in 2022 and the UN peacekeeping mission in 2023, Wagner mercenaries found themselves indispensable. So far, the group has experienced a better track record in securing access to gold mines in the country than securing the population against jihadists or the brutality of its own mercenaries (Felbab-Brown 2023).

When Putin announced in 2015 that Russia would get involved in Syria – but only with air support – he needed ground forces that could make a real impact while allowing Russia to deny its involvement (Tharoor 2023). Enter Wagner. As compensation for their services to the Assad regime, companies linked to Prigozhin received lucrative shares from oil, gas, and phosphate mine production (Korotkov 2020).

Wagner's vast network of shell companies and associates across a broad swath of countries in the region also helps facilitate smuggling, for example, in gold and diamonds and steady cash flows for the sanctioned Russian regime (Felbab-Brown 2023).

All in all, the group's business model is premised on exploiting insecurity and failed states to secure profits (Bouzo 2023). It is, by definition, not interested in genuine state building or capacity building of states in the region (Faulkner 2022).

As Russia seeks to spark intractable conflicts in Africa and as national resources in poorer countries are traded away in exchange for bolstering militia groups and/or unpopular despots, Europeans suffer from a much lower capacity to project stability and development on the continent. The eruption of more coups and conflicts on the continent is a real possibility, with enormous repercussions for Europe.

Conflicts and shoddy governance will prompt more people to flee abroad, and many of them will attempt to come to Europe. It also means that Europe's own agreements with African countries – ranging from those on

trade and critical resource exploration to development and climate change – will eventually become harder to negotiate and sustain. Dependent on Russia’s military cooperation, energy or food deals, some African countries will grow even more restrained in their votes on UN or international efforts to condemn or oppose Russia in its neighbourhood or elsewhere.

Weaponising Migration

When Europe slapped sanctions on Belarus for its brutal crackdown of peaceful protestors and later for grounding a Ryanair flight to extract an opposition figure, Lukashenka resorted to orchestrating routes for migrants from around the world to attempt to enter the EU through the Belarusian border with Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania. Enticed to come to Belarus on special visas and the promise of easy access to EU territory, thousands of migrants from Middle Eastern, African, South East Asian, and other countries were bussed or directed to the border area and left there with little assistance. With Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania refusing to admit anyone entering irregularly, including those who wished to claim asylum, Lukashenko staged a humanitarian crisis at the EU borders that has still not been fully resolved (Greenhill 2022).

Since 2021, EU countries bordering Belarus have erected border fences and deployed significant reinforcements to patrol the border. The EU also succeeded in forcing several key airlines to cancel or reduce the number of flights to Belarus from key hubs in the Middle East that were used to transport migrants. Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia coordinated the closure of multiple border crossings to minimise the organised smuggling and trafficking of sanctioned goods and exert pressure on Lukashenko whose regime is still economically reliant on cross-border movements of goods and transit tariffs.

As a result, the number of people attempting to cross EU-Belarus borders has declined compared to 2021, though the figures remain high. Smugglers from Belarus – who appear to be operating with the permission of Belarusian authorities – and Belarusian border guards are continuing to bring migrants to the border area. They have also rendered assistance in cutting through border fences, digging trenches, and otherwise damaging border infrastructure to facilitate migrants in their passage to the EU. Polish government officials openly talk about an “operation organized by the Russian

and Belarusian secret services that is getting more and more intense” (AFP 2023).

While some direct flights to Belarus have been restricted, alternative routes through Russia are increasingly being used. Most migrants now attempting to cross the Polish-Belarusian border hold Russian visas and transit via Belarus after arriving in Russia first (Delfi 2023).

The lesson that the EU is learning is that despite the currently manageable numbers, a more disruptive crisis could erupt again at any time. These flows could rapidly shoot up at any time of choosing of Belarusian and Russian authorities.

The modest success of the Belarusian-Russian duo of dictators in their nefarious actions, moreover, could encourage copycat exercises in other locations and with other collaborators (Galeotti 2021). In November, Finland announced that it is going to close all the four busiest border crossings with Russia after a sudden spike of arrivals of asylum seekers from Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Syria, and elsewhere attempting to enter Finland at these entry points (Lehto 2023; Vock 2023). Finnish officials accused Russia of directing the migrants to the border and letting them enter the checkpoints without documentation. The route also became popular for a period of time in 2015 when Russia facilitated the transit of arrivals primarily from Syria. The Finnish Prime Minister now suspects that Russia is aiming to destabilise the country against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and as reprisal for Finland’s decision to join NATO (AlJazeera, Finland to block border amid Russian ‘instrumentalisation of migrants’ 2023).

With migration traditionally a politically sensitive topic for Europe, Lukashenko and his Russian counterparts have calculated that when confronted with a large number of new arrivals, Europe will fall into a state of disarray and panic and rather yield to extortion demands.

Apart from utilising the direct border with the EU and its own territory, Russia has played an even more insidious and consequential role in triggering migration flows to Europe. The severe disruption of grain and other agricultural supplies from Ukraine have already impacted the ability of hundreds of millions of people worldwide to have basic food security at home (Brezar 2022). As poverty and hunger in poor countries is further compounded, more people will head to Europe. In 2022, facing growing flows of arrivals through the Mediterranean route, Frontex warned that Europe should brace for larger and larger waves of arrivals as food security worsens (Euractiv 2022).

The EU so far has managed to effectively respond to and cope with attempts to instrumentalise migration, albeit in ways not always in line with its own laws and ethical commitments. It has strengthened border controls, closed border crossings, denied asylum seekers the right to file applications at the border, brokered deals with transit countries and countries of origin to take more people back, helped finance and arrange grain flows to poorer countries, and intensified its efforts to clamp down on smugglers.

Yet, there are no signs that Russia and its partners have resigned from their efforts either. To the contrary, fully aware of the fragility of the temporary solutions that the EU has deployed so far, they appear to be seeking even more ways to aggravate Europe's migration problems. Extorting Europe with migrants is likely to remain in the arsenal of tools Russia will attempt to use to create chaos and destabilise Europe politically (Braw 2022).

A – Shorter – Energy Leash

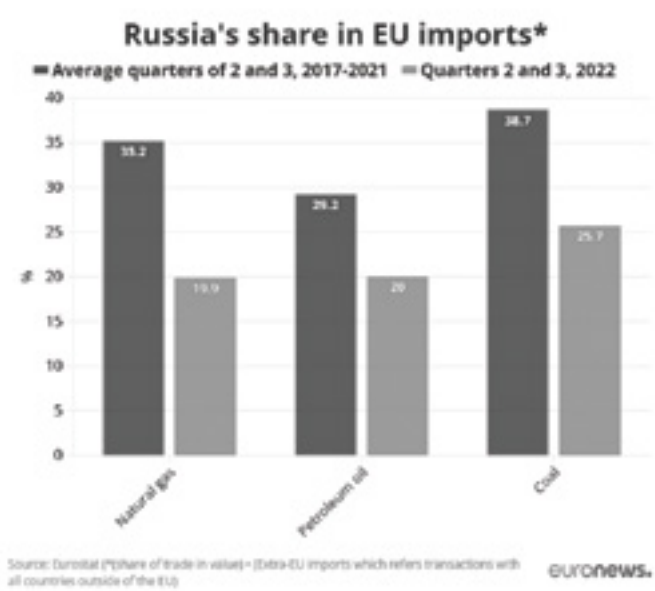
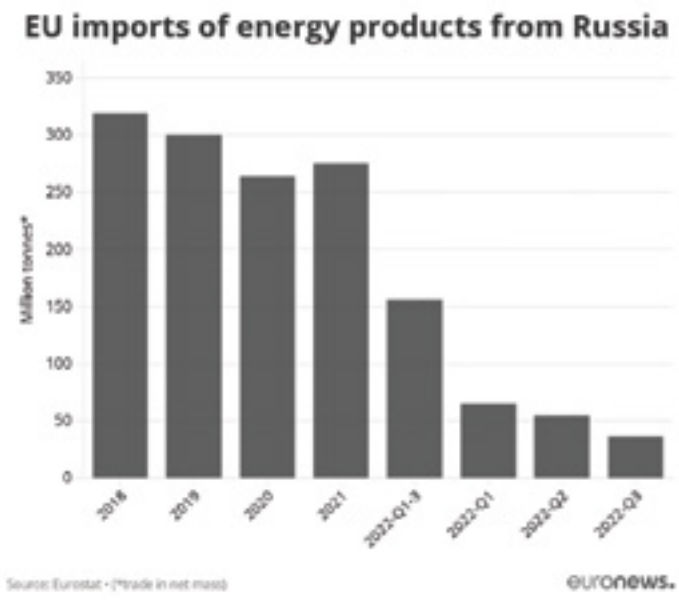
In 2021, before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, about 45 percent of Europe's gas imports and around half its coal imports came from Russia (Mining n.d.). Russia also stood out as one of the largest suppliers of crude oil and petroleum products.

However, throughout 2022, Europe managed to untangle dependencies on Russian energy that had been decades in the making. While committing to eliminate Russian fossil fuels entirely from its energy consumption by 2027, the EU introduced sanctions on Russian oil and coal. Russia's own decision to go all in and limit the flow of its gas to Europe in the autumn of 2022 provided yet another compelling impetus to go further.

While Russia gleefully expected Europeans to freeze in their homes and governments to face revolts from their petrified publics frustrated with rising prices (Meduza 2023), the EU not only managed to survive the winter without falling into a recession (though it wasn't without luck – the weather didn't quite follow Putin's plans (Jucca 2023)) but did so by significantly diversifying its energy mix. In March 2023, the EU was importing a tenth of the oil from Russia that it imported a year prior, a fifth of the gas, and coal imports had dropped to zero (McWilliams, et al. 2023).

The United States, the United Kingdom, and Norway lead the way in augmenting their exports of natural gas to the EU, while Saudi Arabia and

the United States make up a larger share of Europe’s imports of oil (Yanatma 2023). The EU also continues growing its renewable energy output.



Both graphs are from Euronews (Yanatma 2023)

Nonetheless, the EU is not out of the woods yet. While EU imports of Russian energy have significantly decreased, they have not stopped altogether. Furthermore, the EU could still face difficulties in importing natural gas from other suppliers, with the International Energy Agency (IEA) actually projecting a shortfall in 2023 (IEA 2022). It is uncertain whether Norway, Azerbaijan, and Algeria can keep increasing their exports to the EU quickly enough (Kardas 2023). While the global supply of LNG is not forecast to increase this year, competition for the available reserves could rise, especially if demand in China grows. Moreover, Russia remains a key provider of LNG – imports of Russian LNG have remained largely steady over the past year (McWilliams, et al. 2023).

Some EU countries have also failed to transition away from Russian nuclear fuel. Two reactors in Bulgaria, six in Czech Republic, two in Finland, four in Hungary, and four in Slovakia were built with Russian technology and rely on Russian fuel to operate.

While the share of energy produced by these reactors is low for the EU as a whole, it is significant for the countries in question: it amounts to 40 percent in Slovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria (Melchior, et al. 2022). There are, however, concerted efforts to substitute Russian fuel: Slovakia, for example, is working with US and French providers on substitution projects. An agreement with Westinghouse would allow two Finnish nuclear reactors to gradually replace the Russian fuel, as the Russian licenses fully expire in 2027 and 2030. (Vanttinen 2022) In May 2022, Finland also terminated a project with Rosatom, the Russian state-owned nuclear group, to build a new power plant in Finland (France24 2022).

These shifts will, nevertheless, require more time and effort than replacing oil or gas. Additionally, not all countries are pivoting away from Russia. Hungary reconfirmed its commitment to build two new reactors at the Paks power plant with Rosatom. The French government gave permission for the French company Framatome to participate in the project, with Hungarians hoping that Framatome would help bypass the German government's blocking of its original contract with Siemens Energy (Chastand, Pecout and Ricard 2023).

In the meantime, Russia enjoys leverage against countries still dependent on its fuel, if it decides to use it. While the utility of this energy extortion tool has declined considerably over the past two years, it still cannot be completely ignored. Russia can still manipulate and leverage its remaining energy supplies to pressure Europe.

Severing Undersea Communication and Energy Infrastructure

As Russia realises that its energy leverage is decreasing, it has pinpointed yet another element critical for Western economies and societies. Europe relies on the constant flow of information in, out, and within the continent, with these communication channels also underpinning its financial system. The enormously powerful and expansive Western information ecosystem, however, can be undercut by sabotaging physical infrastructure at a single point of failure: undersea cables. The seabed is effectively becoming a new potential battlefield where Russia can knock out both Europe's power supplies and its information systems.

Just over the past year, several incidents have raised alarm bells, including explosions putting the Nord Stream 1 and 2 gas pipelines out of commission. In October 2023, pipeline and telecommunication cables were damaged in the Baltic Sea, with a Chinese vessel later found responsible for the damage (Page 2023). Although undersea cables and other infrastructure are routinely and frequently damaged, suspicious accidents over the past couple of years with evidence of intentional activity have become too frequent to ignore.

While Western countries are either unable or unwilling to confidently attribute these incidents to Russia or other malign actors, they have undoubtedly become more alert to the threat. Russia has a head start though. Over the past few years, Russia has not only dramatically increased its maritime activity around Western infrastructure (Birnbaum 2017) but has also sent its ships to blatantly map out, photograph, and survey Western maritime infrastructure and identify its potential vulnerabilities (Larsen 2023).

Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, NATO is preparing for scenarios in which Russia could attempt to sabotage undersea infrastructure, "to disrupt Western life, to gain leverage against those nations that are providing security to Ukraine" (Siebold 2023). Russian knowledge of key nodes of Europe's information and power transmission infrastructure could become even more important if Russia were to launch a broader conflict with Europe. Russia would effectively have the ability to force information and power blackouts on vast regions across the continent (Larsen 2023). Europe's energy and information systems are sufficiently advanced to withstand an isolated one-off failure of a cable, pipeline, or node. Nevertheless, Russia's knowledge of the broader map and the numerous interconnections puts it in a position where it could stage a coordinated attack on several elements

of the network that would be far more detrimental and difficult to recover from.

Recognising they need to act fast, NATO and the EU have taken a set of measures to fend off potential incidents or minimise damage. This includes launching a joint NATO-EU task force on protecting critical infrastructure, a new NATO centre on critical undersea infrastructure, and the Digital Ocean Vision initiative. While it is not feasible to ensure NATO's presence along the entire line of infrastructure, NATO knows it needs to do much better in collecting and sharing intelligence and identifying patterns as well as working with the civilian private sector to, for example, enhance maritime surveillance and track ship movements.

The thorniest aspect concerns the fact that the rules of engagement and division of responsibilities are so far not entirely clear. While Secretary General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg insists that “hybrid and cyberattacks can trigger Article 5 [on collective self-defence]” and “can constitute an armed attack against a NATO ally,” there is no agreement on the threshold. Russia likely sees this ambiguity as something it can exploit. Western countries also aim to create redundancies in their infrastructure, with the goal to limit the scale and impact of an attack on any single cable. They have also started to help smaller countries reduce their vulnerability in this regard. The EU, for example, is working with Georgia to lay a new internet cable in the waters of the Black Sea to lessen the country's “dependency on terrestrial fibre-optic connectivity transiting via Russia.”

Apart from sabotage, there is yet another concern with regards to land-based lines – espionage. The prospects of critical information flows being intercepted by a hostile government in addition to other potential hackers are seen in a new, far more alarming light against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine (Heal and Gross 2023).

Conclusion

Europe has successfully withstood Russia's threats of a war spill-over and energy extortion. It has also satisfactorily integrated millions of Ukrainian refugees. Russia's leverage over Europe, meanwhile, is waning and more dispersed, though it still holds some potency.

There are, though, still numerous ways Putin can do harm to Europe without the direct use of military force. While in some instances Russia's

remaining leverage may appear limited to one country or another, this is all the power Russia needs to destroy EU unity and hamper the EU's ability to implement critical policies. Europe's unanimity requirements permit holdouts on one issue to block sanctions or create loopholes for Russia to render such policies toothless.

Russia's information operations, connections with far-right movements, and attempts to bankroll and bribe journalists and politicians are compounding these effects.

Russia's methods are designed to overwhelm and overstretch Europe's capacities. But if they are not heeded, over time, Russia could be able to shatter Europe's resilience and ability to defend itself and others even without going to war with the continent.

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11. What do EU Leaders Think of Russia?

Kadri LIIK*

Abstract

Presently, Europe stands at a critical juncture, needing a strategy to address Russia's willingness to engage in prolonged war against Ukraine. Prior to 2011, Europeans held divergent views on Russia. One faction sought engagement for democratisation and mutual benefits, while the other perceived Russia as a looming threat rebuilding its strength. The return of Putin to the presidency in 2011 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 led to a European consensus recognising Russia as a significant disruptor of the liberal democratic order in Europe. The full-scale invasion in 2022 solidified this consensus, emphasising the impossibility of maintaining any cooperative relations with Russia on European interests. In response, the Baltic states must transition from a stance of "I told you so" and maximalist, unattainable strategies towards Russia, adopting an activist role in shaping a unified European strategy on Russia.

Keywords: EU, Russia, strategy

In late 2023, the world looks bleak for Europe. Russia's war against Ukraine is raging on, while Ukraine's prospects of success appear fragile. Its counter-offensive has fallen short of its objectives, and future arms supplies are hostage to domestic debates in the United States. Meanwhile, Russia has put its economy on a war footing, maintaining round-the-clock operation of its military factories. The looming possibility of a second Donald Trump presidency poses a significant threat to the future of the whole Western alliance, while simultaneously, Israel's war in Gaza disrupts domestic stability in many EU countries, diminishing prospects for soliciting substantial non-Western support to Ukraine.

During the first 18 months of the war, many in Europe hoped for the conflict's swift resolution – due to a Ukrainian military breakthrough, regime collapse in Russia, or through a negotiated solution. None of these

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scenarios have come to pass. Furthermore, regarding Russia, the war has facilitated a form of regime renewal in Moscow – an overdue development that the tired regime had previously neglected. Now, dissenting voices have left the country, paving the way for new loyalist figures. Established oligarchs have been marginalised, while a burgeoning military industry potentially fosters the emergence of new economic players. The war has even addressed some regional imbalances – Muscovites have relinquished some of their hedonistic privileges, as military salaries and benefits now hold considerable value in the faraway provinces.

The war has solved some domestic problems for Putin that he had failed to solve himself. However, it has also given rise to new challenges, albeit ones that are further down the line. Living with the war – as long as Russia avoids a significant loss – seems to align favourably with the Kremlin's interests, at least for now. Consequently, the regime does not signal desire to negotiate, deigning not to revise its war aims into terms that could even theoretically constitute a basis for negotiations.

For Europe, the idea of a protracted war is deeply alien. Initial attempts at diplomatic engagement with the Kremlin during the first weeks of the war were motivated by the assumption that Moscow, too, sought an exit strategy from an operation that became a painful embarrassment when Kyiv did not fall within the anticipated three-day timeframe, as envisioned by Moscow's military planners. Europe now requires a Russia-strategy for a long war. This will not be easy – even though, contrary to many popular belief, the EU's fundamental stance on Russia is much more united than commonly acknowledged.

The Past Debate

This was not always the case. In 2007, Mark Leonard and Nicu Popescu, researchers associated with the newly established European Council on Foreign Relations, noted in the think tank's first ever publication that "Russia has emerged as the most divisive issue in the European Union since Donald Rumsfeld split the European club into 'new' and 'old' member states"(Leonard and Popescu 2007). In the 1990s, EU members pursued an approach towards Moscow aimed at democratising and westernising a weak and indebted Russia. Moscow had initially endorsed this approach, accepting the conditions embedded in the post-Cold War European institutions

such as the OSCE, as well as its partnership agreement with the EU itself at the 1994 EU Corfu summit. “Today, Russia becomes a significant partner of the Europeans, and we will do everything possible to support European integration,” President Boris Yeltsin affirmed on that occasion (ANA 1994).

In reality, Moscow quickly grew disillusioned with the conditionality that it never quite managed to fulfil. By 2007, the surge in oil and gas prices made Russia more powerful, rendering it less cooperative, and, most significantly, less interested in joining the West (Leonard and Popescu 2007). This development left the EU’s common strategy in tatters, prompting the member states to devise their own strategies on how to cope with the situation. This division led to two distinct camps: one that still viewed Russia as a potential partner, albeit one whose democratisation happens via detours and setbacks, and another that foresaw an emerging threat on the horizon – a Russia consolidating an authoritarian regime at home and displaying increasingly aggressive behaviour abroad.

The divergent analytical assessments led to drastically disparate policy recommendations. The first group advocated for comprehensive engagement, urging the inclusion of Russia in numerous institutions and encouraging economic links, even if Russia occasionally violated the established rules. Essentially, the strategy was to let Russia fake it in the hope that it would eventually make it. In contrast, the second group, seeing Russia as a threat, preferred a policy of ‘soft containment’ that involved excluding Russia from the G8, enlarging NATO to include Georgia, supporting anti-Russian regimes in the neighbourhood, constructing missile shields, developing an ‘Energy NATO,’ and excluding Russian investment from the European energy sector (Leonard and Popescu 2007).

That difference in assessment was deep, serious and not easily reconcilable regarding policy formulation. The resulting rift prevented the EU from adopting either of these approaches as a true long-term strategy, leading to a weakened and often paralysed Russia-policy. This persisted throughout most of President Putin’s second term and the entirety of Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency. That prolonged period witnessed Russia and the West stuck in a relationship of pretence: Russia pretended, though ever more lukewarmly, to be in the Western camp while many in the West believed, and many pretended to believe, that Russia would “fake it until it makes it” and eventually align with Western values (Liik 2019).

Things Change: 2011 and 2014

The subtle yet significant change to the situation came in 2011. President Putin's announcement of his return to the Kremlin in September 2011, implying a preconceived plan involving a job swap with Medvedev, shattered Europe's faith in Russia's democratic trajectory. Although this change of mood was not immediately visible, as it was barely articulated, even less translated into a policy discussion, it subtly manifested itself. To a closer observer, things had changed: Russia's democratic future was no longer discussed and references to Russia's democratic progress no longer found their way into policy documents drafted by the embassies in Moscow.

Vladimir Putin, perhaps the closest observer of all, keenly sensed the shift in mood. His perspective of European-Russian relations is in fact a curious phenomenon. As a rule, Russian politicians are not good at understanding the workings of the European Union. Their interpretation of the institution tends to be somewhat crude, primitive, and Marxist-influenced, overemphasising the importance of economic interests and the influence of Washington (Kortunov 2016). However, Putin, probably relying on his intuitive reading of his fellow leaders' moods, has occasionally displayed a very astute sensitivity to Europe's positions, at times long before Europe itself has managed to articulate them. As early as 2011, he was among the first to feel the change of mood, stating "They have all ganged up against me," in early 2012, referring to Western leaders, according to several sources (Liik 2019).

This new attitude towards Russia became explicit in 2013, when Russia started undermining Ukraine's deep and comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU, eventually resulting in protests that sparked a revolution in Ukraine. This change gained full momentum after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, representing a dramatic sea change for Europe's relations with Russia. "Territorial integrity is the foundation pillar of our post-war European order," Angela Merkel said in the spring of 2014, following the annexation. "If you start saying things like 'it's my right' and then just take something, you'll end up with an incredible calamity" (RFERL 2014). The French President Francois Hollande similarly condemned the annexation, labelling it as "against Ukrainian law and international law" and calling for a "strong and coordinated" EU response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, which, he said, Paris did not recognise (The Local 2014).

This firm stance also translated into concrete policy actions. On 17 March, a day after the Russia-staged 'referendum' in Crimea, the EU

imposed its initial sanctions. Subsequently, over the following weeks and months, these sanctions evolved into structural sanctions capable of seriously harming Russia's technological development and wealth. In March 2016, the new adversarial stance was also codified in the EU's five principles on its future relations with Russia. These principles involved support of the Minsk agreements that foresaw gradual Russian withdrawal from the occupied Donbas (retrospectively linking sanctions to Russia's fulfilment of the agreement), support for the resilience of Russia's post-Soviet neighbours, enhancing the EU's own resilience, selective engagement with Russia on issues aligned with the EU's interests, and support to the Russian civil society (EP 2018).

Despite initial scepticism about the sustainability of the sanctions, both within the EU and in Russia, the support for them remained solid. France and Germany – the two biggest EU countries involved in the Normandy format overseeing the implementation of the Minsk agreements – consistently failed sufficient progress that would warrant discussions on any easing of sanctions. With their position firm, no other member states mounted a meaningful challenge to the sanctions regime.

The ECFR 2018 survey of EU elite opinion revealed strong support for sanctions, even though member states held some ambivalence about their effectiveness. Most countries considered sanctions against Russia to be necessary. Many saw them as a means to signal the EU's moral position, while some acknowledged accepting sanctions as the price of solidarity. Southern European nations, for instance, expressed their support to the EU on Russia as a down payment in garnering support for other priority issues, especially from the Eastern and Northern members that view Russia as an existential threat. While most governments faced some domestic pressures to lift sanctions, mainly from political parties or business lobbies, this pressure was somewhat strong only in Austria, Bulgaria, and Cyprus. However, it did not translate into serious efforts to challenge the consensus on European policies. According to Brussels, the biannual rollover of sanctions twice per year has, if anything, become smoother, despite some *sotto voce* grumbling (Liik 2018).

Furthermore, the same survey revealed that the EU had come to regard unity in its Russia policy as a value in and of itself. Member states recognised that on their own, they were all small countries in comparison to Russia, prompting a desire for normative questions to be addressed collectively by the EU. While many countries were keen to maintain bilateral contact with

Moscow – ranging from Italy and Austria to Germany and Finland – all emphasised the fact that they viewed such contacts as consistent with and complementary to EU policy, even if, as in the case of Austria, they disagreed with the policy. Crucially, there has been no serious effort to challenge the consensus on European policies. The biannual rollover of sanctions has evolved into a routine rather than a source of drama (Liik 2018).

The Baltic Blind Spot

In the Baltic states, the profound change in the EU's perspective on Russia has often been overlooked, leading politicians and activists seemingly stuck in an outdated discourse. It is fair to say that up until 2011, the Baltic states were ahead of the debate. Whether by prescience or coincidence, they proved to be correct about Russia's nature, and since 2014, they have felt vindicated. However, since then, they have also found themselves entrenched in a dated narrative. Their approach to Russia all too often remains descriptive and analytical, persistently committed to exposing Russia's wrongdoings. This, however, has become unnecessary. Since 2014, if not 2011, everyone within Western policy-making circles is well aware of and in agreement regarding Russia's actions. Ever since 2011, the real question has been what to do about it (Liik 2020).

In the Baltics, this search for a new Russia policy, grounded in a re-evaluation of the situation, has, regrettably, been frequently missed. Western Europe has too often been seen as complacent and cowardly, wishing to go 'back to business as usual.' "When will the West wake up" (Mihkelson 2023) remains the leitmotiv in Baltic discussions to this day, as if the West possessed all unlimited leverage to correct Russia's behaviour but was simply too indifferent to use it. Indeed, such tendency to shift all responsibility to a generalised 'West' is in fact reminiscent of the Russian debate. Russian liberals have long blamed the West for failing to enforce genuine conditionality on Russia, thereby allowing the country to violate the norms that it had committed to uphold. Simultaneously, pro-Kremlin Russians also blame the West for all of Russia's crimes and misdeeds, asserting that the West has severely mistreated Russia.

In fact, the larger 'Western' EU countries have long been engaged in a prolonged search for a new and appropriate approach to Russia. Angela Merkel's numerous meetings with President Putin were not held in order to

provide him with a sense of comfort but rather to communicate Europe's perspective and attempt to achieve policy outcomes aligned with European aims. President Macron's 2019 outreach plan towards Russia (France24 2019), although unrealistic, was guided by the desire to formulate a European policy that acknowledged the existing reality, rather than being in denial, desiring or seeking a return to 'business as usual' (whatever that means). France's and Germany's presence in the Normandy format was not a strategic ploy to keep Ukraine hostage; instead, it represented an investment into a framework with the hope that it would prompt Russia to self-correct, leave the Donbas, and abandon the impasse it had reached in its Ukraine policy.

The Baltics, as part of the West, should accept co-responsibility for shaping the policy. Instead of adopting the critical position of a know-it-all outside observer and applying pressure akin to an activist group, they ought to shape this policy from a position of true ownership. They should propose policies that go beyond the suggestion of avoiding any dialogue with Russia (Brzozowski 2022). While likely influenced by dissatisfaction with EU and NATO practices pre-2014 – where pompous dialogue formats increasingly substituted a true common agenda with Russia – such avoidance is deeply impractical today. This recommendation rests on a misguided assumption that Russia, or Putin personally, craves contact with the West and that withholding summit meetings or phone calls could induce a change in Russia's behaviour. The era when the West could boycott Russia into compliance had long passed by the time the Baltics and Poland joined NATO and the EU.

While the Baltic states rightly perceive Russia as an existential threat and appropriately invest in their defence, there is a need for them to consider a more realistic and pragmatic longer-term EU strategy towards Russia, which is currently openly hostile and dangerous. The Baltic states demonstrate seriousness in their commitment, including substantial contributions to Ukraine. All these are necessary things to do. One cannot accuse the Baltics of lacking seriousness. However, their ideas on longer-term strategies tend to be unrealistically maximalist. When asked about longer-term aims, the Baltic policy-makers tend to come up with phrases such as 'strategic defeat,' 'regime change,' and even the 'decolonisation of Russia.' These are all different terms that share one commonality: they are all unlikely to occur in the near future, if ever.

A Year in the Fog of War

Over the first 18 months of the war, Europe has undertaken actions that were once thought unimaginable. It has frozen Russia's Central Bank reserves, significantly reduced its energy imports from Russia, and supplies Ukraine with ever more sophisticated weaponry in its war against Russia. It is hard to overstate how profoundly this war has changed the way Europeans see the world and their relationship with Russia. While the change in perception of Russia, as argued in this paper, has been underway since 2011, 2022 was still an earthquake, most dramatically for those countries that had heavily invested in their relationship with Russia. Germany features prominently here, as 'rapprochement through interdependence' had long been the guiding motif of Berlin's Russia policy. In a survey of European policy-making elites that ECFR conducted in 2022 (Liik 2022), a German respondent admitted that while the annexation of Crimea came as a shock, the true turning point came in 2022. Cooperation with Russia is now entirely off the agenda, and Berlin is instead seeking to insulate itself against Russia, particularly by diversifying its energy supply. Similarly, take Finland, having invested considerable diplomatic capital in cohabiting with Russia and fostering profitable business ties over many decades, it swiftly joined NATO in the wake of Russia's war, overturning decades of policy of neutrality.

Europeans have come to the realisation that the Europe they once knew has come to an end. In the same survey (Liik 2022), they unanimously admitted that the post-cold war liberal international order, as well as the European order outlined in the 1990 Paris Charter – envisioning a common European home and a continent "whole and free" – is now dead and buried. In more than half of EU states, policy-makers largely regarded the old order beyond restoration. However, they do not know what will replace it. While references to the 'rules-based order' remain ubiquitous in European leaders' political statements, these often amount to little more than shorthand phrases demanding accountability and rejecting impunity.

Likewise, in late 2022 (Liik 2022), there was a lack of clarity on the future of relations with Russia. Several respondents expressed the view that it was impossible to know what kind of Russia would emerge from the war, thereby making any concrete planning impossible. There was little enthusiasm for plotting regime change in Russia, Europeans found it difficult to imagine any cooperative relationship with Russia. Reading the responses to the survey resembled a walk in a foggy day, where the horizon is obscured, and the

view ahead is blocked, making it impossible to see the path forward. Consequently, Europeans focused on near-term planning, prioritising supplies to Ukraine and insulating Europe.

Planning for a Long War

Certainly, there have been some differences in the European countries' views concerning the future of the war. While the more hawkish countries in Europe's east have been focused on Russia's strategic defeat, in the South, there has been a silent wish for the war to end sooner rather than later, even if it necessitates Ukraine making some territorial concessions. Many anticipated the war ending in a stalemate when both Ukraine and Russia had exhausted their potentials. In the early months, Germany and France sought a quick diplomatic resolution but faced frustration. Calls for negotiations have intensified lately once again, particularly in capitals seeking an exit strategy and feeling that Ukraine's expected military breakthrough failed to offer one. However, these calls are likely to yield little, as evident from numerous statements by president Putin, who has indicated that Russia does not feel compelled to negotiate, and its war aims are escalating rather than diminishing.

It now looks like Europeans will have to devise a new Russia strategy for a long war. Given the theory, outlined at the beginning of this piece, that the war helps rather than exhausts Putin's regime, it can be expected to continue for a long time. For Russia to continue the war, it does not necessarily need to be winning— as long as it avoids dramatic losses, the war itself serves as a way of life. Consequently, Europe cannot afford to delay its Russia strategy until the dust settles and the post-war Russia emerges. The Russia currently waging the war demands Europe's attention, and waiting for a clearer picture of the post-war scenario might take years.

A strategy of sorts is, in fact, beginning to take shape. It involves supporting Ukraine, managing potential escalations of the war, improving Europe's resilience vis-à-vis Russia, working on supporting Russia's democratic neighbours – the EU invitation to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine was a huge milestone here – and figuring out what kind of policy to have vis-à-vis Russians who have sought refuge in Europe as a consequence of Putinist Russia.

However, the realisation that Europe needs a Russia policy during the ongoing war, rather than delaying decisions until the aftermath, complicates the task and raises new questions. Should, for instance, the EU policy towards Russia be somehow compartmentalised? Should there be specific areas for dialogue between Europe and Russia despite the overall situation? Determining which areas would be in the EU's interest becomes crucial. The United States, for instance, has expressed its interest in maintaining strategic contact with Moscow, akin to the dynamics of the Cold War. However, the response from Moscow remains underwhelming at present.

The most challenging question of all arises when considering how the EU would navigate Russia's war if Donald Trump were to become the President of the United States and throw the transatlantic alliance into chaos. What will be Europe's options to continue providing effective support to Ukraine? How should Europe re-evaluate the situation of its own security in these circumstances?

Indeed, it is tempting to assert that miracles do not happen – but this would be untrue. Throughout world history, numerous instances have demonstrated that solutions to troublesome situations can unexpectedly emerge through developments that few, if anyone, predicted. Examples such as the collapse of the Berlin Wall or the Soviet Union serve as testament to the unpredictability of historical events – but they are far from the only ones.

Yet, Europe's theory of victory so far has often relied on developments beyond its control, such as hopes of Ukraine's military breakthrough or Russia's collapse. It is now time for Europe to devise a strategy where the EU itself assumes a more active role, embracing the responsibility of a true policy actor in a pragmatic and responsible manner. The Baltics should actively contribute to the formulation of such a strategy, moving away from the more comfortable position of a critical commentator taking the moral high ground. While creating a fool proof theory of victory may be challenging, thorough preparation sets the groundwork for unforeseen positive developments to play a role in due course.

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12. The Change in Europe's Pacifist DNA

Ukraine Must Defeat Terrorist Russia

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Abstract

Ukraine's defence depends on Kyiv's commitment to defend itself, rather than counting on the timely and sufficient support it should receive from its allies to repel immediate threats and defeat Russia promptly. A focussed Allied policy would not only ensure standing on the right side of history by defending a victim but would also contribute to European security. In the long-term, opposing Russian imperialism, countering the assertiveness of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (including in short-term perspectives), and preserving the liberal democratic international order would mean the sustainment of the transatlantic institutions, values, and the principles of the welfare state. While many Western states express support for Ukraine and some institutions have emerged as significant providers of military, economic, and humanitarian assistance, the current amount and the speed of delivery of the necessary aid, primarily military, is lacking. This paper will evaluate the transformation of Western institutions, the positions of major Western powers, and the potential obstacles in the Western structures to ensure more effective and rapid support for Ukraine.

Keywords: Ukraine, support, Europe, European Union, United States, politics

Introduction

Since Russia launched its unprovoked military assault on Ukraine in 2022, almost two years elapsed, and Ukraine is now entering its second winter fighting against Russian occupying forces. At the beginning of the war, the global community was unequivocally opposed to Russia, condemning its

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aggressive policies, and any infringement upon liberal democratic principles that advocate peaceful coexistence between major powers and smaller states. During the decision-making deadlock at the level of the Security Council over a possible condemnation of Russia's war against Ukraine, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution wherein the international community explicitly called for peace in Ukraine, as well as the restoration of its territorial integrity and sovereignty. 141 UN member states were in favour of Russia's immediate departure from Ukraine while only seven countries voted against. Among them were Belarus, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Eritrea, Mali, Nicaragua, Russia itself, and Syria (News 2023). Some countries abstained from voting; among them were India, the People's Republic of China, and Iran – a few major international and regional powers whose clearer position might have challenged the boldness of the Kremlin's activities.

Countries that openly voted to condemn and thwart Russia's attempt to occupy a European country, Ukraine, aligned with the international world order that supports liberal and democratic principles. In this order, the freedom and territorial integrity of any nation-state serve as the cornerstone of the global community. Conversely, autocratic Belarus, totalitarian North Korea, a lone African country, Russia as the aggressor, Assad's Syria, and others exhibiting visible democratic deficits were the only ones supporting the rule of the jungle, where more powerful nations can subjugate the smaller ones. Even those countries that abstained from either siding with Russia or openly opposing its aggressive policies at the UN vote continue to condemn Russia's attempts to occupy Ukraine.

At the beginning of 2023, the former President of Mongolia Elbegdorj Tsakhia called on the democratic world to unite with even greater resolve, emphasising that freedom is non-negotiable and that Ukraine should be given the weapons it needs to win. Ukraine needs support not only from Western democracies but also from democracies worldwide to counter Putin's propositions for the world. According to the former Mongolian President, "as a deep narcissist, Putin could not afford to see more successful and prosperous neighbours. He envisioned that a free, democratic Ukraine could represent a grave danger for his regime. The Russian aggression against Ukraine did not happen unexpectedly. It was a pinnacle of long-fought rivalries between ideas of freedom and fists of repression (Tsakhia 2023)." Putin's approach towards and vision for Russia's neighbours suggest a similar fate

for others in Russia's vicinity that demonstrate a more successful development than Russia.

For many years preceding the war of 2022 or the occupation of Ukrainian territories, as well as the hybrid war since 2014, Putin consistently asserted that Ukraine is not a state and Ukrainians are not a nation. This narrative from the Kremlin suggests a self-proclaimed special right to rule over what it deems as vassals. Surprisingly, even such European countries as Chirac's France or Schröder's Germany seemed to buy into these Kremlin's narratives. The success of Ukraine now holds the potential to restore this damaged international order, which has proven beneficial to most countries for multiple decades. For example, countries such as the PRC and India have significantly enhanced their economic might and political influence as a result.

While there is a broad consensus on the notion that Ukraine must triumph in its struggle against terrorist Russia, there appears to be a hesitancy to translate this agreement into the practical military or economic support Ukraine urgently requires for a swifter victory. As a result, the war persists. To underline this disparity between verbal commitments and practical policy measures, the authors will examine some specific instances where the Western community falls short in supporting Ukraine in its tireless defence not only of its nation but also of the world order as known before February 2022. Conversely, the authors will outline instances of more effective practices. It is important to acknowledge that there is no internationally recognised best practice to showcase, as sufficient support has yet to be provided to bring an end to Russian aggression against Ukraine – a situation that should have been addressed yesterday.

Unexpectedly, the EU Delivers

The European Union has demonstrated considerable commitment in providing military, humanitarian and financial aid to Ukraine, amounting to 77.1 billion EUR (Institute 2023). This makes the EU the foremost global donor to Ukraine. From this comprehensive support to Ukraine, the EU has notably excelled by providing 5.6 billion EUR in military aid, a figure only one billion below the total military aid extended by the United Kingdom to Ukraine. Previously, characterising the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy as nascent, or not even adolescent, seemed fitting for an organisation

with such commercial and humanitarian endowments. However, the current landscape reveals a sound application of sanctions, in collaboration with the United States, that proves difficult or impossible to lift unless Russia capitulates, withdraws from Ukraine, or Ukraine achieves victory, leading to a regime change in Russia. Such an outcome would mark profound changes in how Russia perceives itself and its neighbours. A second notable development is the extensive and swift mobilisation of funds to support Ukraine. This includes financial and humanitarian aid, but, more importantly, military support to address Ukraine's immediate defence needs.

For many years, the EU leadership its statements, and actions have been perceived as pale and insignificant, lacking credibility and substantial resources behind any cause. However, the current response to the Ukrainian crisis is hailed by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, as the "birth of a geopolitical Europe" – a transformation Europe owes to Ukraine (Schaaake 2022). Ukraine has not only redeemed the EU's reputation but has also given a new lifeline to Europe's security and foreign policy. While Russia has historically looked at Europe as superior in terms of power, culture, or civilisation, the perspective from a leadership standpoint has shifted. Even Josep Borrell's past humiliation by Russian elites, though not forgotten, may now be overshadowed by the positive developments spurred by Ukraine.

Searching for "Borrell humiliation" on the internet yields results such as the Guardian's (February 11, 2021) article titled "EU chief's Moscow humiliation is sign of bloc disunity on Russia, say experts," the EUObserver (February 5, 2021) report titled "Russia humiliates Borrell in Moscow," or the Warsaw Institute's article (February 8, 2021) titled "Operation Borrell": Russian Triumph, European Humiliation." Very few would argue it was Borrell who guided EU assistance to Ukraine. Conversely, Ukraine provided Europe with the opportunity to prioritise its security, redeem its image in relation with Russia, and become more a influential actor in international affairs.

Realising these possibilities hinges on the EU reforming and adjusting its decision-making processes to align more effectively with foreign and security policy interests. The existing foreign policy arrangements, which were developed in a less challenging international environment, are plagued by a number of structural problems. Even smaller disagreements between many member states often become major obstacles for strategic decisions. Decision-making relying on unanimity among twenty-seven diverse countries

represents an obvious constraint that often involves delays and occasional blockages, especially after elections, where support for Ukraine has become a focal point in political debates, as seen in countries like Hungary.

The division of roles among various institutional players — such as the European Council, European Commission, and European External Action Service (EEAS) — lacks clear definition, leading to competition among their leaders rather than cohesive teamwork. Moreover, the leaders of pivotal structures such as EEAS may suffer from a deficit of charisma, competence, and credibility. Furthermore, larger European member states frequently conduct their own national foreign policies concurrently with the EU's efforts, demonstrating insufficient commitment to joint action on the European level (Lehne 2022).

Despite the existing structural and political obstacles hindering the EU's efforts for Ukraine and the potential for even more significant actions, the slow, steady, and, preferably, increasing support has the potential to alter the geopolitical DNA of Europe, aligning it with what it should have been for years. For decades, the United States could say, "Americans are from Mars, Europeans are from Venus," highlighting the differences in perceptions of strategic priorities, security challenges, and the means for addressing them. Now, the EU's pivotal move aims to narrow this space for Americans on Mars. With Ukraine, Europe has finally assumed a leading role, pooling and sharing the resources and responsibilities to uphold the liberal international world order alongside the United States.

The major European powers, particularly their leadership, must take proactive measures to prevent the EU from facing a predicament similar to that of the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE). Western attempts at conciliation with Moscow, exemplified by dropping Estonia's candidacy to chair the OSCE in Europe in 2024 and inviting Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to attend the meeting, have backfired. This appeasement strategy has emboldened Moscow, reinforced its grip on the organisation, and provided Lavrov with a platform for vitriolic Russian propaganda (Socor 2023). The EU has adapted its institutional and decision-making procedures to ensure the necessary aid to Ukraine, even in the face of potential vetoes from Russian-friendly voices inside the organisation, such as Hungary (Gabriela Baczyńska 2023). However, the EU must go further to maintain its course in the face of new obstacles that may emerge, which could challenge the shared strategic interests of the majority of its member states.

The European Triangle: the United Kingdom, France, and Germany

Despite the United Kingdom's withdrawal from EU and its security framework, it remains intricately connected to European security, economic, and social affairs. London has always functioned as a balancing power for Europe, particularly within NATO, acting as a prominent voice for enhanced security arrangements both within Europe and in collaboration with the United States and Canada. In the early stages of Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine, Boris Johnson's British government was among the first to demonstrate military support for Ukraine and advocate a strong European stance against Russian tyranny with practical means. The United Kingdom is home to one of the strongest armies in Europe.

At the outset of the war, France, the home to another formidable army in Europe, adopted an ambivalent stance. President Emmanuel Macron urged partner countries to act with caution in ways that would not tarnish Putin's image and respect. This rhetoric echoed the historical appeasement reminiscent of when the United Kingdom and France sought to appease Hitler, hoping to avert World War II. Conversely, adopting such a soft approach against the tyrant then, as surely now, would likely only embolden Putin, encouraging a more assertive and aggressive posture against Ukraine but, eventually, against other neighbouring countries as well.

Macron shifted his stance when he addressed the Bratislava GLOBSEC forum. He acknowledged, "We failed to provide a European response, or to organise an architecture to protect ourselves via the OSCE or the other projects envisaged at the time, against the aggression against Georgia in 2008, that against Ukraine in 2014, and again against Ukraine in 2022, and the rampant transformation of Belarus into a vassal state (Macron 2023)." France openly invited the EU and NATO to admit Ukraine into both organisations, therefore inviting the United States and the European countries to align their policies accordingly.

Haunted by World War II history, Berlin has always been reluctant to fully embrace the transatlantic security principles that advocate for equal contributions and burden-sharing among all allies for defence capabilities. In 2019, during the annual Riga Conference, the German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer pledged to address German complacency with security quickly and adhere to NATO spending rules – but over a protracted 15-year period. This prolonged German approach to European

security has contributed to Berlin being responsible for Russia's imperial resurgence, and the *Schröderisation* of German politics, characterised by close ties with Russia, has faced criticism from Central Eastern European states like Poland, the Baltic states, and Ukraine. However, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz made a significant shift in German foreign and security policy just five days after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as evident in his now-famous *Zeitenwende* speech on 27 February 2022.

Scholz reversed the trajectory of Germany's foreign and security policy. First, Germany pledged military support to Ukraine in its efforts to defend against Putin's Russia, which seeks to restore or rebuild the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union simultaneously. Second, Germany committed to deploying its troops to Lithuania, Romania, the Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean, or the North Sea, aiming to deter Putin and contain Russia, and to ensure efficient airspace policing within NATO. Third, and perhaps most crucially, Germany indicated a departure from its pacifist stance, committing to NATO defence principles by embracing the two percent spending rule. Moreover, in his remarks, Scholz underscored the urgent need to reinvest in German military capabilities, acknowledging the complacency exhibited by the German government as a NATO member (Rostoks 2023).

The policy declarations must translate into practical actions to address the evolving challenges to the European security architecture. Otherwise, as former Estonian President Lennart Meri aptly noted, these announcements become impractical empty words, akin to a "bottle of used Chanel perfume: nice to look at, but empty." Currently, the United States, with its 71.4 billion EUR contribution, remains the top "European security provider" as most of the US support to Ukraine is military aid. Germany has made a significant shift, becoming the second-largest donor to Ukraine among nation-states, contributing 21 billion EUR. The United Kingdom follows closely as the third-largest donor, providing approximately one third less (13.3 billion EUR) in military support. France occupies the 12th position globally, lagging behind smaller nations like Norway, Japan, Canada, Poland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and Switzerland. The aggregate support from France to Ukraine is 1.71 billion EUR, equivalent to the combined military assistance (1.56 billion EUR) delivered by the three Baltic states alone (Institute 2023). Furthermore, France has fulfilled only half of its promised support to Ukraine.

European Wedges

For decades, Europeans have often followed American leadership in security affairs. US foreign policy has played a role in shaping a unified European position, whether in support or opposition to US policies. However, Putin's unprovoked war against Ukraine has brought NATO and EU allies closer, fostering a commitment to coordinated common action. Nonetheless, various factors, including the upcoming presidential election, domestic political considerations, commercial interests, and the onset of the Israel-Gaza war, have influenced the nature of US support for Ukraine.

Since the Truman administration directed vast sums into rebuilding the European continent through the Marshall Plan after World War II, Ukraine now has emerged as the top recipient of the US foreign aid by a considerable margin (Merrow et al. 2023). Furthermore, after the cessation of hostilities, with the full liberation of Ukrainian territory from Russian occupying forces, US leadership and G7 will be pivotal to the international commitment to rebuild Ukraine (Ganster et al. 2022). Nevertheless, the lack of bipartisan support for providing Ukraine with crucial military aid could result in Russian victories, exacerbating and prolonging the occupation of Ukraine.

As of late 2023, the prospects for Western aid to Ukraine appear uncertain, with new funding measures entangled in political gridlock within the US institutions. The US population still supports the provision of military aid to Ukraine, despite diminishing enthusiasm. Approximately three-in-ten Americans believe the United States is providing too much assistance to Ukraine in its fight against Russia, while around half says the United States is providing an adequate or insufficient amount of support (Cerde 2023). Conversely, the majority of the fractured Republican Party is saying that the United States is providing Ukraine with too much military support (only one out of ten is saying that more should be done to support Kyiv) when Ukraine's victory and Russia's defeat is far from evident in a short-term perspective. This US domestic political dissent in terms of robust, sufficient, and long-term support to Ukraine can undermine the unity of approach in Europe, too. The reciprocal coordination and cooperation between the United States and the EU enhances the international influence of the Western alliance.

In the EU, leaders have been embroiled in debates over the most significant support package for Ukraine and the country's potential accession to the bloc alongside Moldova. Currently, only Hungary stands as the

primary opposition. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary has called Ukraine's situation hopeless. He has said, "Russia's goal is to make Ukraine an ungovernable wreck, so the West cannot claim it as a prize – the land of nobody – no man's land" (Dreher 2023). Orbán's close ties with Putin have positioned Budapest as a pro-Russian voice within the transatlantic community, symbolically a dissenting figure among Western allies within NATO and echoing the philosophies of the radical nationalist, Alexander Dugin, within Europe.

Orbán's perspective on Ukraine and its resistance against Russian imperialism may contain some valid points. He argues that the West fails to comprehend that time is in Russia's favour in Ukraine. Given Russia's immense size, it has the capacity to mobilise a substantial army. In contrast, the Western support for Ukraine, including that from the United States, appears to Orbán as a mere façade – akin to an empty bottle of Chanel, nice to look at, but empty. This perceived void in Western support could widen, with the potential for Slovakia to follow Hungary's stance, despite public support in Slovakia for aiding Ukraine against Russia's aggression. Moreover, cases like Bulgaria's domestic politics, where a pro-Russian president opposes parliamentary support for Ukraine but is overridden, may serve as precedent in other European states with pro-Russian interest groups (AP 2023).

Conclusion

The primary criterion for evaluating the adequacy of Western support to Ukraine in its resistance against Russia is the achievement of Western security goals through the provision of substantial military aid. The West's success lies in delivering sufficient military aid to Ukraine for the complete liberation of its territory and the restoration of its sovereignty. A prolonged conflict benefits Russia by providing it time to adapt, restore, and adjust its military industry. Moreover, Russia may explore alliances, finding ways around Western sanctions regimes to meet its security policy interests.

The EU has demonstrated its capability to deliver crucial support to Ukraine, providing a channel for European countries to contribute military, economic, and humanitarian aid to Ukraine without directly opposing Russia. The leadership of EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has been an indispensable factor in this effort, compensating for the

relatively subdued activities of the EEAS. In contrast, NATO, as a security alliance, encourages its member states to ensure the necessary support to Ukraine, aiming to avoid a direct NATO-Russia war, which some fear could trigger World War III. The United States stands as the primary contributor of military aid to Ukraine, followed by Germany and the United Kingdom. Notably, France appears more hopeful for a resolution without robustly supporting Ukraine, signalling a significant weakness among the major European powers. However, reliance on hope instead of bold support for Ukraine is the sign of a major power's profound weakness.

It is also important to note the significant changes in social-political support in an election year both in the United States and Europe. A lack of sufficient and timely support to Ukraine might lead to Kyiv's capitulation after a long and brave struggle against the occupying Russian forces. To ensure the efficiency and timely delivery of required resources, adjustments in legislation within both the United States and the EU are essential. Without such adaptations, a minority of Republicans in the Congress and Senate could compromise crucial military support to Ukraine. Similar challenges must be addressed in the EU, particularly in countries like Orbán's Hungary.

The United States and Europe must offer more significant and prompt military assistance to Ukraine. Mere promises during political gatherings and conferences will not alter the outcome of the war. Real military support and immediate reconstruction prospects for Ukraine should be in place the moment Russia faces defeat. Taking such a stance would position the West on the right side of history and prevent a return to historical predicaments and World Wars.

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13. *Zeitenwende*: Does the Turn of History Belong to History Already?

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Abstract

After some reflection on the term *Zeitenwende* (is it a *point in time* or rather a *process* of developments and responses?) and after a short characterisation of global challenges, this chapter focuses on Germany, where the term was born, or at least where the term was first proclaimed. Its dual character was inherent in Chancellor Scholz's historic Bundestag speech three days after Russia's invasion into Ukraine. Germany's security and defence policy, as well as its readiness to give arms to Ukraine, underwent a 180° turn. Nonetheless, the ensuing efforts were – and continue to be – half-hearted in both respects. The essay concludes with a discussion of necessary steps lest we fail the *Zeitenwende*.

Keywords: *Zeitenwende*, history, policy change, Germany, Ukraine, arms assistance, Bundeswehr, defence mind-set

Introduction

The somewhat provocative title proposed by the editors reminds me of an interview I gave to a German regional newspaper some weeks after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and Chancellor Scholz's Bundestag speech three days later. It was "I hope that the effect of the shock will last." The editors probably meant to insinuate that it has not lasted, that governments and societies have not drawn sufficient conclusions. To put it simply, that talking the talk was not satisfactorily followed by walking the walk.

But what does *Zeitenwende* mean? It can be a *point in time*, as indicated by the English translation 'turning point.' This is how Chancellor

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Scholz used the term when he declared that the military assault by Russia on Ukraine had brought about a *Zeitenwende* on 27 February 2022. In that sense, one could think of other significant examples. The first would be Gorbachev's ascent to power and the 'new thinking' in Soviet foreign and security policy. The second comes with the fall of the Berlin Wall, leading to the illusion that the global victory of liberal economy, and that this market economy would signify an 'end of history', whilst Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' became the more realistic pattern. Third, the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington marked a climax of global terrorism. Fourth, Xi Jinping's takeover and Obama's pivot to Asia signify one more turning point. Finally, but no less importantly, the Maidan Revolution of Dignity ten years ago represents another *Zeitenwende*. There are numerous other 'turning points' – not comparable in substance – but events that were of global importance. On the other hand, however, *Zeitenwende* can be regarded as a *process* in two respects: regarding global and regional developments and concerning the conclusions that are drawn. What are these significant developments?

A Disintegrating World Order

For some time, we have seen a disintegrating world order, with a weakened 'Pax Americana' and an attack on the international system. The battle for power, hegemony, and exclusive spheres of influence is back, and 'multipolarity' is a fighting term that gives the 'polycentrism' that we observe a confrontational connotation. The situation is characterised by war in the Middle East, instability in the Western Balkans, multiple military coups in Africa, and ever more electoral victories by populist autocrats. However, it is most prominently seen in China's intensified rise to world power and Russia's criminal war of subjugation against its neighbour, Ukraine.

In China, a *Zeitenwende* has been proceeding for over ten years; Deng Xiaoping's maxim that China should "hide its strength and nurture its power" no longer applies. Xi Jinping, increasingly an autocrat, has relied on demonstrating military strength, aggressive 'wolf warrior diplomacy', and threats that reach beyond China's neighbours. China's proclaimed rise is, in the view of its leadership, a resurgence intended to make the 'century of humiliation' forgotten in the light of 5,000 years of history. Such a view supports the comprehensive attack on the so-called rules-based world order,

codified in the United Nations Charter, as an order that China considers to be imposed by the West.

All of this is underpinned by an enormous armament and – within little more than a decade – the creation of offensive power projection capabilities far beyond the East and Southeast Asian regions. Of particular relevance for Europe and NATO are the maritime power shift in China's favour, more aggressive behaviour in the Asia-Pacific region, the creation of artificial islands in the South China Sea as military bases and sensor platforms, increasingly martial rhetoric, and the growing convergence of interests between China and Russia.

The danger of a violent conquest of Taiwan is increasing with the growing military power and the development of comprehensive state goals. Reunification in the foreseeable future is seen as an almost sacred duty, which includes military occupation if necessary. Thus, the Chinese leadership is keeping a close eye on the war in Ukraine and the brave resistance of the Ukrainians.

Strategic Chinese-Russian cooperation has developed rapidly since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and third countries, such as Iran, are also increasingly involved. With the addition of North Korea, there is a veritable anti-Western front that has already proven its worth by supporting Russia in its criminal war of subjugation against Ukraine.

In the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, both sides reassured each other they would not become adversaries. But since his rise to the top, Putin pursues offensive behaviour towards the West, the intimidation of smaller nations in the so-called near abroad, and overt military aggression against Georgia and Ukraine – all while engaging in further repression internally and continuing to neglect domestic problems and innovation requirements. Russia's security interests rather are political-psychological sensitivities, in terms of bitterness, resentment, and prestige. NATO enlargement is certainly a thorn in Russia's side, as it were. But it is by no means a threat to Russia's security; it was not even an active expansion but the result of an urgent desire of those countries that had liberated themselves from the Soviet yoke or possessed limited sovereignty within the Warsaw Pact to join the West.

President Putin's confrontational policy is driven by revisionism, as a sort of imperial phantom pain. It is steered by the desire for exclusive zones of influence, the externalisation of grave domestic problems, and by containment of democracy. For Putin, democratic successes – such as in Ukraine – are an existential threat to his system of power. He is not afraid of NATO

that is completely structurally and politically defensive, but of his own people, who could be infected by this democratic virus.

Putin's policy is increasingly rooted in a one-sided and flawed interpretation of history for the sake of his imperial goals. *Geschichtspolitik*, the 'politics of memory', plays an important role with the elements of victim and defender, victory and great power, Russian unity, and the image of the West as an enemy (Putin 2021). The overt confrontation with the West and NATO started with Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007. Failure in the West to realistically read Putin at least from that time onward will be exemplified with Germany's Russia policy below.

In general, there is a struggle between authoritarian regimes and the liberal democracies of the Global West, acknowledging that the latter are not faultless, but capable of self-correction. At present, the West and its leader, the United States, appear to be in retreat, not the least due to a multitude of crises and violent conflicts. There is also great division in many of their societies, where dissatisfaction leads to the rise of populists, who are often supported by Moscow with money and propaganda. The countries of the Global South are wedged in between and often do not want to take sides. Anti-colonialist sentiments have been revived, and those states want to be taken seriously.

A positive *Zeitenwende* should indicate a consciousness of common challenges and grave dangers, taking responsibility, consulting together, and proceeding to concerted action. In that perspective, *Zeitenwende* means that the signs of the times have been recognised, and policies are being changed accordingly. How is Germany doing?

Germany in the *Zeitenwende*

As the term was born, or at least first proclaimed in Germany (which is why many others use it in German), my country will now serve as a reflective case study focusing on its foreign and security policy in the *Zeitenwende*.

In the Cold War, Germany was the main frontline state. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and re-unification, it felt satiated in security terms. Germany itself was surrounded by friends, and thus it was easy to forget that those friends were not necessarily surrounded by allies only; that the solidarity it had enjoyed for decades would one day also be required by others was not an obvious thought.

With a fervent pursuit of the ‘peace dividend,’ there was a significant reduction of the armed forces, coupled with neglect, leading to a contraction of the defence budget. Foreign missions became the main structural factor so that a huge share of heavy weapon systems was given away or scrapped. Furthermore, conscription was abandoned without much reflection on the particular responsibility the largest country in the heart of the continent holds for Europe’s basic stability. This ongoing requirement for force build-up capability, specifically reserves, was overlooked.

The author of this article, who spent many years at NATO headquarters and was involved in the NATO-Russia dialogue, often published ideas for cooperative, as opposed to confrontational, security, but was increasingly sobered about its shrinking prospects in light of Putin’s revisionist-revanchist stance. Consequently, he developed ideas without illusions – for better times, as it were.

German politicians, however, held the illusions that the motto *Wandel durch Handel*, ‘change through trade’, would also work with Putin, with an increased dependence on cheap Russian oil and gas deliveries. They liked to think that mutual dependence of supplier and customer was a guarantee, and even after Russia’s annexation of Crimea the Nord Stream 2 pipeline was built as supposedly an entirely economic – rather than geopolitical – project. Critics, particularly in the Baltic states, were told not to get hysterical about Russia.

And when people framed Russia as Germany’s neighbour, it was essential to point out that in between these two countries, there live tens of millions of people with deeply negative historical memories of Germany and Russia coming to an agreement behind their backs.

Regarding the German defence effort: Germany stands as an important NATO ally where German diplomats and officers collaborate constructively on ideas and concepts. However, Germany has persistently been regarded as a ‘free-rider’, or *Trittbrettfahrer* in German, referring to its reliance on security provided by others without sufficiently investing in defence. The basis for this perception was an emphasis of a “culture of military restraint,” stemming from the background of German militarist history, which more than a few allies saw as evading genuine commitments.

Even after the joint agreements made at the highest level at the Wales Summit in September 2014, Germany has failed to achieve the two per cent of gross domestic product for defence spending. And the United States’

displeasure with insufficient burden-sharing has been voiced long before the Trump presidency.

When in 2021 a German Green politician demanded defensive weapons for Ukraine's battle in the Donbas, the German government stuck to its restrictive arms export policy, which, among other things, ruled out arms transfers to 'areas of tension' – as if Ukraine was just any area of tension. The same policy continued until after the invasion of 24 February 2022. Instead of feeling compelled, in light of the Nazi crimes, to support Ukraine against renewed occupation by supplying weapons, the opposite conclusion was drawn from German history. For many weeks Germany even prevented Estonia from delivering field howitzers to Ukraine – the transfer of which Berlin had to authorise, as they originated from East German army stocks.

Despite the potential predictability, it was only Russia's all-out invasion that served as the trigger for a complete reversal. The reasons that had been valid until then were put aside overnight, and the Chancellor's speech three days later in the Bundestag was indeed historic. The shift not only affected support for the invaded country, which had previously been either a blank spot on the mental map of most Germans or primarily viewed through Russian eyes, but also had repercussions for the Bundeswehr.

The Bundeswehr

The Chancellor promised to fulfil the two per cent mark, which had never been reached, with immediate effect, *and also* to make a special fund (that is, extra debt) of 100 billion euros available to the Bundeswehr for procurement, which the Bundestag expeditiously approved. However, while this *and* was understood as *plus*, the 100 billion will be used over a few years to bring the defence budget closer to two percent in reality - and then the government will have to decide to increase the budget by 20-30 billion euros to meet the target. More than one and a half years after this speech, the condition of the Bundeswehr has not significantly improved. There are major bureaucratic problems in the procurement system, the replacement of equipment handed over to Ukraine is sluggish, and recruitment problems persist.

Germany's first National Security Strategy, which finally saw the light of day in June 2023 after long labour pains, claims to clarify Germany's geopolitical situation and strategic direction. The strategy contains a lot of correct analysis but few concrete conclusions. A certain amount of

self-criticism, for instance, of the serious mistakes made in Germany's Russia policy, would have also been appropriate. Consequences, directives, and concrete conclusions are largely lacking. The absence of the expected structural underpinning (in the form of a National Security Council) is conspicuous. Equally conspicuous is the lack of clear statements about German responsibility in Europe and the world, along with a conclusive explanation of 'leadership.' This does not have to mean German hegemony but could be achieved through initiative and active coordination.

For some time now, Defence Minister Pistorius has been trying to influence public opinion by calling for defence readiness and demanding that the Bundeswehr be "fit for war." This has sparked controversy and yet acts as a call to recognise the fact that our peaceful country can also be threatened again. After decades of foreign deployments, the focus has returned to national and alliance defence.

This requires a change in the mindset not only of the Bundeswehr but also of the political class and society. Therefore, the Chancellor must take the lead on this issue, notwithstanding vocal dissent from prominent members of his party (SPD) who publicly deem the Minister's language too bellicose. It is important to note that the Minister does not advocate for warfare but for realistic preparation for defence readiness, aiming at preventing war through deterrence. Once again, one wonders whether "the effect of the shock" has lasted.

Ukraine

A few general remarks on Ukraine should also be made. First of all, one should never misjudge the character of this war, as there are not two warring parties. This brutal war of aggression against a sovereign neighbouring country is criminal in its intention and aim (*ius ad bellum*) as well as its methods, which violate all rules of the international law of war (*ius in bello*). If Western wisecracks demand that Ukraine give up part of its territory to end the war, they should be aware that the territories they suggest be ceded are not abstract terrain but home to millions of Ukrainians. The crimes perpetrated against them under Russian occupation are well known, including the violent russification and the abduction of tens of thousands of Ukrainian children who are indoctrinated in Russian families or homes.

The demand for immediate negotiations completely disregards President Putin's far-reaching goals of subjugation and destruction. He has not deviated from them one iota in declaring his willingness to negotiate. At best, Russia would use a ceasefire to refresh and reorganise its forces. Imagining a Minsk III when considering negotiation proposals, one should remember that there were 12,000 Ukrainian deaths during the supposed ceasefire after the Minsk II agreement. While casualties mount on both sides in this criminal war, each one can be attributed to the actions of the Russian aggressor. If Russia stops fighting, the war will be over. If Ukraine stops fighting, it will be done. Between the will to destroy and the fight for survival, a 'compromise' is inconceivable.

It should also not be overlooked that Putin has proclaimed far-reaching goals beyond Ukraine. Should he win there, the costs for us would also be much higher than the current burdens, such as inflation, a shrinking economy, higher energy prices, and increased refugee flows. If this were explained concisely by the government, public support for arms deliveries would also be greater than recently reported. Ukraine must win this war. And 'victory over Russia' does not mean the destruction and occupation of the aggressor such as the situation after the defeat of Nazi Germany, but merely withdrawal of its troops.

Today, Germany boasts of being Ukraine's second largest supporter. In reality, German arms deliveries were hesitant for many months. In the beginning, little was delivered, and it was often late. On 28 April 2022, the German Bundestag mandated the government to deliver heavy weapons to Ukraine, yet only in February 2023 did the Chancellor give up his resistance. Meanwhile, we kept hearing what in one article I deemed "typically German excuses." For example, not wanting to become a party to the war, aversion to German unilateral action, the risk of escalation, avoidance of depleting one's own stocks, lack of supplies from other states, fear of nuclear war, time needed for training, knowing what Ukraine needs better than the Ukrainians do, and so on – this list is not finite. Practical philosophy has it that if you want something, you find ways, and if you do not, you find excuses.

Meanwhile, Germany has indeed provided Ukraine with valuable equipment, such as a limited number of armoured combat vehicles, artillery, ammunition, and above all, very effective air defence. But to date, this has not been enough, and the metaphorical handbrake was always on. The repeated mantra of pledging assistance to Ukraine for "as long as it takes" lacks the

crucial additions of “with everything that is necessary” and “in a timely manner.” Germany should take a much stronger lead, deliver more supplies, and introduce initiatives.

Currently, Ukraine has its back to the wall. Its counter-offensive, which faced the exaggerated expectations of many, could not have been any more successful without sufficient equipment, ammunition, mine-clearing kits, and air superiority. The stalemate at the front noted by experts has a lot to do with the fact that the Russians had half a year to set up a deep defensive line (on robbed land!), which included minefields of unprecedented density. This was mainly due to the significant delay in the delivery of important weapon systems.

Perhaps the end of the war will not come about through the physical liberation of every square kilometre but because the military situation of the conquerors becomes untenable. This requires – not the least in their power centre Crimea – further erosion of their combat power, a reduction of their command capability (command posts), and the impairment of supplies and transport, namely, logistics (transport routes by rail and road, bridges including, finally, the Kerch Bridge, depots, and airfields).

Long-range weapons such as German Taurus cruise missiles are indispensable for this. Great Britain and France have already delivered such systems (Storm Shadow and SCALP), and the United States, after some hesitation, supplied ATACMS missiles. Such systems can shorten the war. The German Chancellor’s refusal, which has continued for months now, prolongs it. His counterarguments are disputable excuses.

Fortunately, Putin has miscalculated the unity of the West and the bravery of the Ukrainians in many respects. He has revitalised NATO, and he has completely overestimated the capabilities of his armed forces. However, the further course of the war will continue to depend on the supply of weapons and ammunition from the West. These are Ukraine’s life artery.

One of the most important aspects of the Wagner mutiny was Prigozhin’s exposure of the lies used to justify the offensive and his scathing criticism of the conduct of the war. He acknowledged that there was no threat from NATO, there were no Nazis in the Ukrainian leadership, and no massacres in the Donbas by Ukrainians. He also added that the reason for this war was the ambition of the Defence Minister Shoigu and that the leadership was incompetent. Prigozhin revealed the immense numbers of Russians killed and wounded, which were unknown in Russia, these were not perfumed generals’ sons, but ordinary people and ethnic minorities. He admitted

that instead of having been demilitarised, Ukraine had become militarily stronger than ever before.

The Russian armed forces can still destroy a lot and kill many people, but Putin's political and strategic goals have long since been missed. Their unattainability must also become clear to Russia before an end to the war can be negotiated. Russia's large-scale offensive capability in Ukraine is already largely exhausted, even if 'cannon fodder' – pitifully trained and equipped soldiers – is being brought in without end.

Additionally, Germany's leadership should be bolder with regard to security guarantees for Ukraine after the war. The only security guarantee that will function is NATO membership. But when the Weimar Triangle met in Paris before the NATO Vilnius Summit, Chancellor Scholz was much more reserved than Presidents Macron and Duda regarding the expected strong signal that Ukraine should become a NATO member right after the war. Germany must beware of 'self-deterrence.' The not irrational but obsessed Putin escalates regardless of what we do or refrain from doing.

The Global West and Europe

Therefore, with regard to Germany and its national defence policy, its armed forces, and its half-hearted military support to Ukraine, the question posed in the title is justified to some extent: has the *Zeitenwende* failed? This question can also be directed to the larger community of liberal democracies. Are we all up to the challenges? Are we aware of the comprehensive attack that Russia, backed by autocracies such as China, Iran, and North Korea, has launched on our values and the rules-based order?

European nations must also realistically look at the possibility that the continuation of the United States' overwhelmingly larger military support for Ukraine might not be infinite. It is already in doubt because of the wrangling in Congress, and if Trump or a Trumpist wins the next election, it may cease altogether. In that case, much more extensive efforts will be required from the European countries. Even without Trump, it is unrealistic to think that the United States will forever continue to be engaged so disproportionately in propping up Europe's security and defence.

For many Europeans, the realisation mentioned above is valid. In the case of a Russian victory in Ukraine, the cost for us will be much higher than what we have to endure at present. Firmness is needed: a rejection of

appeasement and a reminder of NATO's Harmel Report of 1968 – defence *and* détente, readiness for dialogue on the basis of capable armed forces.

The Re-Vision Munich Security Report from the 2023 Conference (Bunde et al. 2023) rightly states:

“The defenders of the liberal vision can push back effectively if they recognize the fundamental nature of the revisionist challenge and swiftly reinvigorate their own vision of a desirable international order. To be successful, these defenders need to do more than just nurture the global coalition of liberal democracies. They must also build a larger coalition willing to actively defend the key principles of the liberal order. This demands paying due respect to the legitimate resentment that many countries of the “Global South” have toward the existing order. Simply defending the status quo will not do the trick. They need to re-envision it.”

Constructive relations with all forces of good will are required, as well as much closer cooperation at eye level with the countries of the now so-called Global South, who, for the time being, mostly regard the war against Ukraine as Europe's war.

One of the strengths of liberal democracies is their readiness for self-criticism and self-correction. But at the same time, they need self-confidence. And they need leaders. In 1879, the German historian Heinrich von Treitschke, under the impression of Bismarck, coined the phrase “Männer machen Geschichte” (“Men make history”). During my university studies, such sentiments were frowned upon and out of fashion, as social history, economic history, and structural history were the flavour of the seventies. But how often have we seen since, even in the modern times, that individuals do make a difference, for good or for ill: Reagan, Gorbachev, Wałęsa, and Kohl have left positive marks, while figures like Milošević and currently Putin have had considerable negative influence. Towards the end of the seventies, when there was doom and gloom in the West and the Soviet Union was seen as on the victory road, an Australian author wrote a sort of a triple biography (O'Sullivan 2006) denoting three leaders who saved the world, challenging communism in their own ways: John Paul II, spiritually and politically, Ronald Reagan, politically and militarily, and Margaret Thatcher, economically. Where are such leaders nowadays when the West and its values are under such a concerted attack? Who leads with courage but also with great optimism?

‘Burden sharing’ with the United States is too banal a term. Even if the transatlantic link and the US extended deterrence, including the nuclear

umbrella, remain indispensable, much greater responsibility for the security of Europe and its periphery must be assumed by NATO's European members and the European Union. And even if the admission of Ukraine and Moldova is quasi-mandatory, and of the countries of the Western Balkans is mandatory in the medium-term, the EU has a lot of homework to do in order to overcome fundamental political differences as well as veto situations as, for instance, the Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán likes to create.

Since majority decisions on important political issues (particularly those which involve sending soldiers in harm's way) are difficult to achieve, the European Union might once again reflect upon the Core Europe idea presented in 1994 by the German politicians Schäuble and Lamers, which offers states the possibility to join, or refrain from joining, certain initiatives. With concepts such as 'two-speed Europe' and 'concentric circles,' it remains important that no country has the impression of being excluded; free access must be assured to all those who are willing.

But such considerations must be at the beginning of initiatives. That the German proposal of the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) for European air defence lacks, among others, France and Poland as initial participants, has the potential of being divisive within NATO and the EU (Wachs 2023), even though this initiative is for procurement and the systems are said to be compatible with Polish and French ones.

In contrast, the so-called Weimar Triangle, initiated in Weimar 1991 by the German, French, and Polish foreign ministers Genscher, Dumas, and Skubiszewski, should be revitalised. The cooperation among these three nations has seen its ups and downs, but it has great potential. For Germany, situated in its historically precarious central position with more neighbours than any other European country, there is nothing better than having solid, cooperative, and even friendly relations with its neighbours to the West and to the East. Of course, that requires efforts to harmonise views and policies, as well as the setting up of a German 'servant' leadership.¹

¹ 'Servant leadership' means considering interests and having respect for the views of smaller nations, which was Chancellor Kohl's principle. However, this has been partly forgotten since (Mangasarian and Techau 2017).

Conclusion

In sum, stating that Germany or even the West has failed the *Zeitenwende* and that it is already a matter for historians may go too far. However, it is true that not all of the implications of the change in the international situation have been acknowledged, that not all conclusions have been drawn, and that many consequential actions need to be designed and implemented. The foremost priority is to halt and reverse the assault on the international order, the attempt to put power over international law, and the egregious act of seeking to eradicate a neighbouring country from the map. In his latest speeches, Putin declared that he has only just begun to reshape the European order. In the initial stage, he wants to convince Ukraine that resistance is futile, and Russians will do everything to strengthen the voices in the West which spread this narrative. Putin's speeches must be taken more seriously.

This struggle must not be overshadowed by the brutal war in the Middle East, important as it is to prevent the spreading of wildfire and to bring peace to that region. Also, efforts must be extended to guide China's rise, whether it be its resurgence as a great power or even its attempted rise to becoming the dominant world power, in a benign and cooperative direction.

Reason should prompt the leaders of nations – in the UN, OSCE, EU, NATO, G7, G20, AU, the Arab League, or other formats – to direct the energies towards cooperatively tackling the scourges of our period: climate change, environmental destruction, terrorism, organised crime, poverty, a lack of prospects for young generations, bad governance, and corruption. Furthermore, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in a slimmed-down version (2005), should no longer be misunderstood as merely military intervention but should be tracked back to the original concept: to prevent, react (choosing from a panoply of measures), and rebuild.

There is the opportunity to leverage the process of the *Zeitenwende* for greater clarity in objectives and concepts, coupled with stronger determination. By turning the term into a guiding principle for constructive action, it will not become a soon-to-be historic relic.

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14. Structural Obstacles to Support Ukraine in the US and the EU

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Abstract

Europe has demonstrated relatively commendable support for Ukraine, and the United States, particularly in terms of military assistance, have also played a significant role. Nevertheless, both face challenges in providing more robust and expedited support, particularly in terms of military aid. This chapter examines the structural obstacles in Europe and the United States that are related to the provision of military support to Ukraine. For Europe, the focal point for analysis is the state of the military industry, while for the United States it is the domestic priorities and political obstacles.

Keywords: European Union, US Congress, aid to Ukraine, European defence industry, Republican Party

Introduction

While European military, political, and financial support for Ukraine is noteworthy, unfortunately, it does not alleviate immediate and urgent shortages, particularly in munitions supplies such as 15mm shells. It has also become evident that Europe has not succeeded in ensuring an adequate production of ammunition to sustain Ukraine in what may be a long war. Furthermore, leaders in the West, including the United States, appear to struggle in deciding on the necessary supplies for Ukraine, despite having a sufficient industrial base and stocks. Consequently, attrition warfare may not have been a conscious choice but a default option suggested by the United States and Europe for Ukraine in a long-term perspective.

The gradual increase of aid from the West might have been a part of a well-weighed plan to keep Russia in the war and drain its resources (Veebel

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and Ploom 2023). Conversely, historical patterns and the Kremlin's need to replenish lost hardware suggest that Russian military recovery could happen sooner than anticipated (Šrāders and Allik 2023). The current situation casts doubt on this assumption. The self-constrained supply of military aid, especially precision weapons, may have also been influenced by misplaced fears of escalation across Europe, a scenario that has rarely occurred (Ploom, Šliwa, and Veebel 2020). According to the prevailing understanding, the power-security dilemma appears to constrain Europe by discouraging the provision of military equipment, such as precision weapons that could potentially make a difference on the battlefield. While Russia's overt and all-out war against Ukraine has enhanced regional consensus on dealing with Russia, bold European action is yet to be seen (Rostoks and Šrāders 2023).

In the case of the United States, the commitment to defending freedom, democracy, and European and US security, without deploying boots on the ground, aligns with domestic political and economic interests and the Jeffersonian foreign policy tradition. Considering the entire range of debates above, why is it so difficult to find ways to allow Ukraine to defeat Russia sooner by supplying more?

Apparently, elites might be hesitant to take actions that could provoke the Kremlin into considering the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Despite the changes in Russia's military doctrines indicating a willingness to use nuclear force even when Russia is at risk, there seems to be a reluctance to confront this potentiality (Persson 2022). Putin relies on the roots of Russian strategic culture to keep Europe guessing and in fear (Adamsky 2018). Furthermore, limited support to Ukraine currently obstructs a faster defeat of Russia and the desired alterations in its foreign and security policies, potentially even the regime itself.

Europe does not stand as the only major supporter of Ukraine in its efforts to resist Russian aggression. While Europe is the main supporter of Ukraine, the United States come out as the top single state in terms of the quantifiable military support. Nevertheless, due to growing dissent inside the Republican Party and the presidential primary debates, the viability of new or extensive support packages to Ukraine is in question, as the candidates face increasing pressure.

Considering the aforementioned arguments, this paper will focus on the structural challenges inside Europe and the United States for the bolder support to Ukraine. Particular focus will dwell on the industrial capacity and political will to support Ukraine.

Europe: Willing yet Incapable?

Even if Europe has performed comparatively well in supporting Ukraine and constraining Russia, its twelve aid packages, including more than 80 billion euros over less than two years, is unprecedented by previous EU standards. Obviously, Europe has broken with its pacifist stance to opt for bolder realist policies to ensure security of Europe and Ukraine. The EU will soon have delivered twice as much support as the United States, and the European countries bilaterally have upped their support with new multi-year packages for Ukraine (Kiel Institute 2023).

While the European sanctions on Russia may not have achieved their intended impact, Russia's economic losses have nonetheless been significant. To date, EU sanctions on Russia have targeted its government, financial, business, defence, technology, and media sectors. Since February 2022, the EU has imposed twelve packages of sanctions intended to cripple Russia's ability to finance the war against Ukraine, exact costs on Russia's elites, and diminish Russia's economic base. Imposing sanctions requires unanimity among EU members, suggesting unity in Europe in the provision of support to Ukraine (Archick 2023).

Furthermore, a noticeable evolution within European strategic culture has taken place. Germany's *Zeitenwende* is the most vivid break from the past, with economic interdependence with Russia replaced by more confrontational policies (Scholtz 2022, 2023). Moreover, more significant changes have occurred in Italy, where Prime Minister Meloni has largely abandoned her previous views. As Meacci argues, in an effort to distance herself from the right-wing trio of Salvini and the late Berlusconi, Meloni has managed to shift from her previous Kremlin-friendly stances: "From hailing Putin's 2018 re-election as an 'unequivocal' sign of the 'will of the people' and continually demanding Crimean sanctions be revoked, Meloni has morphed into a safeguard for Italy's Atlanticist stances in the past few months" (Meacci 2022).

In terms of practical support, the West has sent some high-profile precision missiles that have proven superior to the Russian ones. Nevertheless, the most vital elements of military aid to Ukraine, 15mm shells and armoured vehicles, were already in short supply by the summer of 2023. Controversially, the West has yet to sign off on the multi-billion long-term procurement contracts that the European defence industry requires for the mass production of equipment and ammunition for Ukraine (Aris 2023). Moreover, Europe itself needs to provide sufficient funding for its indigenous

industry to support Ukraine, as well as to provide its own security in a long-term perspective.

In Europe, only Germany has placed additional orders to its arms industry, such as Rheinmetal and Krauss-Maffei-Wegmann, including orders of 155mm shells (Dabrowski 2023) (Rheinmetall 2023). One crucial aspect for the European defence industry is its reliance on global supply chains. The production of ammunition requires materials like copper that depend on supplies from China (Butterfield 2023).

Currently, Europe is facing a predicament due to its past pacifism and complacency with security affairs (Biscop 2023a). It is lacking not only sufficient supplies of military equipment but also ammunition to defend itself in the long-term, as well as to supply Ukraine in the short-term. If France spoke of Europe's strategic autonomy before the 2022 war, this extant deficiency greatly diminishes the potential of such autonomy and strategic power.

The result of this condition is weak EU military planning and conduct capability that falls far short. As a result, there can be no discussion about Europe's capability to rapidly deploy substantial defence forces (for example, to Estonia, Finland, or Sweden). The result of this is a lack of agreement and cost-sharing for permanent structured cooperation. This European disunity and lack of commitment made cooperation within NATO difficult in terms of burden sharing, but now it also undermines Europe's own strategic security objectives (Howorth 2023, 10).

An impediment to the enhancement of Europe's military posture is the appalling state of the indigenous defence industry; for years, it has been poorly managed and suffered from shortages of investment and bureaucratic constraints (Aris 2023). Importantly, it is currently very difficult to talk about a pan-European defence enterprise. European industry is instead a composition of scattered production plants in Europe that seldom collaborate. Instead of strategic defence objectives on a European or national level, small and competing military companies have undermined the efficiency – and therefore the output – of the European industry.

The competition among defence industries in Europe is so fierce that consolidated producers like Israel and South Korea are in a better position (Skove 2023a). The absence of a European common defence industrial market has made it impossible to develop any European “national champions,” but more importantly, it makes the emergence of a sufficiently broad and inclusive military-industry that could satisfy the European security needs

impossible. European military industry has relied on small companies that produce at the national level, and therefore, their production capacity remains rather low.

In times of relative peace, the private industry model is a good and efficient choice. During periods of insecurity, however, this ownership model has a downside, as the public purpose of state defence or the defence of partner states must be translated into investment decisions that treat the industry in an equitable manner, which by necessity demands a slow bureaucratic process. As has been recognised by the European Parliament, there is a need for relatively long-term contracts to ensure that enhanced production capacities do not bring about losses. Indeed, large capital investments over time are needed to create new plants (Clapp 2023, 5). Russia's economy may be minuscule compared to the European Union's, yet the former's persistent increases in military expenditure and the steady stockpiling of older platforms and munitions is deeply concerning.

For too long Europe has avoided geopolitical thinking to underline its reliability and engagement on its own or with its partners regionally or globally (Biscop 2013; 2023a; 2023b). In relations with Russia, Europe neglected its Eastern and Southern neighbourhood for decades. So-called Western Europe, especially at the beginning of 1990s, regarded Eastern Europe as 'another Europe,' but Europe as a whole never considered it has vital interests in Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus, or Central Asia. While the EU approved its Strategic Compass immediately after Russia's full-scale invasion and there have been evident signs of Russia's revisionist tendencies since 2008, Europe must decide whether it is planning for peace or war (Howorth 2023). Even if Europe remains pacifistic concerning its military-industrial base, individual European nations can demonstrate the potential for a more rapid development of their own capabilities (Koenig 2022). Some positive examples from Germany or the Baltic states could serve as the groundwork for both regional and, ideally, pan-European cooperation.

A substantial obstacle to a pan-European cooperation model is the nascent European federal cooperation. Not all European states belong to the Eurozone, and thus any long-term budgetary planning remains on the national level (Biscop 2013). Furthermore, when compared to the United States, the central budget, inclusive of military procurements, remains quite meagre. Although the original purpose of the European Community was to prevent war, side-lining the military aspect of cooperation may potentially result in more conflicts with external entities. Alongside the non-military

means of security and defence, the option to employ military means for offensive purposes always remains a possibility (Buzan 1991).

Despite the opposition of major European countries to the prospect of EU federalisation, common security interests should encourage increasingly closer defence and fiscal cooperation. The European approach to the Eurozone and divergent opinions regarding the role of the common currency, coupled with the absence of a 'federal' treasury alongside the central bank, best explain the lack of military-industrial cooperation in Europe. The tight budgetary regime within the Eurozone has hindered the prompt expansion of national defence budgets. The proposed solution of exempting defence expenses from deficit criteria (Pugnet and Allenbach-Amman 2023) is a step in the right direction.

Given that the underlying problems are systemic and long-term, it is probable that a significant reform of the Eurozone system is necessary (Reinert and Kattel 2013). The solution to the fiscal crisis has proven to be inadequate and has, in fact, exacerbated inequalities among member states (Ploom 2014). France, Germany, or even the non-member of the EU, the United Kingdom, cannot ensure the security of Europe alone. Instead, for shared interests, there must be a community of equal partners (Weiler 1999, 250–252). Currently, this prospect should drive European cooperation, with defence and security policy at the forefront.

Rather than navigating between free market and protectionist policies, smaller European states should particularly embrace common procurement, coordinated defence plans, and capability developments (Ploom, Kalvet, and Tiits 2022). Since security affairs are shaped and dominated by national governments, only these governments or EU institutions could leverage their purchasing power to determine the ownership, size, structure, and performance of national defence industries. Government procurement policies determine the openness of defence markets, with national 'protectionism' often justified on the grounds of security of supply and broader economic benefits such as jobs, technology, cooperation spin-offs, or exports (Hartley 2013, 4). However, until a common defence industry is established, and considering that not all European states can afford substantial investments in their military capabilities, these states are compelled to opt for more market-oriented options – buying off the shelf. This approach is treated as a national responsibility, driven by limited defence budgets, demand for reliable products, or previous unfavourable experiences with national industries (De France, Mampaey, and Zandee 2016).

Simultaneously, even smaller states should identify niches and specialise in the supply of military equipment. State-owned military companies can be found in Israel, Switzerland, Norway, or the Netherlands (Hartley and Belin 2020). The Swedish military-industrial complex serves as a commendable example that has been instrumental in averting wars by fulfilling national needs and supporting economic development.

To establish a pan-European military-industrial production and supply system, the EU should create value or supply chains that ensure the viability of the smaller military companies and their integration into a broader supply system (Blockmans 2018; Ploom, Kalvet, and Tiits 2022). This approach would enable Europe to meet its security needs while leveraging competition and the market for improved quality and pricing. Additionally, it would position smaller European states to access crucial military supplies without experiencing price spikes during conflicts. Long-term planning and production would guarantee the stability of demand and supply. Therefore, if Finland decides to procure a significant quantity of air defence systems from Sweden, these systems would become more affordable for the Baltic states, either for their own security needs or as military support to Ukraine.

Crucially, the potential establishment of a common pan-European industry will create value chains among states, regions, and within the transatlantic community. Finland's procurement of F-35s serves as a clear example. By acquiring the right to provide costly maintenance for its planes and sell selected spare parts worldwide, Helsinki's defence industry gains access to the global market of military aircraft (Frisk 2021). As a result, defence exports and imports must remain an important inherent foreign policy dimension as they offer an opportunity to advance long-term relationships between governments (Heidenkamp, Louth, and Taylor 2011). Individually, European states, their markets, and procurement power is too small for a pan-European defence industry to sustain or develop (Lundmark 2020).

The United States: Capable yet Unwilling?

The United States' military and industry have consistently propelled the nation to maintain its top position in international security affairs. Over multiple administrations, the military-industrial complex has remained a primary focus for investment and development. Collaboration between the US military and commercial sectors has, in several instances, laid the

groundwork for the development of well-known products, such as Apple's iPhone. The military industry's involvement has been the driving force of research and development. Consequently, the US military industry has actively sought to collaborate closely with Congress for orders and competition, aiming for long-term investment in military capabilities. Despite being home to the most advanced military industry and supplies, structural obstacles in the United States have hindered the support and military aid to Ukraine.

As an illustration, the United States has accelerated its production of 155mm shells more rapidly than originally predicted due to close cooperation and government emphasis on munitions manufacturing (Skove 2023b). While several European states have relied on the United States for their defence requirements, increased cooperation between the United States (within NATO) and Europe should pave the way to closer NATO-EU cooperation at the politico-strategic and strategic-military levels (Simón 2022). This possibility would gain even more support if the US industry were to permit increased procurement of military aid to Ukraine, financed by the EU.

However, the entire proposition of supporting Ukraine has become controversial in the United States, often linked to the support for Israel, Taiwan, or broader US engagements. There has also been a shift in the White House from "as long as it takes" to "as long as we can," even though there is not a clear resolution in sight that would halt Russia's aggression against Ukraine. If the US Congress fails to extend aid to Ukraine, it could significantly alter the dynamics of the war in favour of the Kremlin.

The debate surrounding aid to Ukraine has often centred on whether and when the country will receive advanced weapons systems like Abrams battle tanks, F-16 fighter jets, and ATACMS missiles. However, the most crucial supply Ukraine has received from the West is old-fashioned artillery ammunition. Thus far, Ukraine has expended as many as 6,000 to 7,000 of these shells per day — approximately half of what the United States produced in a month before the war. In response, the United States has made significant investments in building up shell production capacity. Ukrainian troops on the frontlines are already reporting shortages as aid packages diminish. Notably, much of the funding allocated by Congress is intended to replenish US stocks for materials shipped from American warehouses to Ukraine (Keating 2023).

In the presidential election year, additional uncertainty looms over the prospects of military aid to Ukraine. The United States currently leads as the top supplier of such aid. Despite Western leaders expressing confidence in the Biden administration's ability to support Ukraine, even in the absence of bipartisan support in the Congress, the future remains uncertain. Domestic debates often draw comparisons between the United States and Europe. From the perspective of the average US voter, the United States has provided the lion's share of military support to Ukraine, but this voter might not be aware Europe cannot match the US capacity to supply military aid. Although the US industry is capable of delivering both now and in the long-term, the EU's military manufacturing base faces production shortfalls. While Europe surpasses the US in economic support, the United States maintains a significant lead in terms of military assistance (Beale 2023).

Similar to Europe, the US military-industrial complex stands to gain if the government approves new support packages. Presently, the United States is utilising its military reserves to assist Ukraine, but as these reserves deplete, the more modern defence equipment remains for the defence of the US population. The current inability of the United States to deliver military support to Ukraine not only undermines US credibility globally and the commercial interests of the US military-industrial complex, but also jeopardises shared American and European interests in taming and deterring Russia and China. Furthermore, it might provide Putin with the opportunity to exploit the uncertainties of the US presidential election year, witness Ukraine exhaust its defence capabilities, and allow Russia to prevail (Tirpak 2023).

Conclusion

The EU and the United States continue to be the primary supporters of Ukraine in its effort to defend itself against Russia. Nevertheless, it appears that both sides are encountering structural domestic obstacles in providing assistance to Ukraine's defence against revisionist Russia. For both Europe and the United States, it is important for Ukraine to triumph, especially as Putin approaches the Russian election cycle, where formal democratic procedures exist but lack substantial qualities such as opposition (all credible candidates are incarcerated) and the rule of law (crafted for one person, not for public interest). More importantly, the Kremlin faces an urgent need

to demonstrate success in its restoration of imperial ambitions and its war against Ukraine.

It is not unthinkable that Ukraine might lose the war against Russia. This possibility poses significant risks to commercial, political, and security interests of the United States and the EU. Such an outcome could provide impetus to Russia and China, impacting regional and global dynamics. Beyond the potential decline of the West and the rise of other powers, heightened geopolitical competition might lead to wars against NATO's Baltic members and the US and European partners in the Asia-Pacific region. To counter this trend, closer collaboration between Europe and the United States is imperative, overcoming capacity, political, and decision-making constraints. Ukraine should be a strategic common effort where Americans and Europeans jointly address the genuine needs of the democratic world rather than merely competing for domestic public support.

While the EU stands as the main supporter of Ukraine, its historical pacifist stance, obstacles for pan-European cooperation, and limited military reserves pose challenges in providing primarily military aid to Ukraine. This situation also raises questions about Europe's capacity to sustain itself in the event of a conflict. The European military-industrial complex faces constraints like limited financial impetus, lack of long-term planning, and similar market conditions that hinder the emergence of larger European champions (similar to those policies of the protected designation of origin or protected geographical indication that support French champagne, Italian prosciutto, or German bratwurst but not the real shared security interests of Europe). Despite these challenges, there is political will in Europe to support Ukraine, with only a few outliers such as Hungary.

While the US military industry has the capacity to offer swift and substantial support to Ukraine for a victory in the short-term, political structures in the United States are impeding quick and decisive action. The upcoming presidential election and increasing opposition within the Republican Party add to the uncertainty, upon which Putin's Russia capitalises. Putin, facing political opposition and controlling election processes, seeks to offset public discontent with victories that reinforce narratives of Russian superpower status and cultural supremacy. The current approach strengthens Putin's regime, extends the conflict with Ukraine, instigates new wars, and undermines Western political, commercial, and security interests.

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15. NATO's Russia Policy

Did it change at Vilnius? Will it change at Washington?

Dan FRIED*

Abstract

From the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO's Russia policy has traced an arc from initial hopes and determined outreach to a recognition, codified in the NATO Strategic Concept adopted at the Madrid Summit in 2022, that "The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security" (NATO, 2022). The current phase in NATO's Russia policy – a return to a realisation that, as during the Cold War, the Kremlin is an aggressor and thus a strategic adversary – crystallised after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While the NATO 2023 Vilnius Summit maintained the strategic line, it offered no major shift on Russian policy from the Strategic Concept laid out in Madrid one year earlier. The Vilnius Summit, however, did mark a turning point in NATO's consideration of its relations with Ukraine, including Ukraine's accession to NATO; at Vilnius, for the first time since 2008, NATO resumed thinking about and debating that question.

Keywords: Ukraine, NATO, Summit, Bucharest, Madrid, Vilnius, Washington

Russia as an Adversary: How NATO Got There

NATO's shift in its Russia policy came about slowly and reluctantly. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO reached out to post-Soviet Russia, hoping to build a lasting partnership, an "alliance with the Alliance," as the author and others in the Clinton Administration put it at the time (Vershbow and Fried, 2020). NATO sought to formalise and institutionalise this partnership in the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act that included the following: "NATO and Russia...will build together a lasting and inclusive

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peace in the Euro-Atlantic area on the principles of democracy and cooperative security” (NATO, 1997). NATO and Russia affirmed this partnership at their 2002 Rome Summit attended by US President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin, which created the NATO-Russia Council.

These advances in NATO-Russia relations did not occur over the heads or at the expense of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, whose persistence in seeking and achieving their own liberation played a major part in ending the Cold War. Rather, NATO-Russia relations advanced in parallel with NATO’s decision to welcome new members from Central and Eastern Europe: Poland, Czechia, and Hungary were invited to join NATO in 1997 and seven more countries, including Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, were invited later in 2002.

The NATO-Russia partnership in both theory and practice faltered as Putin turned away from a course of cooperation with the West. As it turned out, Putin’s terms for good relations included Western tolerance of his authoritarianism at home and efforts to restore Kremlin authority, one way or another, over independent countries he deemed to be core parts of a renewed Russian Empire, especially Ukraine and Georgia. Putin tolerated NATO’s decisions to invite even the Baltic countries but seems to have been alienated by what he (wrongly) perceived as US instigation of the pro-democracy and pro-Western “colour revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, respectively.

US and Western European leaders were slow to recognise this turn. They downplayed the significance of Putin’s authoritarian moves against independent media as early as 2002-03, essentially shrugged at Putin’s aggressive speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, and, at the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit, limited themselves to expressions of “concern” about Russian moves that would eventually destroy the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) (NATO, 2008). The Bucharest Summit in April 2008 is famous for the Allied split (roughly the United States, the United Kingdom, Poland, and the Baltic states vs. Germany and France) over whether to offer Georgia and Ukraine a Membership Action Plan and the awkward compromise that emerged.

Less remembered is that at the Bucharest NATO-Russia Summit the following day, Russian President Vladimir Putin made a territorial claim against Ukraine, asserting in his speech that Crimea had been improperly transferred from the Russian to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954 by then-Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev (Unian, 2008). Most NATO

leaders from Western Europe and even the Bush Administration foreign policy leadership dismissed this threat,¹ and Bush flew directly from Bucharest to Sochi for a meeting with Putin, then Prime Minister, and then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.

Putin launched his war against Georgia that August and the Bush Administration concluded that its policy of outreach to Putin's Russia had failed. In a major speech that fall, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was frank and clear eyed about that failure and the danger that Putin represented (US Department of State, 2008).

The Administration of Barack Obama, however, soon took office and almost immediately launched a "reset" of relations with Putin's Russia, seeking to minimise the significance of Putin's decision to use warfare to impose Russia's will on its neighbours. Obama's reset policy was based in part on a mistaken assessment that President Medvedev represented a more modern Russian leadership with which the United States and Europe could work. Like Bush's earlier outreach to Putin, the Reset had its achievements, but these proved ephemeral in the end as Putin deepened his repression at home and aggression abroad.

Putin's decision to attack Ukraine in 2014 ended the Reset and prompted the Obama Administration to work with Europe to impose sanctions on Russia. In the face of this Russian aggression, the Obama Administration also led NATO efforts to send combat forces in battalion strength to the Baltic states and to Poland, and, in addition, sent a US armoured brigade to Poland on a rotational basis. This was a major decision by NATO and the United States, a reversal of decades of US military drawdown in Europe.

The strength of these moves was mitigated by the Obama Administration's decision not to send weapons to Ukraine on the questionable basis that doing so would be futile because Russia had "escalation dominance" over Ukraine.² NATO itself sent mixed signals about the significance of Russia making war against its neighbours for the second time in six years. While condemning the invasion of Ukraine, NATO's 2016 Warsaw Summit communiqué also had an almost plaintiff tone about the NATO-Russia relationship:

¹ As Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia, I heard Putin's remarks threatening Ukraine and shared my alarm with the late Mariusz Handzlik, then foreign policy advisor to Polish President Lech Kaczynski, who shared it. Handzlik easily convinced his leadership of the problem; I could not then convince mine.

² At the time, I was still in government as State Department Sanctions Coordinator and recall the arguments against weapons to Ukraine.

“For over two decades, NATO has striven to build a partnership with Russia...While NATO stands by its international commitments, Russia has breached the values, principles and commitments which underpin the NATO-Russia relationship, as outlined in the...1997 NATO-Russian Founding Act, and 2002 Rome Declaration... We continue to believe that a partnership between NATO and Russia, based on respect for international law and commitments, including as reflected in the NATO-Russia Founding Act and Rome Declaration, would be of strategic value. We regret that...the conditions for that relationship do not currently exist” (NATO, 2016).

This restrained language reflected an implicit (and sometimes explicit) desire among Western leaders, particularly in Germany and France, to treat the Russo-Ukraine War as a speed bump or impediment to what they hoped would be a return to some level of cooperation. Taking office in 2017, President Donald Trump made clear on numerous occasions that he also shared a desire to work with Putin and had little sympathy for Ukraine’s struggle for national survival. Although many senior officials in the Trump Administration were more committed to resisting Putin’s aggression, because of Trump’s own stand, US policy from 2017-21 was muddled and NATO essentially kept its 2016 position.

The Biden Administration came to office in January 2021 with a clearer message of condemnation of Putin’s actions but sought a “stable and predictable” relationship with Russia, albeit at a low level. Even that modest ambition did not survive Putin’s appetite for further aggression against Ukraine.

When Putin launched his all-out invasion of Ukraine, seeking to topple its leadership and install a pliant ruler in Kyiv, the United States and NATO at last drew deeper conclusions about relations with Russia. These were reflected in NATO’s Strategic Concept, issued at the Madrid Summit that unambiguously characterised Russia as a strategic threat, noted above. NATO declared (rightly) and condemned the fact that Russia “seeks to establish spheres of influence and direct control through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation.” In addition to declaring its intent to “strengthen deterrence and defense for all Allies,” however, NATO reaffirmed its interest to “seek stability and predictability” with Russia.

Key West European governments that had maintained hopes of better relations with Russia reconsidered their position after the shock of the full-scale Russo-Ukraine War. In the aftermath of the February 2022 invasion, German officials, grappling with the failure of decades of hopeful German assumptions about Russia, started using the apt phrase that “European

security must now be organised not with Russia, but against Russia.”³ French President Emmanuel Macron, in a major speech in Bratislava in May 2023, acknowledged that the Central and East Europeans’ harder-line views about dealing with Putin’s Russia had been right all along (Élysée, 2023).

This was the context for the Vilnius NATO Summit in July 2023. The NATO Declaration issued there went a step beyond Madrid; it reiterated the Madrid language that Russia is “the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area” without repeating Madrid’s language about seeking a stable and predictable relationship with Russia (NATO, 2023). The Vilnius language was the strongest yet and unambiguous, without the notes of regret present as recently as Madrid.

NATO-Ukraine Relations: The Turn at Vilnius

While the NATO’s Vilnius Summit was incrementally tougher toward Russia, it did not constitute a major change from the Madrid Summit language. With respect to NATO-Ukraine relations, however, the Vilnius Summit marked the first time in 15 years that NATO considered and debated potential Ukrainian accession.

NATO’s 2008 Bucharest Summit famously featured a fight over Ukraine’s and Georgia’s NATO membership. After intense negotiations among a restricted group of leaders-plus-one, compromise language emerged (developed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Foreign Ministers from the Baltics, and Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski⁴). That language included an assertion that “both nations [Ukraine and Georgia] will become members of NATO” and even an expression of general support for their MAP aspirations (NATO, 2023). But the language did not lead to any serious forward movement after Bucharest; the heated debate and open divisions discouraged any effort to reopen the question of Ukrainian accession. The Bucharest formula was ritualistically

³ I first heard this powerful phrase in early 2023 from then-German Ambassador to Poland Thomas Bagger, now German Foreign Ministry State Secretary and later in 2023 from Emily Haber, at the time German Ambassador to the US. German officials acknowledge that it encapsulates most German official thinking about relations with Russia, a striking turnaround.

⁴ After the restricted meeting at which the language was worked out, Rice briefed her senior staff, including me, on the process.

repeated at NATO Summits, without serious discussion, until the run-up to Vilnius.

The core issue of Ukraine's relations with NATO, not always explicitly articulated, is whether Ukraine will have a sustainable future as part of Europe and the transatlantic community or whether Ukraine belongs to a Russian sphere of domination. The issue of Ukraine's place in the world had not arisen until Ukrainians themselves, slowly and fitfully through the Orange Revolution in 2003–04, the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–14, and the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, developed a national consensus that their future was indeed with the West. In response to this developing Ukrainian sense of strategic identity that crystallised after 2022, the United States and Europe had to determine whether they accepted this Ukrainian consensus and would act to support it. Specifically, they had to consider whether the objective of Ukraine's European and transatlantic future was achievable given Russian determination to go to war to maintain its control over Ukraine.

NATO's strategic concept adopted at Madrid accused Russia of seeking a sphere of influence, maintained through force, and implicitly rejected it. But considering whether and how to apply that principled position to Ukraine did not come up until the preparations for the Vilnius Summit.

At the start of 2023, Biden Administration officials did not want to discuss within NATO (or even think internally about) Ukraine's accession to the Alliance. They preferred, they made clear, to maintain the practice of reiterating the Bucharest Summit language without further thought. Their initial argument was that an effort to return to the question of Ukrainian NATO accession would invite a divisive debate within NATO along the lines of the split that had occurred at Bucharest.

That initial Administration case for avoiding the issue of Ukraine and NATO fell apart when French President Emmanuel Macron, in a May 2023 speech at a GLOBSEC-sponsored conference in Bratislava, called on NATO at the Vilnius Summit to consider "tangible security guarantees to Ukraine." French diplomats made clear that they were prepared to go beyond the Bucharest language on Ukraine's path to NATO accession. That French shift seemed to take the US administration off guard. It coincided with and encouraged an ongoing push from other governments, with Estonian and Lithuanian officials playing an active role, for the Biden Administration to move beyond the Bucharest formula.

The Biden Administration, on the defensive and with reluctance, agreed to address the question of Ukraine's path to NATO. After intense negotiations, the Vilnius Declaration issued 11 July affirmed that "Ukraine's future is in NATO," removed a MAP from the steps Ukraine needs to take on its way to accession, elevated the NATO-Ukraine Commission to a NATO-Ukraine Council, and, cryptically, added that "We will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree and conditions are met."

In parallel the following day, the G7 issued a Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine (US Department of State, 2023) that included a promise that each G7 member would develop "specific, bilateral, long-term security commitments and arrangements" including security assistance, provision of military equipment, support for Ukraine's defence industrial base, training for Ukrainian forces, intelligence sharing, and support for cyber defence and initiatives including hybrid threats. These promised G7 arrangements, to be in the form of separate bilateral memoranda of understanding, would include a commitment to consult with Ukraine in case of armed attack.

Sceptics argued that after intense discussion, NATO had not in fact moved far from Bucharest. Indeed, the Vilnius Declaration did not include an invitation to accession and even the conditional use of "invitation" in the Declaration was heavily qualified and put into the future.

The Vilnius Declaration and parallel G7 Declaration were, however, the first time in 15 years that NATO governments had considered Ukrainian accession to NATO at all. The circumstances of the debate were more difficult than at Bucharest (and far more difficult than when the Clinton Administration decided to support NATO accession for Poland, Czechia, and Hungary). Ukraine, as Biden Administration officials pointed out in the run-up to Vilnius, was at war; accession to NATO under such circumstances could mean that the Alliance itself would become a party to that war. At home, the Biden Administration faced growing opposition to its support for Ukraine from a strengthening "America First," neo-isolationist right. The Biden Administration's argument in favour of continued military support for Ukraine included a red line that US troops would not be committed. Talk of NATO accession for Ukraine could undermine that argument and thus, some in the Administration feared, undermine political and Congressional support for Ukraine.

Given that context, the Vilnius/G7 language on Ukraine marked a substantial advance over Bucharest, one made possible because of a shift in Allied opinion in favour of steps to bring Ukraine closer to the Alliance.

This discussion within the Alliance will intensify as the Washington NATO Summit approaches. The problem is acute: security for Ukraine is critical to European peace. Forced neutrality along the lines of the Austrian State Treaty of 1955 will not do. In 2013, with pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych in office, Ukraine's government had a policy of neutrality and showed no interest in joining NATO. That was not good enough for Putin. He forced Yanukovych to break his public promise to sign a modest Association Agreement with the European Union, triggering pro-European demonstrations in Kyiv. These grew into a full-scale revolt as Yanukovych, possibly under Kremlin pressure, used force to crack down on them; the Revolution of Dignity, whose success triggered the initial Russian invasion of Crimea and the Donbas.

The challenge remains: European security requires security for Ukraine, but NATO members are reluctant to offer Ukraine NATO accession while the Russo-Ukraine war is raging.

The Atlantic Council think tank (where I work) attempted to solve that problem with a recommendation contained in a "Memo to the President" (Herbst, Pifer, and Vershbow et al, 2023) (of which I was a co-signer and contributor) that the Washington Summit offer Ukraine the start of accession negotiations to address the challenges of offering NATO membership to a country whose territory is partly under foreign occupation and all of whose territory is under military attack. That recommendation appears, at present, to go too far for the Biden Administration.

The Biden Administration has argued that the proposed G7 security arrangements with Ukraine, the parallel MOUs, provide a 'bridge' to eventual NATO membership. That is a plausible argument. But, to use the metaphor, that bridge seems too weak – one made of paper and wood when one made of steel is needed for Ukraine given the threat it faces from Russia. The Administration could try to address that problem by strengthening the proposed G7 MOUs into more formal agreements.

In any case, the Washington NATO Summit will have to express, in unambiguous terms, the end state for Ukraine – full NATO membership – and provide a credible way to get from here to there in the face of continued Russian aggression. Inviting Ukraine to begin accession negotiations still seems a way forward that removes ambiguity while providing time to consider

the important operational details of NATO accession for a country under partial occupation and under attack. Ukraine's circumstances are in flux. By the time of the Washington Summit, these circumstances could include either continued military stalemate on the ground or an improved military position for Ukraine. At some point, the Ukrainian government may even decide to explore an unhappy ceasefire with a portion of Ukraine still under Russian occupation.

It is difficult to forecast the military situation by the time of the Washington NATO Summit. But that situation is unlikely to include a Russian victory parade in Kyiv, Putin's initial and arrogant expectation for his 'Special Military Operation.' The bracket of outcomes is likely to include most of Ukraine under the control of its own government. It is in the interest of the United States and Europe that a free Ukraine, even if like West Germany during the Cold War it does not have sovereignty over all its territory, be secure and sustainable. That outcome would count as a win for Ukraine, given that Putin's objective is not to seize this or that piece of Ukrainian territory but to destroy Ukrainian independence. NATO and the EU should make clear that their goal is full Ukrainian membership in both organisations, that they will put Ukraine on the path to membership, and that they will help Ukraine at each step on that complicated road.

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16. Has Russia's Hybrid Sabre Lost Its Sharpness?

Dr. Toms ROSTOKS*

Abstract

Russia's military has steadily been degraded ever since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, although it still poses a threat not just to Ukraine, but potentially also to Russia's other neighbours. But what about other means at Russia's disposal? Have they also been degraded as the result of the failed invasion that irreversibly antagonised Ukraine and the West? This chapter assesses the extent to which Russia's hybrid toolbox has been damaged as a result of the ongoing war in Ukraine. This hybrid toolbox, however, is so varied that the scope of this article is inevitably limited. It does, however, take stock of some of the key aspects of this hybrid approach such as public opinion and political influence.

Keywords: Russia, hybrid war, Ukraine

The aim of this chapter is to take stock of the current state of Russia's hybrid toolbox. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has prompted the West to reduce the extent of Russia's influence abroad. Hybrid aggression, however, comes in various forms and shapes. Thus, the progress in dismantling Russia's influence in the West is likely to be uneven. The chapter begins with a brief examination of the main concepts, such as hybrid war, liminal warfare, cross-domain coercion, political warfare, and grey-zone threats. The first section also looks at Russia's track record in its use of the instruments that are widely regarded as part of the hybrid toolbox. This is particularly significant because Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a marked step away from staying below the threshold. Already back in 2014, the military was a key instrument in seizing control of Crimea and facilitating separatism in the Donbas region. Thus, hybrid war is a combination of military and non-military tools of statecraft, although military instruments are calibrated so as not to provoke the adversary to retaliate in a decisive fashion. Whilst Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was probably intended to produce a *fait*

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accompli, so that Moscow could hope to minimise retaliation from the West, it nevertheless entailed a massive use of military power that is different from the hybrid approach which aims to remain under the threshold.

The second section then looks at changes in public attitudes towards Russia in the West (and more specifically in Estonia and Latvia where Russian-speakers' attitudes towards security issues have been a persistent problem), but also more broadly in the Global South. The article then briefly tackles the broader issue of Russia's political influence in the West. It concludes that Russia's image in the West has been tarnished irreversibly, but this has not happened in some parts of the Global South. The extent of Russia's networks of political influence, however, is not entirely clear and warrants further investigation.

Russia's Hybrid Toolbox

By the time Russia annexed Crimea without hardly firing a shot back in 2014, it had already conducted cyber-attacks on Estonia in 2007, fought a war against Georgia in 2008, and started a large-scale military modernisation program. There was little doubt in the minds of decision-makers in states that were Russia's neighbours that Moscow's policies had become increasingly aggressive and assertive.

What was less clear was the extent to which Russia was able to achieve its foreign policy objectives. The annexation of Crimea seemingly demonstrated that at the time Russia had acquired the ability to achieve its objectives swiftly and bloodlessly in the post-Soviet space before its actions could be countered. Perhaps, Russia even had a new doctrine that combined a mixture of military and non-military means that could produce outcomes in ways that were difficult to detect and counter (Galeotti 2014, 2018, and 2019, Gerasimov 2013).

Russia's unqualified success in Crimea raised questions about what exactly it was that the West had just witnessed, whether this success could be replicated elsewhere, and what the West could do protect itself (especially frontline states such as the Baltic states). It is worth exploring these questions in greater detail. On the question of how Russia's actions could best be characterised, plenty of concepts were offered. Although the annexation of Crimea had been frequently characterised as a 'hybrid war' – a concept that was originally coined and explored by Frank Hoffman (2007) well before the

watershed moment in 2014, this was not the only concept that had been offered by academics and the think tank community. Other concepts included 'cross-domain coercion' (Adamsky 2015), 'new generation warfare' (Bērziņš 2019), 'political warfare' (Polyakova and Boyer 2018), 'non-linear warfare' (Galeotti 2016), 'liminal warfare' (Kilcullen 2019), and 'grey-zone aggression' (Braw 2021). 'Hybrid war' became the umbrella concept that included various aspects of aggression such as disinformation, subversion, bribery, sabotage, and cyber operations (Maschmeyer 2023). Indeed, it seemed that the future of war was 'hybrid.'

Given the fact that Russia had used a vast array of instruments against Ukraine and the West more broadly since 2014, it was suggested that the new era of great power competition would be characterized by the 'weaponisation of everything' (Galeotti 2023). Moreover, it seemed that Russia was fairly successful in using its capabilities to exploit the weaknesses of its adversaries. While Moscow was running influence campaigns against its Western adversaries, Russia itself was becoming ever less susceptible to outside influence. It had silenced Russian journalists and expelled many of their Western colleagues, weakened domestic political opposition, and largely eliminated the presence of Western NGOs.

Although the overall economic strength of the West could hardly be called into question, Russia was playing its cards skilfully. It was using cyber instruments and social media campaigns to influence the outcome of the US presidential election in 2016. There were allegations of Russia buying political influence in the West, as well as weaponising criminal networks, while the use of private military companies (such as *Wagner*) opened the doors for Russia's influence in Africa. Russia's limited military involvement in Syria had produced results that seemingly surpassed Western involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, especially in light of the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. Russia was punching above its weight, while continuing its programme of military modernisation. Arguably, Russia had mastered the art of hybrid war, but it was also a formidable military power. Russia's ties with China were also strengthening in the meantime, raising questions about a potential alliance between two states that were challenging the Western rules-based international order.

Could Russia's success in Crimea be replicated elsewhere? There were indeed concerns that it could, although Russia had encountered difficulties even in Ukraine itself when it tried to replicate in the Donbas region what it had done earlier in Crimea. The attempt to create 'Novorossiya' failed when

Ukraine began to fight back in the summer of 2014. Russia's proxies managed to secure control over parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, but similar attempts to take over Kharkiv and Odesa were unsuccessful. Moreover, Ukraine's counterterrorism operation revealed the extent of Russia's involvement. Separatist forces were insufficiently prepared and could not hold ground against Ukraine's military. Thus, Russia's military had to interfere on behalf of the separatist forces. Hybrid war as a mix of military and non-military means of aggression is only productive so far as it surprises and confuses the adversary and delays its response. Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine in the spring of 2014 was successful mainly because Ukraine was in disarray after the fall of Victor Yanukovich's government and the Revolution of Dignity. 'Little green men' succeed when they face no armed resistance. When they face the prospect of being shot at, as promised by Estonia's Chief of Defence Riho Terras (Jones 2015), the illusion of Russia's non-involvement fades and the likelihood of hybrid aggression decreases.

The Baltic states were nevertheless singled out as the most likely targets of Russia's hybrid aggression. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia had been under Russian occupation before, and all three countries (especially Latvia and Estonia) have large Russian-speaking minorities whose political loyalties were questionable. At best, their loyalties to national governments in Riga and Tallinn did not run deep. Assuming the worst, Russian-speaking minorities saw independence of the Baltic states as a transient phenomenon and would not object if Russia interfered on their behalf. This created a particular problem for NATO because the Alliance was built to counter military aggression. NATO's task was to deter Russia in the Baltic region through extended deterrence (Lanoszka 2016), but was it well-equipped to deal with Russia-backed separatism and hybrid threats? NATO's credibility could be at stake, and yet the Alliance did not have an adequate military presence in the Baltic states, and neither was it clear if its military foothold would be a solution or if it would further aggravate the security problem that Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia faced.

To deter Russia, NATO member states decided in favour of a rotational and persistent military presence in the Baltic states and Poland through enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the decision was made to establish NATO battlegroups in several other NATO member states as well and to transform the existing battlegroups in the Baltic states into combat-capable brigades. Accompanied by efforts of the Baltic states themselves, these measures should create an

effective deterrent against Russia. Given that the Baltic states and Poland have moved considerably beyond the minimum 2 percent defence spending threshold, this should be enough to deter Russia both in the short term and the long run. Moreover, Russian-speakers and other groups in supposedly vulnerable frontline states were not particularly enthusiastic about the idea of 'Russkiy Mir'. Although they sympathised with Russia's policies and saw Vladimir Putin as a strong leader, they did not necessarily want Russia to militarily interfere on their behalf. The prospect of a large war in Europe was not an appealing option, especially when it increasingly became clear that this might escalate into a direct military confrontation between Russia and NATO. Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine decreased support for Russia's policies even further. In addition to this, it demonstrated that Ukraine's eastern regions were for the most part determined to defend against Russia's invasion because they had seen how life was in the temporarily occupied territories since 2014 and were determined to prevent the spread of 'Russkiy Mir.'

What can be done to counter Russia's 'hybrid warfare'? One of the key characteristics of hybrid war is that it is persistent (Chivvis 2017) which means that instruments that are used in hybrid war, such as information operations (disinformation), cyber instruments, use of proxies, economic statecraft, active measures, political influence, and limited use of military levers of power are routinely used by Russia in peacetime. Thus, addressing the challenge of hybrid threats is more about threat management than achieving decisive outcomes by eliminating the source of threat or neutralising the instruments that Russia is using. The aim should be limiting the extent of Russia's nefarious influence in the West. This includes building resilience against a wide range of external shocks, ensuring military preparedness, and gaining trust of Western societies with the aim of reducing their susceptibility to Russia's messages.

The next section explores two particularly salient aspects of 'hybrid war' – public opinion and political influence – to assess the extent to which Russia's hybrid sabre has lost its sharpness. However, it should be noted that the Western view of 'hybrid war' particularly focuses on vulnerabilities. Indeed, due to their openness Western societies are susceptible to outside influence in the form of disinformation, manipulation of economic interests, and political influence. From Russia's perspective, however, influencing the West might not be that simple. To start with, 'hybrid war' is particularly

suitied for less powerful actors who seek influence or aim to weaken more powerful actors.

The reason why Russia sought to stay under the threshold is that it was well-aware it would be more difficult for it to attain valued foreign policy objectives in an open confrontation and that it was probably not strong enough to pursue its objectives by primarily relying on military force. Evidently, Russia understood the limits of hybrid measures when it aimed to decisively intervene in Ukraine in February 2022. ‘Hybrid war’ simply did not deliver the outcomes that it was looking for, although instruments of power other than military force were clearly used in the run-up to the invasion. Using disinformation to shape public opinion in other states is also hardly a simple task because other states may take measures to counter Russia’s narratives, and people are inherently biased against foreign interference (Lanoszka 2019). There is some potential for using disinformation to influence public opinion and decision-making in other countries, but such influence attempts are nevertheless likely to be viewed as hostile by the public and most decision-makers alike.

Has Russia’s Hybrid Sabre Lost its Sharpness?

The short answer to the above question is ‘yes, partly.’ To demonstrate the extent to which Russia’s hybrid sabre has lost its edge, this section looks at two key aspects of hybrid war, namely, public opinion and political influence. Analysis of public opinion demonstrates the extent to which Russia’s messages and disinformation aimed at the neighbours, the West and the Global South find receptive audiences. Public opinion does not necessarily translate into behaviour, but it still demonstrates the extent to which Russia’s messages resonate abroad. Regarding public opinion on Russia and its president, a recent Pew Research Center report indicates that Russia’s image on the world stage has suffered a serious blow due to its invasion of Ukraine. In many Western countries, the image of Russia was already quite negative before the invasion, and it further deteriorated in 2022 and 2023. For example, in Germany the share of respondents who held positive views of Russia decreased from 30 percent in 2020 to 10 percent in 2023, in Spain – from 31 percent to 5 percent, in Japan – from 18 percent to 5 percent, in the United Kingdom – from 24 percent to 10 percent, in Italy from 48 percent to 10 percent. In the United States, only 7 percent of respondents held positive views

on Russia in 2023, while in Poland it was just 1 percent (Fagan, Poushter, and Gabbala 2023, 17-19).

Unfavourable views of Russia in the West are only matched by those on its leader Vladimir Putin. Percentage of those respondents who have a lot or some confidence in Putin's ability to handle world affairs rapidly decreased in wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In many countries, confidence in Putin's ability to handle world affairs was already relatively low before the invasion, but it deteriorated further after it. For example, in Germany confidence in Putin decreased from 36 percent in 2019 to 10 percent in 2023, in France – from 28 percent to 8 percent, in Japan – from 26 percent to 4 percent, in Spain – from 21 percent to 5 percent, in the United Kingdom – from 26 percent to 9 percent. Also, confidence in Putin stood at 7 percent in the United States in 2023, and just 1 percent of Polish respondents had confidence in Putin (Fagan, Poushter, and Gabbala 2023, 13-15).

Evidence from the Global South, however, reveals far more positive views on Russia and its embattled leader. In India, the proportion of respondents holding favourable views on Russia increased from 49 percent in 2019 to 57 percent in 2023, in Nigeria – 41 percent to 42 percent, in Kenya – from 38 percent to 40 percent, and in Indonesia – from 39 percent to 42 percent. Likewise, confidence in Putin increased in India from 42 percent in 2019 to a whopping 59 percent in 2023, in Indonesia – from 36 percent to 43 percent, and in Kenya from 39 percent to 46 percent. Although confidence in Putin has somewhat decreased in other countries that belong to the Global South, it is relatively modest and does not constitute a decline as catastrophic as in the West (Fagan, Poushter, and Gabbala 2023, 13-19). Thus, it is fair to say that global trust in Russia and its leader is at an all-time low since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but there is considerable variation across the world, and it seems that people in the Global South still hold favourable views of Russia and its president.

While views on Russia are at an all-time low in the West, but not necessarily so in the Global South, Russia represents an immediate security problem for the small frontline states such as Latvia and Estonia. Both states are home to a significant Russian-speaking minority with approximately 29 percent of Latvia's population and 27 percent of Estonia's population being Russian-speakers – a category which includes Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians. A proportion of households using Russian as the primary language of communication is even higher. Although Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic states are not monolithic, their foreign, security, and

defence policy preferences have often been at odds with those of the titular nations. Russian-speakers have on average been less likely to perceive Russia's policies as a threat to national security and the territorial integrity of the Baltic states. They have been less supportive of NATO and the presence of NATO troops in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Russian-speakers have also been predominantly against increasing defence spending. Their views on Russia have remained mostly positive even when Russia has pursued rather aggressive policies internationally, and they have mostly seen Russia as an economic opportunity.

Have Russian-speakers' views changed after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine? Evidence from Estonia and Latvia points to the conclusion that the change has been at best partial, and it remains to be seen if that effect proves to be lasting beyond the ongoing war. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was supposed to be the moment of moral clarity, but for many Russian-speakers in the Baltic states that was clearly not the case. Results of a public opinion poll that was conducted in Estonia in the spring of 2023 demonstrate that 25 percent of the Russian-speaking respondents still rate Vladimir Putin's performance either very positively or rather positively. 17 percent of Russian-speakers sympathise in the ongoing war with Russia (with 28 percent sympathising with Ukraine), and a staggering 49 percent do not want to take sides in the conflict. 54 percent of respondents who speak Russian in the household disagree with the statement that Russia is a threat to peace and security in Europe. Estonia's Russian-speakers are also less likely to accept bearing the economic costs that stem from the ongoing war. 43 percent of Russian-speaking respondents do not support the economic sanctions that have been imposed upon Russia, and the support for further economic sanctions is even lower, with 63 percent of respondents who speak Russian in their family opposing stronger economic sanctions that would affect Estonia's prosperity negatively (Krumm, Stranberg, and Strapatšuk 2023).

Russian-speakers' attitudes in Latvia are not much different. Results from a public opinion poll from spring 2023 show that 14 percent of Russian-speaking respondents sympathise with Russia, and 51 percent do not want to sympathise with either Russia or Ukraine. Russian-speakers have systematically overestimated Russia's political and economic clout, and this is still the case in 2023, as 65 percent of Russian-speaking respondents think that the biggest losers from economic sanctions that were imposed upon Russia were the Western states themselves. 56 percent of Russian-speaking

respondents regard Ukraine as a US puppet state, and 53 percent are of an opinion that Ukrainians and Russians are in fact one nation. 44 percent of Russian-speaking respondents regard the presence of NATO troops in Latvia as negative, and 44 percent do not support Western economic sanctions against Russia, while 25 percent rate Vladimir Putin's performance either very positively or rather positively (Krumm, Šukevičs, and Zariņš 2023). All in all, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has changed foreign, security, and defence policy views of the Baltic Russian-speakers, but while many refrain from openly supporting Russia's policies, support for Ukraine is lacking, and attitudes towards NATO have hardly changed. This means that the Russian-speaking community in the Baltic states is still sympathetic to Russia and open to the Kremlin's narratives.

Political influence, in turn, is a broad concept that covers the use of a wide range of instruments of power to secure favourable behaviour on the part of partners and adversaries alike. What matters is a favourable outcome that is achieved through various means. Russia's political influence in the West has seen a marked decrease recently due to a combination of factors. Arguably, states are most successful in achieving political influence in a hybrid war when the target of the influence campaign does not pay sufficient attention to the actions themselves. In other words, hybrid influence is at its most effective when it stays in the shadows. Countering hybrid influence requires paying attention to and seeking out adversary's actions that at first glance do not seem to be malign. In this regard, Russia's hybrid sabre was losing its sharpness already before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia's actions were increasingly scrutinised after the annexation of Crimea, and this process accelerated after Russia's interference in the US presidential election in 2016.

To counter Russia's malign influence in the West, there has been a concerted effort to get a better understanding of Russia's aims and actions. There has been recognition by NATO and the EU of hybrid threats posed by Russia. The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats has been established in Helsinki, Finland. Western intelligence services have increasingly been paying attention to Russia's influence networks in the West. Russia's efforts to influence Western societies through soft power and public diplomacy have also been exposed as attempts of malign influence with the aim to divide and weaken Western societies. Russia's actions are probably better characterised by the concept of sharp power (Walker 2018). Russia's attempts to influence elections in other Western countries have also been

exposed. Particular attention has been paid to Russia's use of its security apparatus to spy and target particular individuals abroad. Also, Russia's ties with organised crime networks in Europe have come under scrutiny. Europe has largely managed to wean itself off Russia's oil and gas supplies and the political influence that comes with energy interdependence. In the meantime, Russia's ability to run influence operations has decreased due to reduced number of embassy staff in Europe and North America.

Much of what Russia does to undermine Western unity still probably flies under the radar, and it may take time to expose the true extent of Russia's hybrid war against the West, but open societies with independent mass media are well-positioned to achieve that objective. Corruption in Russia's state institutions (and the sloppiness of Russia's operatives) have allowed Bellingcat to expose Russia's clandestine activities against the West. Collaborative work of Western journalists has made it possible to gain insights into Russia's attempts to buy political influence abroad and how Russia has used international networks to evade Western economic sanctions. The latest casualty of investigative reporting has been the German journalist and author Hubert Seipel who has received hundreds of thousands of euros from Russian steel and banking magnate Alexey Mordashov (Izadi et al, 2023). This raises questions about the extent of Russia's network of political decision-makers, journalists, academics, entrepreneurs, and opinion leaders in the West. Some parts of Russia's network of political influence have been exposed, while parts of the network remain hidden from public scrutiny, which probably means that Russia's influence in the West remains substantial.

Conclusion

Russia's hybrid sabre may have lost some of its sharpness, but that may be less relevant as hybrid warfare is more like a multifunctional Swiss army knife than a sabre. Hybrid threats are multifaceted, and they address adversaries' vulnerabilities. In this respect, hybrid warfare is a normal state of affairs under the conditions of strategic competition, and it challenges the Western mind-set which tends to draw a sharp distinction between war and peace. Hybrid war is a permanent simmering conflict which reflects Russia's resentment towards the West and its policies. Hybrid war reflects Russia's approach in its conflict against the West from a position from a

relative weakness. When Crimea was annexed, Russia proceeded cautiously because it was not ready to challenge NATO and the West more broadly in an open confrontation.

Russia used a hybrid approach not necessarily because it was stunningly effective. Instead, hybrid war was a reflection of what actions were thought to be feasible by Russia's political leadership. Liminality or below-the-threshold actions were pursued because acting from a position of strength was not feasible. Russia's heavy investment in military capabilities, however, was a sign that it did not intend to pursue the liminal approach indefinitely. Russia wanted to shock and awe (Kofman and Edmonds 2022), and it did try this approach against Ukraine in February 2022. Although it is hard to predict what courses of action Russia might pursue in the coming years, it is likely that it may return to a more below-the-threshold approach in its confrontation with the West. Thus, Russia may return to hybrid actions aimed at weakening the adversary while staying under the threshold and using 'salami tactics' (Maas 2022) where feasible.

For the time being, some instruments in Russia's hybrid toolbox, such as disinformation aimed at Western audiences, have become less effective. That effect may turn out to be temporary, while the Global South is still somewhat sympathetic to Russia's messages. Russia's relations with the West are at an all-time low and are unlikely to improve any time soon. Russia's image in the West is unlikely to recover either, except with some groups that for various reasons have been sympathetic to Russia and were willing to accommodate its disruptive behaviour. Other instruments in Russia's hybrid toolbox may have been less affected by the catastrophic consequences of its invasion of Ukraine. Russia has nurtured influence in the West for decades, and the extent of its influence is not clear at this point. The aim of Western governments should be to investigate the extent of Russia's influence and identify its remaining levers of influence. Russia may have resorted to hard power in recent years, but it is still imperative to address the hybrid challenge that it poses to the West.

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17. The Nexus of Cognitive Resilience

Is There a Danger of Misperceiving a Post-War Russia?

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Abstract

This chapter refrains from making predictive assertions about the post-war landscape of Russia after the conflict with Ukraine. Instead, it serves as an intellectual exercise aimed at stimulating a more open debate, challenging some wishful thinking regarding Russia-related perceptions and beliefs in Western public discourse. However, this chapter operates under the important assumption that there will be at least some kind of a post-war Russia (or rather a *post-wars* Russia, considering Russia's involvement in other armed conflicts as proxy wars). Collapse, disintegration, and degradation can equally may evoke a mix of inspiration and fear, as one cannot simply imagine (and therefore instinctively fears) the degradation of a nuclear power and the subsequent chaos in post-Russian territories. However, some optimistically await a new geopolitical world order without the Russian state as traditionally known. Nevertheless, those thrilling scenarios are not explored in this chapter, as they remain underrepresented in the public global projections regarding a post-war Russia which, undoubtedly holds diverse potential prospects (Deen et al, 2023).

Keywords: Russia, public discourse, forecasting, cognitive resilience

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Personal disclaimer: Despite the impressions generated by the following chapter, the author's empathy and compassion lies fully with the victims and their suffering. The author's stance on Russia's cruel war against Ukraine is straightforwardly unambiguous: with unconditional assistance and continuous support from the free democratic world, Ukraine must win this war by defeating Russia's oppressive regime, compelling it to fully accept adequate reparations, and ensuring those who are responsible for the committed war crimes face justice.

Contesting the Futures

Discussing a hypothetical future can be used as a strategy of legitimisation in political rhetoric, enabling the manifestation of power and the projection the control over public perceptions regarding the variations of the future outcomes (Reyes, A, 2011). Typically, a shared vision of the future enforces public and political commitments to achieve transformational effects of a positive nature, even in international relations. On the contrary, disagreements on future visions can corrupt rivalries and conflicting perceptions which might have an escalating potential when ideologically, religiously or geopolitically motivated through coercive disinformation or other malicious actions with a hostile intent.

Given that media portrayal presents a limited perspective that may not fully capture the reality, it can result in a distorted understanding of the issue. Therefore, one of the key questions is who is actually shaping and influencing Westerns' visions about Russia's present and its multiple futures and how? Moreover, if it is assumed that one of the keys to a sustainable peace in Europe lies in Moscow, what format and content of the Russian state(s) would be just as essentially acceptable for neighbouring countries to reduce their fears of existential threat and perhaps cultivate a practice of non-conflicting coexistence? This is specifically relevant to the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, where echoes of past wars and brutal repression resonate with the societal traumas and socio-economic consequences of the ongoing war against Ukraine. As personal and collective experiences of (in)security and (in)justice vary across the region, there are different imaginations – from propagandistic to alarmist, from optimistic to pessimistic – about how Western democratic societies should and could deal with a post-wars Russia.

As escapism would be too naïve in such a geopolitical situation, the question 'why' is deliberately left aside from the chapter, acknowledging that some public figures in the West express the temptingly opinion of ignoring any sort of developments in a post-wars Russia. This approach, akin to geopolitical carelessness and imaginable 'crocodile moats' on the borders, is suggested as a possible means to protect the neighbours from the future hazards. Before delving further into a typology of different group prospects on Russia's perceptions and their driving forces, it is essential to make some statements regarding the demystification of Russia's influence activities.

A Declining Russia

With a deeply rooted history of plotting coercion, projecting hostile influence, and interfering in domestic issues of foreign nations, various Russian political regimes have established a strong reputation as malicious actors over centuries. This pertains not only to physical actions but also extends to information warfare, and, more recently, the digital domain (Wilde and Sherman 2022). By weaponising its anti-Western kleptocratic ideology, the Kremlin has been exploiting long-accumulated experience in intimidation and harnessed various features of modern technologies to tune and transform its propaganda tools, both domestically and also with international reach (Horbyk, Prymachenko, and Orlova 2023).

The footprints of Russia's political warfare can be found over many countries during various crises (Shekhovtsov 2023). However, the actual power of Russia was apparently overestimated, not only in the military field but also in other spheres, as the real impact of its influence operations and anti-Western disinformation campaigns has been exaggerated (Jankowicz 2020; Bergmane 2020; Tregubov 2023; Fridrichova 2023). While Russia may maintain an image as a powerhouse of falsehood, producing lies on an industrial scale foremost for domestic consumption, on the global scale, however, its main 'achievements' are limited to instrumentalising the weaknesses present in Western democracies (Teperik et al. 2022).

In essence, the harmful effects of 'active measures' have been achieved not due to a powerful and resourceful Russia, but chiefly because of the existing problems, fractures, and socio-political tensions in the United States and many European countries. These issues include deepening polarisation, political distrust, decreasing life satisfaction, and rising numbers of disadvantaged societal groups, among others. If Western democracies genuinely address these issues at once and invest more resources in consolidating values-based interregional and international alliances, as well as strengthening national resilience at home, there is no credible reason to believe that any influence operation from a post-wars Russia can fundamentally threaten NATO and EU countries.

Meanwhile, the current Russian regime, obviously, attempts to work against that 'if'. Despite lower effectiveness among Western audiences, Kremlin-orchestrated and/or inspired disinformation campaigns continue to poison the global news flow, creating and amplifying information disorders globally. This is especially evident in the media landscapes of some

vulnerable regions (e.g., the Balkans) and countries of the so-called Global South (Doncheva and Svetoka 2021; Herd 2021; Neuville 2023). As freedom of speech and pluralism are among the key characteristics of the Western information environment, it is not completely shielded against disruptive or toxic effects of Russia's influence operations in the public discourses and the digital space (Myers and Browning 2023; Karalis 2023). Fully comprehending and accurately interpreting the massive information flow becomes challenging, particularly when there is a sense of confusion about the actual origin of these thoughts – which narratives are genuinely Western-born and work for the Western interests and which narrative is implanted, alien in origin and pursuing some foreign interests that can potentially harm the West vis-à-vis a post-wars Russia.

Postponing the Thinking

However, there is a vocally articulated opinion against drawing any far-reaching conclusions, as it seems to be a worthless effort to strategise about future relations between the West and Russia due to the unpredictable outcomes of the ongoing war(s) and their consequences for the domestic situation in Russia (“Russia-Ukraine: a war without end?” 2022; Jacobs et al. 2022; Cordesman 2023). Additionally, the West – referring primarily to the results of the 2024 US presidential elections, but not only – might find itself politically and socio-economically in a quite different position than presently. Regarding this conjecture, proponents of this view advocate a cautious, step-by-step approach to forecasting, as well as the importance of first winning (some still use the word ‘ending’) the war before contemplating the conditions for moving forward in dealing with Russia. Additionally, the possibility of a frozen conflict is also still on the table as one among several scenarios in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine (Le Bec and Segur 2023).

Geopolitical volatility in various regions of the world contributes to a growing sense of paralysis among some Western decision-makers, as they might fear making an error due to growing uncertainty. While there are some incentives to enhance predictability by suggesting a less hard-line approach towards a post-wars Russia (Priebe et al. 2023), there is the risk of postponing strategic thinking. This delay could arise from the even greater complexity of a post-war situation, which might provoke a pragmatic

temptation to negotiate or trade-off some important values or positions due to unforeseen socio-political shifts in the West. Kremlin disinformation campaigns exploit this theme of the Western indecisiveness, which stressed the national consolidation of the Russians against the weakened and fragmented societies in the United States and European Union (Adamsky 2022; Picheta 2023; McGlynn 2023). Moreover, Russian disinformation emphasises the Kremlin's willingness to negotiate with some global leaders not just over Ukraine but also in regard to other issues, including trade, energy, climate, and migration ("Narratives of..." 2023; Sonnenfeld and Tian 2023).

Arming Up to the Teeth

Another common view on a post-war Russia maintains the strong belief in the country's enduring aggressive nature. This view asserts that Russia's imperialistic tendencies will remain intrusively threatening not only to the wellbeing of its own population but also to neighbouring countries. The collective memories of the Baltic states, Finland, Ukraine and other Central and Eastern European countries contain countless tragic stories of violence perpetrated by Russian, which justifies the almost insurmountable historical distrust and most probably stands as a significant barrier to any meaningful trust-building in the future as well.

The historical context plays a crucial role in shaping long-lasting perceptions, reinforcing a specific security-driven angle on Russia as primarily motivated by colonial and imperial ambitions. Consequently, such point of view emphasises a high probability that such hostility will remain within the DNA of Russia's 'foreign policy' in whatever format and conditions the country enters the post-war period. Armed with indisputable evidence from the past and the present, the Russia-sceptics advocate a policy of resolute containment. They emphasise the need for decisive measures to reassure the most vulnerable allies, the increased militarisation of some NATO regions, and more significant investment in collective deterrence and modern defence capabilities to restrain Russia in the future (Vershbow 2023; McDonough 2023). The fog of the ongoing war does not blur the thinking of the Russia-sceptics; on the contrary, it reinforces their conviction to intensify the course of action, mobilising resources to suppress the Russian regime both now and during the post-war period (Rumer, E. and Weiss, A. 2023).

Expectedly, the Kremlin propaganda proclaims such views and actions as highly Russophobic and contributing to the further escalation of tensions between Russia and the West. One of the key disinformation narratives addresses pacifistically-minded groups in the West, promoting Russia's attempts on conflict resolution and peace building despite strained diplomatic relations (Tkachenko and Tropynina 2023; Carvin 2023). Furthermore, the narrative labels the policies of Russia-sceptics as historically obsolete, dictated by older generation with trench vision and the mind-set of the Cold War. According to the Kremlin's perspective, these views cultivate deep-rooted anti-Russian biases (Reitz 2023; Amanatullah et al. 2023).

Seeing the Ray of Hope

The third group of Western intellectuals, policy-makers, and opinion leaders refers to different historical examples, appealing in their rhetoric to the cases of profound socio-psychological transformations that occurred over painful decades after the defeats of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. Their main arguments underscore the ability of an aggressor to evolve and reconcile through the losses, downfalls and other traumatic experiences of war. They contend that a nation, even with a history of aggression, can transition to a peaceful and benevolent state if the post-war circumstances allow for a democratic transition of power with conditions such as justice, amnesty, socio-economic benefits, and financial support ("Gary Kasparov..." 2023).

Some voices from the so-called Russian opposition in the West express views on liberating Russia from the current authoritarian regime. They promote specific political narratives about the necessity to initiate and support reforms in a post-wars Russia, presumably for their own strategic purposes (Domanska 2023). However, there are neither explicit plans behind the words nor widely supported actions beyond discussion, and such narratives, often, oversimplify the complex issues of a post-war relations and might contribute to misperceptions regarding Russia's ability, as well as its sincere willingness and readiness to undergo fundamental transformations. Such transformations must involve significant multilevel changes in political governance, economic systems, and societal structures ("Alexei Navalny..." 2023, Bergmann 2023).

In any case, those figures and thinkers publically expressing some optimism regarding a post-wars Russia often lack persuasiveness in their

communications compared to the Russian-sceptics (Isajiw 2023). Moreover, some Russian disinformation campaigns aim to spread discrediting narratives about the pro-Western-minded Russian voices in Europe and the United States, referring to them as hopeless immigrants (or even traitors to the nation) with a distorted outside look with a limited understanding of Russian society and its true aspirations (Alieva 2022). Lastly, it raises the question of how many of these optimistic pro-Russian voices might actually be agents of Kremlin's influence.

Re-thinking the Russia Thinkers

Another peril for Western policymakers lies in the trap of overconfidence in the accuracy of their knowledge about and nuanced understanding of Russia's socio-psychological context and its implications for the future scenarios. Given recent successes of the Kremlin-led or -affiliated disinformation in spreading pro-Russian sentiments within Western scholarship, a profound (re)validation of Russia-related expertise is evidently required (Kuzio 2023). Furthermore, the Russian political regime has managed to weaponise its cultural diplomacy towards various countries in the West for decades, meaning that Kremlin narratives can be found not just in the media but also in the broader information environment (Koval and Tereshchenko 2023).

Supposedly, Russia learns lessons from the wars, and within the range of its capabilities, it mitigates the risks of the consequences of war for the future prospects of the Russian state and society. Furthermore, Russia constructs its own projections of the future to make them as engaging and appealing domestically as possible. This aims to discourage anti-war resistance, stimulate national consolidation to overcome war casualties, and prepare for entering a post-war period with its own compelling visions on the world order and the cognitive maps to navigate there (Cohen, R. 2023, "Россия..." 2023; "Международные..." 2023). Through entertaining disinformation campaigns, the Kremlin-inspired variations of stories about Russia's hypothetical futures manipulate public attitudes among Russians, persuading to accept the uniqueness or even inevitability of these future constructs (McGlynn 2023; Bolt et al. 2023; Novikova 2014).

Additionally, Russia is driven to inject its forecasting ideas about future relations with the West into ongoing thinking and discussion forums to influence more favourable policymaking outcomes. In spreading its positions,

Russia may seek and empower some anti-establishment movements and groups critical of Western political systems, both domestically in Europe and the United States, and internationally (Hartleb and Schiebel 2023, Saint-Gilles 2023). For instance, cultivating a sense of self-perceived humiliation and insult among some countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East can make significant part of their population and decision-makers more inclined to adopt alternative narratives about Russia and its post-wars vision(s) (Kowalski 2022, Pivtorak et al. 2023, Wilde 2023).

Therefore, it is imperative to observe the individuals and channels shaping the future visions for the Russian people, both within Russia and internationally. Moreover, it is equally vital to know the agendas of opinion-makers and those envision a future of Russia in the West, as their perceptions of relations may be impacted by cognitive biases, emotions, and may align with partisan interests or commercial prospects (“All side with Putin...” 2023).

Waiting for a Black Swan Event?

With the described palette of various opinions, conflicting views, and the prevalence of disinformation, it seems almost impossible to reach a consensus on a single practical policy vector for the future developments of a post-wars Russia. Human psychology accentuates hindsight in thinking, where retrospective views and present-day actualities often overshadow imaginative foresight. In other words, it is cognitively more convenient for the West (and safer from the security point of view) to paint a bleaker picture of Russia’s future. Consequently, it is not surprising that citizens in most Western countries hold overwhelmingly unfavourable opinions of Russia, largely due of the senselessly cruel crimes committed done during the unprovoked aggression against Ukraine (Fagan, M. et al. 2023). As the trajectory of this war indicates a potential prolongation, there are various calculations and speculations with different degrees of plausibility regarding conditions for war termination, related agreements, settlements, and broader policy implications (Charap and Priebe 2023). Additionally, the current Russian regime exhibits self-assurance and assertive determination in shaping its future actions, a stance could be only challenged by a black swan event of a strategic magnitude (Van Bladel 2023).

In any case, there is an emerging consensus among Western publics that Russia’s genocidal war of aggression against Ukraine is a significant

game-changer, which cannot be ignored in any future relations, and any new normalcy after the war as based on returning to “business-as-usual” with Russia must be fully eliminated from all discourse and political agendas (Blank 2023; Lehne 2023). Still, in addition to their own biases, Western political elites and public figures also have particular interests and ideologies that may be more prone to adopting simplified or distorted (positive or negative) views of Russia to align with their own narratives or (populistic) agendas.

To move beyond political slogans entails the pursuit and negotiation of a fine balance between extreme views on possible relations with a post-wars Russia in the future. Although there is a strong (and rightfully justified) tendency to view Russia’s actions through a lens of suspicion and mistrust, the question arises on what conditions Western leaders and geopolitical trend-setters would confidently (if at all) consider re-shaping the public opinion on a post-wars Russia without distorting own perceptions of its intentions (Provoost 2023). What hard-to-predict event(s), if any, could possibly catalyse shifts in strategic thinking and navigation within the cognitive nexus of the contested futures? While any attempts to appease an aggressive Russia must be absolutely condemned and abolished as short-sighted and cowardly, what circumstances and characteristics of another Russia would be deemed satisfying to Western interests during the post-war period?

Striving for More Accuracy

Given the current dynamics favouring Russia in the ongoing war, the West faces an uncomfortable situation obscured by opacity, lacking new tools of strategic imagination to embrace the non-computability (Duncan 2023). To establish a firm future vector in this nexus, it is imperative to pose the following questions. How does one assess which misperception poses a greater danger: the risk of optimistic yet misguided policies that could lead to disillusionment and disappointment in Russia’s real interests and actual aspirations, or the peril of underestimating its positive (self)repairing potential and unreasonably rejecting Russia’s intentions for constructive engagement in the future?

On the one hand, a failure to accurately perceive Russia’s natural interests and capabilities might lead to missed opportunities for cooperation on issues of mutual or global concern. Additionally, given the cognitive biases

of media and political audiences, sensationalised reporting about Russia often emphasises negative aspects, perpetuating undesirable stereotypes and discriminative prejudice against Russia in general. This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, where a post-wars Russia is eventually cast as a hateful and evil-minded actor partially due in part to distorted portrayals and constant external nudging towards that image.

On the other hand, any strategic miscalculation in Russia's assertive capabilities, offensive resentments, or its neo-colonial ambitions could severely compromise regional or global security. This may re-actualise and reinforce existential threats to several European nations or possibly even beyond. Even if militarily defeated, Russia can remain an influential source of historical revisionism and internal and external instability or insecurity. Given these potential risks, the collective West might not be willing to take chances with misperceptions about a post-wars Russia. Arguably, the only feasible Western strategy for the post-war period remains inducing changes in Russia towards true re-federalisation and the empowerment of regional elites and communities. However, the current efforts toward this goal are unclear (Zolotukhin 2022).

Minding the Gaps

Given the limited policy instruments available in the present Western approach to countering Russia's aggression, prognostic thinking is bound to operate within ambiguity and complexity. However, the absence of clear and simple solutions should not lead to a cessation of strategising about the nexus of multiple futures. Moreover, a dichotomic approach does not facilitate finding an exit from the mentality of focusing on extreme positions. Probable variations of these futures can be presented as dynamically ever-changing reflections in a cognitive kaleidoscope, with multiple known and unknown factors influencing perceptions of future projection, including relations between the West and a post-wars Russia.

Meanwhile, recommendations for some attitudinal changes can serve as general guidelines to mitigate the impact of various driving forces and foster a more accurate understanding of upcoming challenges in forecasting.

Firstly, addressing serious problems requires recognising that solutions cannot be solely confined to the level or dimension where the problem is identified. Merely dealing with the consequences in the West without

addressing the root fails to wield any influence on the source of the problem, be it in present-day Russia or in its post-wars iterations.

Secondly, maintain a realistic assessment of the effectiveness and efficiency of Russia's influence operations is essential. Demolishing the myths portraying Russia as a 'magical powerhouse of falsehood' enables a re-categorisation of Russia as a poor backstreet shop peddling miserable lies, unworthy of instilling fear within strong Western democracies.

Thirdly, directing efforts towards closing socio-political and economic gaps within Western societies diminishes the opportunities for malign actors, including Russia, to exploit existing fractures. Grey zones, neither offering certainty nor prosperity domestically or geopolitically, can be addressed by adopting resilience-oriented thinking, drawing insights from the BEACON model (Teperik 2023).

Fourthly, maintaining vigilance does not guarantee immunity to a black swan event but can ease the navigation of the volatile and unpredictably turbulent period of the post-war times. Additionally, awareness of cognitive traps can help reduce the risk of succumbing to reflexive control. Limiting the Kremlin's influence in the cognitive domain of free democracies is crucial in preventing Russia from projecting and constructing a version of the West that would be favourable to a post-wars Russia in the future.

Fifthly, building and reinforcing alliances and mutually beneficial co-operation networks both domestically and internationally should strategically position the West in more advantageous settings to address the myriad challenges of a post-wars Russia. Exploring shared interests beyond the conventional circle of like-minded partners is essential to broaden the scope of engagement opportunities and diversify the toolbox with unconventional solutions.

Sixthly, current barriers and interferences must not be deemed as legitimate excuses to impede or overlook opportunities for meaningful multi-logues in the future. Managing political and public expectations regarding accurate perceptions of a post-wars Russia in the West can encourage contemplation on suitable conditions for a pragmatically limited cohabitation between the two entities.

In conclusion, mapping the future(s) of post-wars Russia primarily poses a challenge of self-improvement for the West. It presents an opportunity to instigate internal changes today and envision a better, safer, and stronger Western society of tomorrow. Prioritising anticipation over improvisation in examining what and why some alternative futures are unacceptable to the

West fosters more certainty and assurance for post-war endurance with a reduced risk of misperceiving itself in relation to a post-war Russia. Finally yet importantly, a robust moral compass should guide ethically sound navigation patterns through the nexus of contested futures.

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Conclusion

Within this volume, the authors meticulously examined the intricate interplay of factors influencing both Russian and global dynamics. Amidst diverse perspectives that occasionally clashed, certain shared observations have emerged.

Foremost among these is the acknowledgment that Russia will persist as an adversarial actor, challenging the Western and international liberal-democratic order. Whether the country emerges victorious in the conflict, becomes entangled in a protracted stalemate, or faces defeat against Ukrainian defenders, Russia's actions and rhetoric underscore dissatisfaction with its position and resentment towards adhering to the externally imposed rules of the liberal international order. This uncompromising stance, crystallised further after the declaration of war in February 2022, transcends individual personalities like Putin or select members of the political elite. Instead, it is deeply ingrained in a system that has fostered either apathy or fervent support from its population for decades. This intransigence, shaping the short- to medium-term future, appears bereft of alternatives.

Similarly, the West confronts the imperative to respond to this challenging scenario. While the global threat posed by Russia has achieved a measure of consensus, the war against Ukraine has to be understood as more than a localised conflict; it represents a targeted assault on what is perceived as a vulnerability within the liberal international order. Despite this recognition, evident at the rhetorical level in the West, a consensus on concrete actions and a commensurate level of political remains elusive. Obstacles, both mental and physical, obstruct countering the Russian threat and reinforcing the liberal international order. Even if these hurdles are surmounted, a clear strategic goal remains conspicuously absent.

Therefore, the mission for contemporary policymakers, politicians, and prospective peacemakers is to devise strategies that not only shield the delicate global ecosystem from threats like Russia but also outline a coherent approach for engaging with a Russia that perceives the West as an adversary. Should such plans exist, their communication to the public should be infused with vigour, portraying an image of strength and unwavering determination. This communicative effort is pivotal in projecting a robust vision of the future for the West and the globe, one that transcends mere correction or maintenance of current dynamics.

Solidarity and a shared understanding amongst allies and partners, while essential, are insufficient on their own. They must be coupled with confidence, creativity, problem-solving abilities, and self-assuredness. This synergy is crucial to ensure that Russia's challenge to the liberal international order does not mark the prelude to its decline, but rather, the commencement of its revitalisation.



The Baltic Defence College (BALTDEFCOL) is a multinational professional military education institution established by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 1999, educating civilian and military leaders from the Baltic states, allies, and partners at the operational and strategic levels. The institution promotes international cooperation and networking, contributing to research in security and defence policy.

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